

CHAPTER 1

I wasn't there when my sister died.

Ross called me; left close to a dozen voicemail messages before I checked any of them, each one more desperate than the last. And I'm ashamed to say that it was always his voice I heard first – familiar and forgotten, hardly changed at all – rather than his words.

I watch the news reports in Terminal 4 of JFK, during a seven-hour layover that eats away at my sanity until I have to turn on my laptop and look. Sitting on a stool in a noisy, too-bright Shake Shack, ignoring my cheeseburger as I scroll through the first of three reports on the BBC News webpage for Edinburgh, Fife & East. I should probably be just as ashamed that he is what I see first too. Even before the black headline: **Fears Grow for Missing Leith Woman.**

The first photo is subtitled DAY ONE, 3 APRIL, but it's already night. Ross is pacing a low stone wall next to the firth, caught

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between two silver lampposts that cast round, flat light. Though his face is turned away from the camera, no one could mistake his agitation for anything else: his shoulders are high, his hands fists. The photographer has caught the bright spotlights of a returning orange-and-blue lifeboat, and Ross's face is turned towards both it and the frozen fury of a wave breaking over the end of the pier. There was a storm soon after she went missing, he said in more than one message, as if it were my not knowing that extra terrible detail that had stopped me from replying.

It takes nearly two glasses of Merlot in a darker, more subdued bar, well out of earshot of Shake Shack, before I'm able to play the first video. DAY TWO, 4 APRIL. And even then, when El's photo flashes up on the screen – laughing, head thrown back in what she always called her 'Like a Fucking Virgin' pose, her silk blouse transparent, hair bobbed and silver-blond – I flinch and press pause, close my eyes. Run self-conscious fingers through my tangled, too-long hair. I finish the wine, order a third, and the waiter who brings it to me stares so long and hard at my laptop screen, I wonder if he's having a stroke. Before I realise, of course. Amazing what you forget; facts of life that were once as natural as breathing. He thinks he's looking at a picture of me. Below the words: IS ELLICE MACAULEY ALIVE OR DEAD?

I pluck the buds out of my ears. 'My twin sister.'

'Sorry, ma'am,' he says with a megawatt smile, managing to sound like he's never been sorry a day in his life. The constant smiling and *ma'aming* wears me out, makes me feel irrationally furious. That this is the only thing about America that I won't miss makes me feel more tired, more pissed off. I think of my condo

Carole Johnstone

on Pacific Avenue. The hot crazy circus of the boardwalk and Muscle Beach. The hot crazy nights of dancing in basement clubs where the walls run with sweat. The cool turquoise calm of the ocean. An ocean that I love.

I take another big swallow of wine, put my earbuds back in, press play. The photo of El cuts to a reporter: young and earnest, probably still in her twenties, her hair whipping viciously around her head.

‘On the morning of April the third, Leith resident, Ellice MacAuley, thirty-one, sailed from this yacht club in Granton Harbour on the Firth of Forth, and has not been seen or heard from since.’

I start as the camera zooms out from the yacht club to show the distant rail and road bridges at Queensferry in the west, before panning back east towards the outcrops of Earlsferry and North Berwick. Between them, the grey firth and the low rolling hills of Kinghorn and Burntisland on the opposite shore. Then back to the harbour, its bobbing round buoys and long pontoons and white sailboats with rattling masts. A low stone slope into the water. A different crane. No warehouse.

How could I not have realised before that it’s the same harbour – a place I haven’t thought about in decades, and yet there it is, almost unchanged. A shiver cricks my neck. A dread that I don’t want to examine any more than anything else that’s gone through my mind since all those voicemail messages began filling up my inbox. I reach for my wine again, relieved when the camera cuts away from the harbour to archive footage of lifeboats and helicopters.

‘The alarm was raised when Ms MacAuley failed to return to

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the Royal Forth Yacht Club, and it was further determined that she had not reached her intended destination in Anstruther earlier in the day. The Coastguard and RNLi have been involved in the search, but continuing bad weather has significantly hampered their efforts.’

A man: jowly, mostly bald, solemn like the reporter, but with a glint in his eye like he’s faking it, stares into the camera, arms folded. Underneath his too-large belly: JAMES PATON, HM COASTGUARD SAR MISSION CO-ORDINATOR, ABERDEEN. ‘We know that Ms MacAuley was a competent sailor—’

Do we? I think.

‘—but, looking at the prevailing windspeed through the firth on the morning of the third, we estimate that she had already been missing for approximately six hours by the time the alarm was raised.’ He pauses, and even though he’s only being filmed from the waist up, I can tell he’s widening his stance, like a gunslinger. He only just manages not to shrug. ‘Over the past seventy-two hours, the temperature of the firth has been no more than seven degrees Celsius. In those conditions, a person could be expected to survive no more than three hours in the water.’

Arsehole, I think. In El’s voice.

The camera cuts back to the reporter, still pretending not to be bothered by her ruined hair. ‘Now, at the end of day two of the search, and in worsening conditions,’ she says, ‘hope is fading fast for the safe return of Ellice MacAuley.’

A picture of El and Ross on holiday somewhere fills the screen – all tan and white teeth; his arm flung around her shoulders as she leans in, tips up her chin to laugh. I can see why the coverage

is so eager and extensive. They're beautiful. They look at each other like they're both starving and satisfied. The intimacy of it makes me feel uncomfortable; it sours the wine in my stomach.

I pick up my phone, check the weather app. Edinburgh is still the second location after Venice Beach; I've never dwelled too long upon why. Six degrees and heavy rain. I look out the window at the dark, the long white lines of runway lights.

It's barely six a.m. in the UK, but there's already a new video: DAY THREE, 5 APRIL. I don't watch it. I already know that nothing's changed. I know she still hasn't been found. I know that now, even more than yesterday, they don't expect her to be. There's another image below it, time-stamped less than two hours ago. DOCTOR HUSBAND OF MISSING LEITH WOMAN LOSES HOPE. The picture catches my breath. It hurts to look at him. It would hurt *anyone* to look at him. Ross is hunkered down next to a low wall, knees high and close to his chin, his hands clasped around the back of his neck, pressing his elbows tight together in front of himself like a shield. A man in a long anorak is standing next to him, looking down and obviously speaking, but Ross isn't paying attention. Instead, he's looking out at the firth, his mouth open and teeth bared in a wail of despair and horrified grief that I can almost hear.

I close the laptop with a too-loud slam. Drain my wine as people turn to look. My hand is shaking, eyes stinging. The hours between New York and Edinburgh loom and at the same time aren't enough. I don't want to go back. I'd give anything – *anything* – to never, ever, go back.

I get up to move on to another bar; I can't bear to face the

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ma'am waiter again. I grab my laptop, my bag, toss a twenty on the table. I'm more than a little unsteady as I weave between tables. I should probably have eaten that burger. But it doesn't matter. *None* of it matters. People are still looking at me, and I wonder if I've said it aloud, until I realise I'm shaking my head instead. Because I have to believe it. I have to believe that nothing has changed. That all this fear and quickening dread doesn't mean anything at all. I think of Edinburgh, of Leith, of that grey flat-stoned house with Georgian-bar windows in Westeryk Road. I think of Grandpa's gap-toothed grin, and it soothes the worst of my panic. *Nane ae it amounts tae a pun ae mince, hen.*

I wasn't in Edinburgh when my sister died. I wasn't in LAX or JFK. I wasn't even on the wrought-iron balcony of my California condo, looking out at the Pacific and drinking zinfandel and pretending I was exactly where I've always wanted to be.

I wasn't anywhere when my sister died.

Because she isn't dead.