

‘Unbelievably good. So clever, so haunting and melancholic. A novel about obsession, love and loss; an exploration of trauma and delusion; a meditation on writing and what it means to create, to be trapped in a world of your own making, tormented by your own characters. It’s so beautiful, so dark and so vivid’

Jennifer Saint, author of *Ariadne*

‘This twisted tale of ghosts and murderers, derailed lives and childhood traumas is a vertical labyrinth that will take you straight down into the heart of darkness. Enthralling and heartbreaking’

M.R. Carey, author of *The Girl With All The Gifts*

‘This gripping horror is a masterful exploration of storytelling. It will lure you to the dark side before quietly blowing your mind, time after time. A haunting tale of friendship, creativity and revenge, with prose as deep and sweeping as the cliffs of *Looking Glass Sound* itself’

Janice Hallett, author of *The Appeal*

‘Devastatingly beautiful, bone-chilling and enchanting. *Looking Glass Sound* is further proof that no one writes like Catriona Ward. No one conjures such heartbreak from such raw fear. An alchemist of storytelling’

Chris Whitaker, author of *We Begin at the End*

‘One of the finest literary craftsmen currently working is writing horror. *Looking Glass Sound* is a masterclass in atmosphere. Nearly every sentence is faultless, gutting and precise. Come for the family secrets but stay for the humanity, tenderness, and empathy that are so central to Ward’s storytelling. This book will truly haunt you long after you read’

Olivie Blake, author of *The Atlas Six*

‘What a totally stunning book. Such an intricate plot that you just have to sit back and enjoy as there’s no point trying to work it out. At its heart a book about the madness of storytelling, possession and grief. I loved it’

Araminta Hall, author of *Everything and Nothing*

‘A marvel of storytelling, sinister as hell, and, at points where I thought I understood where it was going, Catriona drowned me with her signature “oh no, you don’t” dark turns’

L.V. Matthews, author of *The Twins*

‘Serial killings, magic, literary theft, love and betrayal ... So clever and original’

Mark Edwards, author of *Here to Stay*

‘Murder, magic and monsters from the deep: Ward weaves her dark magic once again in this atmospheric, horror-drenched coming-of-age tale, with twist after head-spinning twist’

Ellery Lloyd, author of *People Like Her*

‘Stephen King meets *Atonement* meets ... screw it, you’ve read nothing like it before. This is so much more than a horror novel. Impossibly compelling, brilliantly plotted and incredibly moving all at once. This is Catriona Ward at her most special, most intimate and most ambitious. I think at this point we can all just agree to follow Ward wherever she takes us’

Virginia Feito, author of *Mrs March*

‘I felt like I was on a rollercoaster. Her characters, the way she weaves together all the storylines, the reveals – all of them brilliantly done, and all while my heart was banging out of my chest’

Lisa Hall, author of *The Perfect Couple*

# Looking Glass Sound

Also by Catriona Ward and from Viper

*The Last House on Needless Street*  
*Sundial*

# Looking Glass Sound

CATRIONA WARD



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For Edward Christopher McDonald

# *The Dagger Man of Whistler Bay*

*From the unpublished memoir by Wilder Harlow*

*June, 1989*

I'm looking at myself in the bathroom mirror and thinking about love, because I plan on falling in love this summer. I don't know how or with whom. Outside, the city is a hot tarry mess. There must be someone in New York who . . . I wish I wasn't so weird-looking. I'm not even asking to be loved back, just to know what it feels like. I make a face in the mirror, pulling my lower lip all the way down so the inside shows on the outside. Then I pull my lower eyelids down so they glare red.

'Hello,' I say to the mirror. 'I love you.'

I give a yell as my mom bursts in without knocking. 'Mom! Privacy!' A startled roach breaks from behind the pipes and runs across the cracked tile floor, fast and straight like it's being pulled by fishing line.

'You want privacy, you lock the door.' She grabs me by the arm. 'Come on, monkey. Big news.'

She drags me to the living room where the air con roars like lions.



Dad holds a piece of paper. 'Probate is finished,' he says. 'The cottage is ours.' The paper trembles; I can't tell if it's from the aircon or whether his hands are shaking. He looks exhausted. Good and bad can feel like the same thing, I think, if they're intense enough.

Dad takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. Uncle Vernon died in April. Dad really loved him. He goes up every summer to visit – well, he did. We never went with him.

'Vernon's crabby,' Dad always said. 'Doesn't much like women or kids.' Uncle Vernon was the last of that side of his family. We Harlows aren't much good at staying alive so Uncle Vernon did better than most; he made it to his seventies.

'We have to list it right away,' Dad says. 'Sell while the summer's still fine. I know that.' We all know that. The envelopes with red on them come through the door all the time.

'Tell you what,' Mom says. 'Let's go up there first, OK? Before we sell.'

'What?' Dad keeps wiping his glasses. His eyes are pink and naked.

'Let's have a vacation,' Mom says. She tucks a strand of imaginary hair behind her ear, which is a sign that she's excited. We haven't had a vacation since that trip to Rehoboth Beach when I was seven. 'What do you say, Wilder?'

'That could be fun,' I say, hesitant. The ocean sounds like a good place to fall in love. Plus, if we take a vacation maybe my mom and dad might stop fighting. They think I don't hear but I do. In the night a certain kind of whisper sounds louder than yelling.

'You deserve a vacation, monkey,' she whispers. 'We're so proud of you.' The phone call came yesterday – Scottsboro Prep are renewing my full-board scholarship. I let her hug me. The truth is that things at Scottsboro got pretty bad by the end of term. I was at breaking point, walking to class as quickly as I could so as not to be caught

in the hallway by others, or taking a book to lunch so no one could catch my eye. That way I could at least pretend not to hear what they said about me. My hands got red and sore from wringing out clothes, ties that were soaked wet with toilet water and bleach, sometimes other stuff.

My scholarship makes it possible for me to go to Scottsboro, which is very expensive. All I have to do is hold on for a couple more years. It has to end one day. *Just hold on*, I tell myself over and over, in my head. I'll go to college and from then on, everything will be different. I'm going to write books.

I don't tell my parents about what happens at Scottsboro. It might make things even worse between them.

We leave the city in a warm June dawn that promises another sweltering day, and drive up through the woods. We move backwards through the season, travelling through time, the summer growing younger and cooler as we make our way north.

In the late afternoon we leave the highway. The grass gets tall and green. There are wildflowers I don't know, the sound of crickets. The warm wind is full of salt.

Evening's falling as we pull over at the foot of a green hill marked by a shingle path. The cottage perches above like a gull on the cliff. We walk, sweating, up the green swathe of land, suitcases leaving tracks in the rough grass. The house is surrounded by a white picket fence with a gate. It's white clapboard with blue shutters, and I think – *I've never seen anything so neat, so perfect*. There are rows of seashells on the porch and twisting silver driftwood hangs above the door. The leaves of the sugar maple whisper – under it, there's a high-pitched whine, a long shrill note like bad singing.

This is the first time I hear it, the whistling for which the bay is

named. It sounds like all the things you're not supposed to believe in – mermaids, selkies, sirens.

I come to with my mother's hand on my shoulder. 'Come on inside, Wilder,' she says, and I realise I've been just standing there, mouth open.

'What's that sound?' It seems like it's coming from inside me, somehow.

Dad pauses in the act of unlocking the door. 'It's the stones on the beach. High tide has eaten away at them, making little holes – kind of like the finger stops on a flute – and when the wind is in the east, coming over the ocean, it whistles through. Neat, huh?'

'It's spooky,' I say.

'Come to think of it,' Dad says thoughtfully, 'the way Uncle Vernon was found was pretty spooky, too. He was just sitting up on those rocks as they whistled around him, eyes staring. Like he'd been taken before his time, whistled to death by Whistler Bay . . .'

'Dork,' I mutter as I follow him inside. I know Uncle Vernon died in hospital of a heart infarction.

Inside the cottage everything is bare and white and blue, like a shore washed clean by the ocean. My room has a single bed covered in rough wool blankets, and a round window like a porthole.

'Keep the windows closed at night,' my father says. 'There have been some break-ins around here. I'll get locks in the morning.'

'And careful in the water,' my mother adds, anxious. 'There's a drowning almost every year.'

'Yes, mother dearest.'

She slaps my arm. Sometimes she gets mad when I'm what she calls *fresh*, but mostly she likes it.

I open the porthole and fall asleep to the sound of the stones and the sea.

In the morning I wake before my parents. I realise as soon as I put them on that my swimming shorts are way too small. I've grown a lot since last summer. I didn't think of it before we left New York. So I put on some underwear and flip flops, grab a towel and slip out the back door.

The red ball of the morning sun is burning off the last sea mist. I go down the path, gravel skittering from my sandalled feet, towel slung over my shoulder.

On the beach the pebbles are already warm from the sun. I take off my glasses and rest them gently on a rock. On an impulse I slip off my underwear too and go into the sea naked. The water takes me in its glassy grip. For a second I wonder, *riptide*? But the sea is still and cool. It's a homecoming. I think, *I'm a sea person and I never even knew it*. Even underwater I can still hear the wind singing in the rocks. And I hear a voice, too, calling. I break the surface, coughing, water streaming from my head.

A girl and a boy stand on the shore. I think they're about my age. She wears overalls and a big floppy hat. Her hair is a deep, almost unnatural red, like blood. She wears a man's watch on her wrist, gold and clunky. It's way too big and it makes her wrist look very slim. I think, *frick that was fast*, because I am in love with her right away.

I see what she holds: a stick, with my underwear hanging off the pointed end. She wrinkles her nose in an expression of disgust. 'What kind of pervert leaves their underwear lying around on the beach?' Her scorn mingles perfectly with her accent – she's English. Not the sunburned kind who throng round Times Square, but the kind I thought existed only in movies. Classy.

The wind billows in the fabric of my shorts, filling them. For a second it looks like I am still in the shorts – invisible, struggling, impaled.

‘Hey,’ the boy says. ‘He didn’t know anyone else was here.’ *Heah*. Is he British, too? He’s tall with an easy, open look to him. I think, *it’s boys like that who get the girls*. As if to confirm this thought, he puts a hand on the girl’s back. ‘Give ’em, Harper.’

*Harper* – it seems an odd name for a British girl but it suits her. Maybe her parents are big readers.

Reluctantly she swings the stick around at him. He takes off his shirt, plucks the underwear off the end of the stick and wades into the shallows. He doesn’t seem to mind his shorts getting wet. ‘Stay there,’ he calls. ‘I’ll come out.’ He swims out in long slow strokes to where I bob in the centre of the cove.

‘Here you go.’ *Heah ya go*. Not British. He hands me my shorts. Then he swims back towards the shore. I struggle into the underwear, catching my feet in the fabric. I begin the endless swim back.

The boy is talking to the girl – she’s laughing. I think with a bite of fear, *they’re laughing at me*. But he puts another gentle hand on Harper’s back and turns her away, pointing inland, towards something on the cliff. I realise he’s being kind to me again, making sure I can get out of the water in privacy.

I huddle, cold, in my towel. I’d thought there was something special about this place this morning but there isn’t. The world’s the same everywhere. It’s all like school.

‘See you around,’ I say and make my way back up the path. I feel their eyes on my back and I stumble on the incline. The rocks make their evil whistling and I hurry away from the kids’ gaze and the sound, which seem part of each other. I go straight indoors and stay there until long after I hear them come up from the beach and past the cottage, long after their footsteps have faded away down the hill, towards the road.

I wonder what the relationship between them is, if they’re dating, if maybe they’re doing *it*. I don’t know enough about *it* to tell. He

touches her with a casual assurance but they didn't behave romantically towards one another – not the way the movies have led me to expect.

I had planned to journal each day, here. But I don't want to write down what happened this morning. I wash my face over and over again with cold water before breakfast, so Mom and Dad don't see redness around my eyes or any other traces of tears.

I want to go home so badly I can taste it. I think of my usual seat at the library in the city, near the end of one of those long tables, the lamps with their green glass shades throwing circles of warm light. Everyone helps you understand things, there.

'Come on, sport,' my father says. 'Good for you to get out. You can't sit in your room all vacation.' So I go with him to run errands in Castine. What else am I going to do?

Waiting for him to finish at the post office, I gaze glumly at the sacks of chickenfeed piled outside the general store, wander up the main street. It's lonely being with family sometimes.

A pickup pulls up with a screech on the other side of the street, outside a cheerful white and blue shop. *Fresh Fish*, reads the sign overhead. The truck is battered and rusty with panels beaten out badly where they've been staved in by collisions. Probably a drinker, I say to myself, knowing. A line comes to me. *Living by the sea is tough on paint, and just as hard on the mind*. Maybe I'll write it down later.

A thin man in a vest gets out of the truck. He busies himself with coolers and crates, and a moment later, the rich smell of raw fish reaches me. I watch the man with interest. He's so easy in himself, unloads the truck in quick, decisive movements, every now and then spitting a thin vein of brown juice into the gutter. *A man of the sea*, I think. He's weather-beaten, skin as brown as shoe leather, but his

eyes are a warm blue, striking in his worn face. I imagine him living in a board shack, bleached silver by the sun and salt, down by the water, going out in his boat every day before dawn. Some tragedy lies in his past, I'm sure of it. He has a rough, sad look like a cowboy in a western. But he's a sea cowboy, which is even cooler. I back into the shadow of a little alley. I don't want to be seen staring.

A bell jingles, and a young woman comes out of the blue and white store and greets him, friendly. He nods back. Her eyes are swollen, her nose red. She's been crying, I realise, and I feel a spurt of hot sympathy for her. Or maybe she has a cold. She blows her nose heartily and stuffs the Kleenex back in her pocket. She takes the crates into the jingling doorway and brings them back empty, swinging from her hand. The bell announces her exits and her entrances, jaunty. It isn't a cold; she's been crying, for sure. In fact she's still crying. Fresh tears shine on her face. She dabs them dry with tiny movements.

'Sorry,' I hear her say to the fisherman, as if she's offending him somehow. The man nods gently. The world is full of sorrow, his silence seems to say. *Maybe they were lovers*, I think, excited. *Maybe he left her*.

When the contents of all twelve crates are inside, she hands him a wad of bills. He takes them and turns back to the truck. As she goes into the store for the last time the Kleenex she'd dried her tears with falls from her pocket. He must see it in the corner of his eye, because he turns quickly, and picks it up before the wind can take it. The man slips the tissue into his pocket. I feel how kind it is, his act of humility, to pick the tissue up for the crying girl and take it away, so it doesn't blow down the street and out to sea.

As if feeling my eyes on him, the man looks around, slowly surveying the street. When his eyes light on me he smiles, amused. 'Hey,' he says. 'Who you hiding from?'

I come out from behind the house, bashful.

‘You want to take a ride? Help me get the next load from the dock?’

He indicates the passenger seat in a careless, amiable way. People around here don’t seem to talk much but they like to do small kindnesses.

‘I can’t,’ I say, regretful. ‘I have to wait for my dad.’

He nods slowly, and then he gets in the truck and it roars away, up the street, in the direction of the ocean. I wish I’d gone with him now. It would have been fun to see the dock.

Someone says ‘boo!’ and I jump.

The boy from the beach says, ‘You took off pretty quick the other day.’ He looks even more relaxed and golden than I remembered. ‘I’m Nat,’ he says. ‘Nathaniel.’

‘Like Hawthorne?’

‘My last name’s Pelletier.’

‘I meant, Nathaniel Hawthorne the writer.’ He looks uncomfortable. I go on quickly, ‘I’m Wilder. It’s a weird name. You can call me Will.’ I’ve been waiting to try ‘Will’ out for a while.

‘Nah, it’s cool. Like a wrestler or something. You’re wild, but I’m wilder!’ He bares white healthy teeth in a snarl. It sits oddly on his friendly features.

‘I’m *Wildah*,’ I repeat, and really it doesn’t sound so bad, the way he says it. Like something from a play.

He punches me on the arm, fake mad and I laugh and he grins. ‘Don’t worry about Harper,’ he says. ‘She’s rich so she doesn’t need manners.’

I laugh again because he seems to be joking, but I think, *she really didn’t seem to have any*.

‘You want to swim with us later? We’re going late this afternoon. We’ll make a fire, sit out.’

I hesitate. I want to go but I’m scared too. I don’t really know how to talk to people.



I start to tell Nat no, just as my dad comes out of the post office and beckons to me.

‘I’ve got to go,’ I say.

‘We’ll come by the bay around five,’ he calls after me, and half of me is so happy that he seems to want to be friends, and the other is unnerved because it all seems to be settled without my doing anything at all.

I won’t hang out with them, I know better. I’ll pretend I’m busy when they arrive.

Nat, Harper and I sit on the sand, silent and a little awkward, watching the tide go out. The wet sand of the bay is slick and grey. It’s obscene like viscera, a surface that shouldn’t be uncovered. Behind us on the beach, the bonfire smokes half-heartedly. As it turns out, we aren’t any of us much good at lighting fires. Harper looks even more beautiful in the long, low light. She has the smooth, angular face of a fairy or a cunning child, I think, and then immediately wish I could write that down to use later. I feel the beginnings of stirring in my chinos and after that I purposely don’t look at her again. I feel her presence next to me, warm like a small sun.

‘I’m sorry,’ Harper says. ‘I was horrid the other day.’

‘Oh, no problem,’ I say, cautious. ‘I mean, it was just kidding around.’ That’s always the best thing to say to people who might hurt you. It takes the pressure off of them.

‘No, it was mean. I get these moods. I try not to but I do.’ She pauses. ‘It was also somewhat confusing; you have very unusual—’ She pauses, and I feel sorry for her; she’s trying not to be rude again.

‘I know,’ I say. ‘I get it all the time.’

People form opinions of me quickly because of the way I look. My eyes are very big, which is supposed to be good. But they’re too

big, like a bush baby's. And they're pale. So pale it's hard to even tell what colour they are. They almost blend in with my skin, which is also really pale. I'm planning to get a tan this summer – to look more like a regular guy and less like some kind of insect.

'Yeah,' Nat says. 'The guy who lived here before you had the same eyes, the same – colour.' He squints and leans away, looking at me. 'You look like a younger version. He swam here in the mornings too.' He pauses. 'He was nice, we talked sometimes. He liked taking pictures of the coast around here.'

'I thought he died,' Harper says. 'Are you a ghost?'

'That was my Uncle Vernon,' I say. 'He *did* die.'

'Hey, Harper.' Nat's voice is easy but she looks up and flushes.

'Sorry,' she says. 'I get a bit personal sometimes.'

'It's OK. I didn't know him. My dad calls it the Harlow look. Big bug eyes, white skin.'

I risk a surreptitious glance at Harper. Her skin is white too, but creamy, scattered with golden freckles. She looks like a human being, at least, whereas I'm aware I kind of don't. She shivers and I want to give her my sweater but I don't. I've seen it done in movies, giving a girl your sweater, but I've never done it myself, or really even spoken to a girl, and I feel shy.

'Where do you go to school?' I ask them.

'Edison High, in Castine,' Nat says. 'We live on the shore.' I've seen those houses on the shore. They're bleached silver, roofs often patched with aluminium.

Nat wears ragged denim cutoffs and a faded Red Sox t-shirt that's too big for him. I feel the hot poke of shame. The kids at Scottsboro call me poor so often I've got used to it – my mom takes the pants on my uniform down each year instead of buying me new ones. I get a bursary for schoolbooks. But I am reminded now that I'm not poor.

Harper says, 'I'm starting boarding school in the autumn.' She

sighs. 'It's a good one, and I'm so bad at school. I probably won't last long there. I'll probably end up at *Fairview*.'

I've heard of Fairview. It's where rich people dump their daughters when there's nowhere else left.

'I belong at Fairview really,' Harper says gloomily. 'It's a crap school for people who are crap at school. Everyone knows it. Even I know it.' She frowns and pokes the sand with a stick. 'I want to go home.'

'Oh. Well, goodbye.' My heart sinks. But I've had an hour with her.

'I mean to the UK.'

'I don't think you'll make it by dark,' Nat says.

'Funny.' She sighs. 'I don't want to go to boarding school. I'm going to miss Samuel so much.'

'Who's Samuel?' I keep my tone casual, even though jealousy is a hot lance in my side. I can't tell if I hide it well or not.

'Oh. My dog,' Harper says. 'He's a dachshund. He's small but he doesn't act like a small dog. He's got dignity. They're giving him to the housekeeper, or that's what they say. It's probably a lie. Mama's probably having him put down. He's so lovely. He always knows when I'm scared. He always comes.' She gets up and dusts her palms free of sand. 'I suppose I do have to go now. It'll be dark soon.'

'Walk you back?' Nat says.

'Better not,' she says. 'They wouldn't like it.' They exchange a look. I burn with envy at the natural intimacy between them. Once again I wonder if they're doing *it*.

We both watch her pick her way up the path in the fading light, crest the clifftop, and vanish into the purple sky.

Nat settles back down into the sand. 'Harper got kicked out of every school in England.'

'What for?'

'What not for? Everything. She *mistrusts institutionalised authority structures*.' His mimicry of her cut-glass tones is pretty good.

‘Have you two known each other long?’

‘A couple years. Her folks come out every summer.’

‘Is – are you two, like, involved?’

‘No.’

‘I thought maybe you were.’

‘No. But I’m in love with her,’ he says.

‘What?’ It is a shocking thing to say out loud, like someone taking off their clothes in public.

‘I said, I’m in love with her. I’m going to make her love me, one day.’

‘But you don’t just – *tell people* stuff like that.’ My fists are balled. I can’t hang my anger on anything rational, and that makes me angrier still. ‘That kind of thing is private, you keep it to yourself . . .’

‘Maybe you do, or try to,’ he says with a sudden flash of anger. ‘But you’re not so good at it. You look at her all the time when she isn’t looking. But you can’t even look her in the eyes; it’s embarrassing. Like you’ve never seen a girl before.’

‘You’re not getting anywhere either,’ I say. ‘How long have you been thinking about, like, holding her hand?’

‘I’ll still get further than you,’ he says, confident, and I know he’s right.

Before I can think my palm hits his cheek with a crack. He puts his hand up to the red print mine has left behind. ‘Did you just *slap* me?’ he asks slowly.

I rear back as his fist comes at my face and the punch lands on my breastbone just above my heart. My chest explodes into pain and I gasp. I go for him now, raining blows on his face and chest and everywhere I can reach. I’m not great at fighting but I don’t think Nat is either, because neither of us lands many good ones. But he gives me a black eye and I get him one on the side of the face.

We fight until we cough sand and it’s in every crevice of our

bodies, until we're panting and exhausted. Neither of us seems likely to win so we just kind of stop by common consent, roll away from one another and lie on our backs, spitting grit.

'Sorry,' I hesitate. 'I really thought you two were – you know – together.'

'Nope,' he says. 'We're friends.' He sighed. 'I thought at first you and me could be friends.'

'I know,' I say. 'I thought that too. But it can't work if both of us are in love with her.'

'I think we have to be,' Nat says. 'Friends, and in love with her.' He's right, it isn't possible to stop either thing.

'We can't fight all the time.'

'We have to work out some kind of, like, agreement.'

'OK,' I say, thinking. 'So, rule one, no cheating, no going behind the other's back. We have to agree that from now on, neither one of us tries to get her. Agreed?'

'And we can't ever tell her about it,' he says. 'That's a rule too. Deal?'

'Deal.' I shake his hand.

He touches his cheekbone with a tentative finger and winces. 'Good thing my dad's night fishing. Sleeps in the day. He won't see me in the sun 'til a week.' He pauses. 'That was fun, though. Good fight.'

We kick sand over the smouldering remains of the bonfire and go up the path.

'See you tomorrow,' he calls behind him.

I'm apprehensive about my parents seeing my black eye. I needn't be, as it turns out. My mother puts arnica on my face and makes tutting noises.

‘It’s OK,’ I say. ‘We’re friends now. Me and Nat.’

‘You usually make friends by roughhousing?’ she asks, amused, and I realise she thinks it healthy for a boy my age – *roughhousing*.

The next day Harper and Nat are at the white fence after breakfast.

Harper stares at my eye. ‘Gnarly,’ she says, then, very English, ‘What a shiner.’ A sour scent hangs about her.

‘Like I said,’ Nat says, ‘I stumbled, grabbed Wilder and we both wiped out. Rolled down the path.’ Turning to me he says, ‘We’re going out on the boat. It’s down on the water.’

Harper picks her way down the shale path with exaggerated care. ‘Mustn’t slip,’ she says as if to herself, shooting me a look under her lashes.

The boat bobs on the water in the morning sun. She’s chipped and scraped all over, and you can see every colour she’s ever been painted, her past written on her like a record. *Siren*, reads the shaky black lettering on her stern. The outboard motor at the back leaks a narrow trail of oil into the water.

There are only two life jackets so after some argument we agree that the only solution is for none of us to wear one.

‘One dies, we all die,’ I say. It’s pleasing.

‘Seems like you two are doing a pretty good job at killing yourselves,’ Harper says. She watches me with bird-like focus. She takes off her big, clunky gold watch and puts it carefully in a Ziploc bag, then stows it in the locker beneath the bench.

The little outboard engine chugs against the waves. We put her nose out into open water, go out of sight of land, looking for great white sharks. When navy-blue water surrounds us in every direction Nat stops the engine. We take turns jumping off the side into the deep, gasping with shock at the cold, our breath coming fast,

picturing monsters moving slowly in the depths below us. We don't see any sharks and soon it gets to feeling lonely, nothing but water everywhere. When we sight the shoreline again we yell with relief, as though we've been adrift for many days.

We make our way slowly up the coast, passing houses perched on cliffs, hillsides rugged with dark pine forest, green meadows studded with ox-eye daisies. On a lonely stretch we surprise a family of seals sunning themselves on flat rocks in a sheltered cove. They watch us, tranquil, with their strange round eyes but don't move. They know we're no threat – we're part of the ocean now.

Harper talks about Grace Kelly. She loves Grace Kelly. It's like the words fill her to breaking point and have to be released. It seems almost an impersonal act, her talk – a mechanical release not meant as communication. 'Such control,' Harper mutters to the sea. 'As an actor, as a woman. She told the truth all the time, but she was a castle of her own making. No one could reach the real her. It was perfect. She made herself safe in a dangerous world.'

'Harp?' Nat touches her gently with his foot and she starts.

'Sorry,' she says. 'I just think actors are holy, you know?'

Harper talks about her dog, too. 'The thing I miss most about Samuel is the way he protected me from my dad,' she says. Then she sits up abruptly and scans the cliffs. 'Do you think the Dagger Man is watching?'

'Ah, we don't need to talk about that,' Nat says. A rare flash of discomfort crosses his friendly face. 'It's freaky.'

'I think he's watching. I think he's waiting for us to come ashore somewhere really remote and then he'll come for us, quick as a shadow, holding his dagger above his head ...' She raises a fist behind her head as if to stab. Her red hair falls about her face, which has become dark and frightening.

I ask, 'What are you talking about?'

‘The guy who breaks into houses round here,’ Harper says. ‘The Dagger Man. Don’t you know? You’re not local, so I suppose no one tells you anything.’

I don’t point out that owning a large house you visit for a month a year is hardly being local. ‘You tell me, then.’

‘It happened last year,’ Harper says. ‘There were break-ins. Always visitors, no one local. But the thing is—’

‘—he takes pictures of people asleep,’ Nat says. ‘It’s not as big a deal as she’s making it sound.’

Harper says, ‘He only takes pictures of the kids. And it *is* a big deal. They think he does it to children because they’d be easier to overpower if they woke up. Then he leaves. Like I said, he doesn’t take anything, that they can tell. The family don’t even know they’ve been broken into, even.’

‘So how—’

‘He sends the photos to people,’ Harper says. ‘The Polaroids. At least, that’s what I heard my dad say. The police, the families. Sleeping children. And they say that in the Polaroids there’s a kind of dagger at the child’s throat. It happened to the Masons, and the Bartletts, I think some other family but I don’t remember who. Anyway it stopped when summer ended. But everyone’s wondering if it’ll start again.’

‘We’re not kids,’ I say. ‘We’re probably going to be ok.’ Unease is all through me. And some other feeling, too. I stare at her hand, which often squeezes her knee or thigh for emphasis, or as if for stability. Her nails are bitten to the quick and she has an old, greying Band-Aid wrapped around her thumb. There are tiny golden hairs on her legs, which occasionally catch the midday sun like fine wire. When I look up, Harper’s eyes are fixed on me.

‘His name,’ Harper says dreamily, looking at me. ‘I think of it as all one word. Daggerman, daggerman . . .’



‘Don’t. . .’ I feel like something’s going to happen if she says the name a third time.

‘Got one!’ Nat yells from the front of the boat and we both jump as if waking from a dream.

Nat pulls the writhing fish from the hook and hits it against the prow until its brains spray out in the bright air. Its body is long and beautiful and bloody. ‘Striper,’ he says, putting the fish in the cold box, laying the pole carefully down in the bottom of the boat.

We pull into a tiny white beach, no more than a spit of white sand. Nat finds oysters growing waist deep on the rocks beneath the surface. He opens them carefully with the oyster knife. ‘My dad carved this,’ he says proudly. ‘Cool, huh?’ The handle of the oyster knife is walnut, worn smooth with use, chased with a pattern of tiny fish. ‘He gave it to me for my birthday when I was, like, seven.’

‘My dad would never let me have a knife,’ I say, enviously.

‘He’s pretty cool,’ Nat says. ‘He catches seals sometimes, in the shark rig. That’s why he always keeps a boat hook in the *Siren*. What you do is come up beside it, knock it out with the hook, snare it in the shark rig, then pull it along beside the boat for a time, until it’s ready to do whatever you want. Then you take it somewhere else on shore to finish it.’

Without hot sauce or lemon the oysters are disgusting but I still eat two. We build a fire from driftwood. We’re a little better at it, this time, don’t put too much wood on at once to start. We gut the sea bass, wrap it in aluminium and cook it on the coals. The fish’s flesh is charred to black in some places and almost raw in others, but we devour it anyway. Spider crabs scuttle near on delicate legs. We throw them the fishbones and they swarm over the skeleton, picking it clean. We lie on our backs on the warm white sand, watching the thin corkscrew of smoke rise into the air. The sun burns above and our skins grow pink and sore.

‘This is the best day of my life,’ I almost tell them – but I don’t. I want to keep all this life corked tight inside me, bubbling and dangerous.

Harper pulls a bottle of Jim Beam out of her bag. It’s maybe a third full and we pass it between us, sputtering as the heat strokes down our gullets. ‘You might as well tell me,’ Harper says into the quiet. ‘Why you fought.’

‘We didn’t fight.’ I’m dreamy with whiskey. ‘Nat fell on the path, took me down with him.’

‘Whatever. You’re both terrible liars.’ Harper holds up the empty whiskey bottle. ‘Let’s spin it,’ she says.

My heart crawls up my throat into my mouth, a warm lump. I’ve never played spin the bottle, never kissed anyone. I wonder what it would be like to kiss Harper. I wonder if I’m going to throw up. Nat’s watching me. I wonder, through a white haze of panic, what this means for our deal.

‘Harper,’ he says, but she hisses ‘sssssh!’ and glares at him.

Harper puts the bottle on a flat rock in the middle of the three of us. She spins. The bottle gleams and whirls like a propeller in the glare. It slows, then comes to rest. The top points at me, and the other end points out to sea.

‘You have to kiss the ocean,’ she says.

‘But those aren’t the rules—’ I start to say, helpless, then decide to leave it. Maybe I misunderstood the rules; it’s not like I’ve ever played before. Harper would know how to play better than I do. ‘Spin again?’

‘No,’ Harper says, squinting at me. ‘These are our rules, Wilder. You have to kiss who it says.’

Standing up is like being a kite, I’m billowing around on the end of a string. How much whiskey have I drunk? I go to the shallows where they wash bright over the pebbles, turning them into jewels. ‘Nice to meet you,’ I say to the sea. ‘That’s a lovely blouse you’re wearing.’

The water rushes in over my feet. 'Right down to business, huh,' I say, resigned. 'Whatever you say, ma'am.' I kneel and kiss the sea. It kisses me back, stroking my mouth like a cool tongue. I imagine for a moment that it's salty skin beneath my lips.

'More tongue!' Harper yells. 'Give her more tongue!' And I realise she's had even more to drink than I have.

The game is that we have to make out with whatever object the bottle tells us to. Nat embraces a rock passionately. Harper drapes herself in seaweed, spitting and gagging.

'The bottle is the rule,' I say to her, sententiously. 'The only rule. More tongue.' She pushes me hard and I fall backwards onto the sun-warm shale, laughing so hard I feel like I'll die.

We wake with our feet in the water. The tide is almost in; we have to swim out to the boat with clothes and bags held above our aching heads, the waves slapping salty and cold into our open mouths.

Harper sits at the back of the boat, staring at the water. Her hand trails in the cold blue.

'I don't know how Harper does it,' Nat says. His voice is low, under the cover of the engine and the waves. 'Whenever we play that game it only ever lands on like, a tree. Or a rock.'

I pause in the middle of pulling on jeans. 'You guys play spin the bottle – just you two?'

'Pretty dumb, huh?' He sees my face. 'Not anymore,' he says quickly. 'Now we wouldn't play without you, Wilder.'

By the time we make it back to Whistler Bay we're moving through a swamp of exhaustion.

✧

That night I float above my bed, hot and strange, like the sun has entered my body. I can still feel the boat dipping under me, moving with the waves. *This is what life is really like*, I think. *It's this intense*. Then I stumble out of bed and run down the narrow cold hallway to the bathroom, and throw up violently, chunks of half-cooked fish riding on a hot torrent of old Jim Beam.

In the morning my parents leave early for some craft fair or maybe a seafood market, or maybe sightseeing, I don't know. I groan and turn over. 'No,' I say through the pillow. 'I'll stay home. Do some vacation reading for school.'

'Well all right then,' says my dad, pleased. I drift back into the dark, head pulsing.

At last, at about ten, I wake up properly. The day is already noon-hot outside. I make coffee and go out into the sun with a fistful of granola in my hand.

Harper's sitting on the grass outside the gate. She looks drawn and I suspect her night was even worse than mine. I feel a stab of excitement. She came to find me.

'How long have you been here?' I ask, casual. 'You should have knocked or yelled or something.'

She shrugs. 'I'm not in a hurry,' she says. 'Just bored. Nat's got chores. Can I have some coffee? Can I hang out with you today?'

I am excited and terrified at the prospect of spending the day alone with her. 'OK,' I say. 'Yeah, I mean, sure! We can stay here, if you like. My parents are out.'

She nods. 'It's nice to be near a house sometimes,' she says. 'I'm kind of tired of the sea.'

I hold out my hand. 'Want some breakfast?' We eat dry granola from my open palm.

We climb into the branches of the maple. We're just kind of sitting here, awkward, and I'm searching for something to say when she reaches across towards me with a twig.

'What really happened between you and Nat?' She pokes my thigh. 'I think you were fighting. Does he like me?' I think I hear longing in her voice.

'I got questions for you too,' I say. 'Why was that bottle of whiskey you brought on the boat two-thirds empty?'

We glare at each other. I cave first. 'Sorry,' I say. 'I'm being a dick. I've never had a friend who's a girl before. In fact I've never had friends before.' I stare at the ground, waiting for her to say something crushing and smart, or just leave, maybe.

'I don't have any friends except Nat,' Harper says, matter of fact. 'Everyone hates me. All year I wait for summer when we come here. What's your excuse?'

'You first,' I say. 'Why does everyone hate you?'

'I'm not good with people.'

'Why? Truth for truth.'

Harper goes pale and waves her hand, like, *no*.

'Come on,' I say. 'Your British is showing. What are you afraid of?'

'Nothing, stop it.' She brightens. 'Do you have anything to drink?'

'My parents don't drink.' There's a bottle of sweet vermouth on the shelf in the store cupboard. My mom likes a small glass with a lemon slice before dinner. I'm not giving it to Harper. When I look again she's crying. She does it in complete silence, tears gleaming on her face in the dappled shade of the tree.

'Oh . . .' I slide down from my perch in a panic and go over to her. I reach up to where she sits in the crook of a branch. I don't know what to do so I kind of pet her side, like you would a pet a horse.

She shifts away from my touch. 'I just really miss Samuel,' she says thickly.

'Your dog.' I'm pleased with myself for remembering.

'He was so kind and good. He looked after me. He would only eat French fries if they had mustard on them. Isn't that weird?'

'I'm sure he's a great dog,' I say. 'I'm sure he's happy, wherever he is.' I wonder if her parents have already had the dog destroyed. She's talking about it in the past tense today. Could they have done it that quickly?

'Let's just hang out,' she says, tired. 'OK, Wilder?'

'OK,' I say.

So that's what we do. We find a backgammon set in the cupboard beneath the stairs and she teaches me to play. I'm terrible at it.

'Frick,' I say as I lose another game to her.

'You can say fuck, you know. I'm not your mum.'

'Uh,' I say, feeling shy. 'But then I might get used to it and say it in front of her by accident.'

'You are such a weird guy.' She sounds approving.

'We crawl inside and eat Cheez Whiz on crackers in front of the TV. It's old, there's a constant rainbow sprawl in the corner of the screen, but eventually we find a movie to watch, something about a friendship between two bartenders. And only once does that peculiar electricity roar up my spine. Only once, all afternoon.'

'Do you ever wonder if you're imaginary?' Harper asks dreamily, putting her head on my shoulder. 'Not a real person?'

'You're real,' I say, every sense alive.

She yawns. 'I'm so sick of this movie.'

'I thought you hadn't seen it before.'

'I hadn't.' She starts. 'Sorry, I'm falling asleep. I'd better go.'

'Let me walk you.'

'Why? Nothing's going to happen to *me*,' Harper says.

She still sounds kind of out of it so I start to insist – but then she gets mad so I back down.

I watch from the window as she goes along the clifftop in the low light.

I'm putting away the Cheez Whiz when I notice the bottle of vermouth is gone. When did she take it? While I was in the bathroom?

I'm afraid my parents will notice, but when they get back they're distracted, unnerved. Not, for once, fighting. There's a problem in Castine. Someone went swimming this morning at dawn, and she hasn't come back. A local business owner who has lived here all her life. The coastguard is out.

'I hope they find her,' my mother says, face white. 'Christy's the most neighbourly soul in Castine, everyone says so.'

'No swimming outside the bay, sport,' my father says to me, placing a hand on hers. I try not to notice that she flinches. 'If you go out in the boat with your friends you stay in the boat. Always take a spare can of gas. The riptides around here are lethal.' His spectacles reflect the lamplight and his beard is messy from the wind.

'I have to see my friends.' I'm anxious but it comes out sounding mad. I'm afraid he'll tell me not to go.

'Just be careful,' he says. 'Did you get any reading for school done today?'

It takes me a moment before I recall my lie of the morning. 'Oh, tons,' I say. He looks so happy that I hug him tightly.

Dad pats me gently. 'I've got to pick up that spare part for the mower,' he says and slips out the front door. My mom's eyes follow him.

He comes in late; the sound of the front door opening blends with my dreams.

Some days Harper's busy with her parents or in trouble for something or other and it's just Nat and me. On those days we talk about her feverishly, about her eyes and hair and how cool she is. We talk about how we'll never love anyone else but her. We feel closer to one another for it. It's strange maybe but it bonds us, being in love with her. It lends security to the whole thing. It means we can be doubly sure that nothing will ever happen.

At first I lend Nat my favourite books. He's such a great friend and if we could only talk about books together he'd be *perfect*.

'But do you *like* Tom as a character?' I ask, as we wade out through the pools at low tide. 'Did Dickie deserve to die?'

'No one deserves to be murdered,' Nat says, handing me a shrimp-ing net.

'I'm not sure,' I say, thinking of school. I feel disappointed. I don't think he even read the book.

'Periwinkle snail,' Nat says, showing me a small shell with a beautiful curve. Inside I glimpse a delicate, shining thing. 'You can cook and eat them,' he says.

'Are - is that what we're going to do?'

'Are you hungry?'

'No.'

'Then no.' He puts the snail gently down in the tide pool.

I don't know much about his home life, or even exactly where on the shore he lives - he keeps that to himself. He always comes to the cottage to collect me, and won't come inside, even when my parents ask him to. He seems most comfortable outdoors, under the sun, beside the ocean.



I never once, throughout our friendship, see him indoors. Until that last time.

We walk together along a cool pine trail. Nat carries the BB gun over his shoulder. We're supposed to be shooting rabbits but I secretly hope we don't find any. Sometimes we stop to line pinecones up on logs and shoot them. I'm pretty good for a beginner.

It's a long, sunlit day. I give Nat half the sandwich I have in my pocket because he didn't bring anything. To my relief we don't see any rabbits. He teaches me to recognise plants – trees and flowers. 'City boy.'

As we near home, we stop in the sloping meadow above the bay where you can see over the beech tops down to the sea, which is bright aching blue today. A stream runs through it, chattering. We drink with cupped hands. Dandelion clocks whirl up around us as we sit down in the grass.

'My folks are fighting a lot.' It feels good to tell someone.

'What are your parents like?' Nat asks.

'They're OK,' I say, surprised. 'My dad is kind of a dork.'

'Do you guys like, hang out?'

'Sometimes,' I say. 'Not as much as we used to.'

'I miss my mom. She ran away and left us. It's OK,' Nat says, seeing my face. 'It was a long time ago.' He opens his battered Velcro wallet. 'My dad doesn't know I have this. He wouldn't like it.'

A woman with a shock of shaggy blonde hair, that her son will later share. She's in a bar, pink with beer and the warmth of the room. Nat has folded the photograph in two, so it fits in the clear plastic sleeve in his wallet where the driver's licence is supposed to go – so that he sees her every time he opens it, I guess.

'She's called Arlene,' Nat says. 'I wonder where she is, sometimes.'

‘Maybe one day you’ll go find her,’ I say. ‘Go into the big wide world.’

‘Nah, I won’t leave. Why would I?’ He gestures at the sea, the meadow, the summer sky.

‘You feel about this place like Harper does about her dog,’ I say. ‘She misses it a lot, right?’

Nat shakes his head. ‘She doesn’t have a dog. Never did.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s not my story to tell.’ And I can’t get him to say any more than that. Instead Nat says, ‘My pa’s letting me off chores again tomorrow. We can take the boat. Harper and I will call for you at seven.’

‘In the morning?’ I’m incredulous.

‘We have to get out early to hit the god weather.’

‘The good weather?’

‘That’s what I’m saying.’

I’m nearly sure it wasn’t what he said.

I shiver, and everything goes a little dim, as though there’s a cloud over the sun.

Nat’s watching me. ‘What’s up?’

‘I’ve got to get home. My mom’s expecting me.’ My dad probably won’t be there. I know that. He’s not home much, these days.

But it’s not that. I just suddenly don’t like this place. I don’t know why. It’s a beautiful meadow full of flowers overlooking the sea, what kind of person doesn’t like that? But I can’t wait to get away from it. I feel like I might throw up.

He slaps me on the back in a friendly way and I don’t stop to say goodbye. I hurry down towards the sea and Whistler Cottage.

As soon as I’m through the beech trees and back on the cliff path I feel better. There’s no way I can explain the feeling that overwhelmed me just now. Like a hand was squeezing my insides. *Get a grip, Wilder*, I tell myself. *Just a place*. But I hated it. I felt like it was looking at me.

The early morning is grey and flat, pressing down on the horizon. In the bottom of the boat is rope, a grappling hook and the oyster knife. My eyes return to them again and again, as we push out of the bay and around the headland.

‘What are those for?’ I ask eventually.

‘We’re going somewhere special,’ Harper says. She seems worked up, her eyes glassy. I realise that she’s been drinking. I feel unease for her, but it’s also a little exciting. She’s troubled and needs my friendship. Once again there’s a stirring in the depths of me.

The sea tosses and spits, black with rims of white.

‘This doesn’t seem like good weather,’ I say.

‘It’s god weather,’ Harper says. ‘It’s the best weather to see the god in.’

‘What god?’

‘She’s just kidding around,’ Nat says. ‘Harper pretends she thinks something lives in the back of the cave. And when you call her, especially when the weather’s rough—’

‘She wakes up,’ Harper hisses, eyes on the horizon. ‘The woman in the sea. The god.’

I’m scared and I think about telling them to take me back, but I don’t want to in front of Harper. Perhaps this is what they’ve been planning all along – befriending me to lure me here as a sacrifice. My palms slip and slide where I grip the side of the boat.

‘Hey,’ Nat says, gentle. ‘Relax. It’s just a trick of sound and light on the water. There’s nothing really there.’

‘Why take the knife if it’s not real?’

‘To be scared,’ Harper says. ‘Being scared is fun. But you have to make it feel real – to be properly afraid.’ She puts her hand on mine. ‘Don’t worry. It’s play-acting, I promise. But you have to *commit*.’ Her hand squeezes mine urgently. ‘We’re going to find Rebecca.’

I can tell she wants me to ask, so I do. 'Who's Rebecca?'

Harper smiles. There's just a hint of slurring round her consonants. 'So, like, twelve years ago there was this young actress named Rebecca who was just about to have her big break. She was going to play an Olympic swimmer in some big Hollywood epic. She came up here for the summer to practise, tested herself every day, swimming further and further from shore.

'Rebecca was married to this perfect guy. Every day at dusk, her husband hung a light out for her at the end of the pier, a lantern with a blue bulb, to guide her home. She'd swim to the pier and he'd pull her out of the water, and rub her down in a big fluffy towel, take her inside to warm up and draw her a bath and give her a glass of wine and make dinner and they'd go to sleep.

'One day at dusk, he went down to the pier and hung the blue light. He drew her bath as usual and poured a glass of wine ready for her. He waited patiently. He waited and waited, but Rebecca didn't come. Night came, the stars came out, and she still didn't come.

'As for Rebecca, she swam towards the blue light, looking forward to her bath and her dinner and her warm towel and her warm husband. She felt happy, knowing she was near home. Her limbs had that nice heaviness that comes with tiredness, knowing that you'll rest soon. But the minutes passed and the light didn't seem to be getting any closer. The tiredness in her arms and legs was turning to heavy weight. But she swam on. She was starting to feel afraid.

'The night got dark. But somehow, she couldn't get any closer to home. The blue light stayed there, in the distance. Rebecca swam harder and harder, her breath coming in gasps. She tried not to think about all the big shapes moving far below her, how small her body was in the big black sea. She strained and swam towards that little pinpoint of blue. Still, it didn't come any closer. Rebecca felt the tears running down her face, into the cold sea around her.

‘Now it was completely dark, except for the blue light shining in the distance. When she looked up, there were no stars, no moon. Solid black. And the sound of the water was different. It sort of lapped, and echoed.

‘Rebecca saw that she wasn’t in the open ocean anymore. There were stone walls on both sides of her and over her head. She was in a cave. And ahead was the blue light, reflecting on the shining black walls, on the water. She was crying really hard, now; her body was exhausted and she was afraid. She turned and swam again, swam for her life, into the dark, away from the blue glow. But her fingers met stone. There was no cave mouth. She was alone under the rock and the tide was rising. She knew she was going to die. The blue light pulsed and brightened, like it was enjoying itself. Finally, at last, it came nearer. She stopped swimming, but still the blue light approached. It wasn’t one light, she saw now, but two. Eyes that shone in the dark like St Elmo’s fire. It came closer and closer. She clawed again at the wall, looking for any opening that could save her. Under the water, she saw the body of the thing was vast, filling the cave like ink spreading in water. Rebecca was surrounded by the god. It tugged lightly at her limbs. Then it took her, drew her down and down and away for ever. It took her and they became part of each other – Rebecca and the god.

‘She’s strong, though. Even though she’s dead, Rebecca never, ever stops trying to find her way back to shore, back to her life and her husband. But all that swimming makes her hungry. So if you feel something grab you by the leg, beneath the water, you’d better say your prayers. Rebecca’s got you.’

A pleasurable shiver runs between my shoulder blades and down each vertebra.

‘You feel it?’ Harper’s eyes are bright and fixed on me.

‘Is any of that story true?’ I ask Nat.

‘People do drown out here,’ Nat says. ‘Like Christy Barham who owned the fishmonger. Everyone’s pretty sad about that. And there was a woman called Rebecca who disappeared years ago. Or they say so. Maybe there wasn’t and they’ve just got used to saying it. Harper made all the rest of that stuff up.’

‘OK then,’ I say. ‘Let’s go wake the god.’

‘Are you afraid?’ Harper whispers.

‘Yes,’ I say and she quivers with pleasure. I finger the wicked, long blade of the oyster knife. ‘But if she’s dangerous, we’ll get her with this.’ I fumble and almost drop the knife overboard.

‘Careful,’ Nat says, anxious. ‘That was a birthday present. My dad still borrows it sometimes, he’ll know if I lose it.’

We moor the boat to a tall rock like an obelisk. Beyond is a narrow channel lined with rock. The water swells are steep peaks and falls like a rollercoaster. At the end is a dark mouth in the cliff. A cave.

‘My dad showed me this cave when I was little,’ Nat says. ‘It’s kind of special.’

The water lashes white against the cave mouth.

‘Is this safe?’ I ask, with a strong return of my unease.

‘We’ve come here loads of times,’ Harper says. Her gaze is fixed on the opening to the cave.

‘Not when it’s been this rough,’ Nat says, reluctant. Harper looks at him in surprise, and then with fury.

‘You stay here then.’ Before we can move or reply she’s gone over the side, into the heaving flanks of the ocean. The thunder of the sea is so loud in the narrow channel, I don’t even hear the splash.

‘I think we have to go, now,’ Nat says. He wriggles a broad elasticated band onto his head. It has a light fixed to the front. ‘Don’t forget the knife.’

‘Wait—’ But he’s gone too. I’m alone in the boat.

I take a deep breath, grab the oyster knife and jump. The water seems colder, saltier than on that first day. It feels solid, like a hard hand slapping my face.

The temperature plummets as we come under the rocky ceiling, the quality of sound changes. Light plays all over the cave walls and roof. The cave narrows to a tunnel. We move into single file. Here the ocean breathes up and down; the swell throws us against the rough walls, leaving bloody scratches. I raise a hand – my fingers just graze the rough stone overhead.

The swell lifts us gently. The tide is high and rising. I try not to imagine our legs from below, kicking tiny in the black. The narrow tunnel opens up into an echoing space. We’re inside the cliff now, I can feel the weight of rock above our heads. I can’t see much until Nat’s headlamp blinks on and he shines it around.

It’s large, the cave, it goes back and back. It’s loud, too, like being inside an engine. A big stone looms over the lashing water. The top of the rock is flat, just about big enough to stand on.

‘Let’s call her up!’ Harper yells, her voice echoing and eerie.

‘Yes!’ Nat yells. His voice is filled with a strange energy. ‘The cave is filling up,’ he says, coming up beside me. His head torch is blinding. ‘Right up to the roof. So let’s make this quick.’

‘Tell me what we’re doing.’

Harper’s face is just a gleam of wet cheek. She swims close. ‘Some say she’s that woman who drowned. Some say she’s always been here. We call her Rebecca but who knows what her real name is? She tries to kiss you.’ Her face is close to mine, now. ‘If you let her kiss you, it’s the last thing you’ll ever do.’ Her breath fills my ear, runs down the spaces of me. Despite the staleness that lingers, it lights my groin with fire. ‘She wraps you in her arms and drags you down with her, into the cold depths of the sea. You drown, but in ecstasy.’