A TERN OF LOVE

BY

Faye Alcott

Alaska · The Tundra

Seattle

Isles of Shoals, New Hampshire

321LUMINA

© 2026 Blurt Snodgrass · 321Lumina™

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

First Edition, 2026

Published by 321Lumina · 321lumina.com

CONTENTS

Chapter 1 · The Knock
Chapter 2 · The Ridge
Chapter 3 · The Mug
Chapter 4 · The Declaration
Chapter 5 · The Bear
Chapter 6 · The Dread
Chapter 7 · The Phone
Chapter 8 · The Beagle Channel
Chapter 9 · The Office
Chapter 10 · The Fox Returns
Chapter 11 · The Colony
Chapter 12 · The Flat Rock
Chapter 13 · The Scarred Female
Chapter 14 · The Departure
Chapter 15 · The Distance
Chapter 16 · The Shoals
Chapter 17 · The Guillemots
Chapter 18 · The Comedy Show
Chapter 19 · Portsmouth
Chapter 20 · Star Island
Chapter 21 · Grace
Chapter 22 · The Sailboat
Chapter 23 · The Choice
Chapter 24 · The Show — Fifteen Years Later

CHAPTER

1

The sun does not set here in July and I have stopped noticing.

Someone is banging on my tent.

Not the wind. The wind I know. This is a fist. Two knocks. Deliberate. The knock of someone who has been standing outside deciding whether to knock and finally decided.

I check my watch. Two forty in the morning. The light outside the tent wall is the same gold it has been since May.

“Dr. Alcott.”

A man’s voice. Not my team. My team knows better than to knock at two forty in the morning unless something is on fire or someone is hurt.

“Dr. Alcott. I have one of your birds.”

I am already unzipping my sleeping bag.

He is tall. Standing in the gold light of two forty in the morning on the Alaskan tundra with a tern cupped in both hands like something he is not sure he is holding correctly. Dark hair. The look of someone who has been outside for weeks. Boots that know this

ground.

The bird is banded. My band. Tag number G47 — a female I tagged three seasons ago who has come back to the same nest site every year without fail.

She is alive. Eyes bright. The particular outrage of a tern being held.

“Where did you find her.”

“Two hundred meters north. Fox got into the colony. She was on the ground.” He looks at the bird then at me. “I did not know if I should move her.”

“You should have.”

“I did.”

I take G47. Run my hands along her wings. Nothing broken. Scared and indignant and completely herself.

“She will be fine,” I say.

He nods. Does not move.

“You are not with the university team,” I say.

“No.”

“You are not with the wildlife service.”

“No.”

G47 is calming in my hands. Her heartbeat slowing from a drumroll to something steadier.

“Then what are you doing in my colony at two forty in the morning.”

He almost smiles. The almost-smile of a man who has been asked a version of this question before.

“I am mapping the fox dens,” he says. “I have been here six weeks. I know where every den is on this island.” He looks back toward the colony, toward the darkness that is not quite darkness. “Tonight a female moved. I followed her. She came through the east edge of the colony.” He pauses. “I found your bird on the way back.”

A man who maps fox dens. Who has been here six weeks alone and knows this island the way I know my tagged birds — completely, from memory, nothing missed.

“Eli Marsh,” he says. He does not offer his hand because both of his are still cupped in front of him from holding the bird.

“Faye Alcott,” I say. Though he already knows that.

“How many dens,” I say.

“Seven active. Two abandoned.” He looks at the colony. “The female that moved tonight — she has four pups. They are old enough to hunt with her now.”

Four pups old enough to hunt. In a colony of eight thousand nesting terns.

“You have been watching them six weeks and you did not tell anyone.”

“I told the landowner. I am here with permission.” He looks at me directly. The look of a man who does not apologize for his work. “I do not interfere with the predator cycle. I map it. Document it. Present the data.”

“While my birds get eaten.”

“While the foxes feed their pups,” he says. Evenly. Not a challenge. Just a man being accurate about what he studies.

G47 shifts in my hands. Ready to be put down.

I set her on the ground. She stands for one moment looking at both of us with the complete contempt of a tern who has survived a fox and a researcher and a strange man in one night. Then she walks three steps and lifts into the gold air and is gone.

We stand in the two forty light watching her go.

He knows where every fox den is on this island. Seven active. Four pups old enough to hunt. The colony is running out of time before the pups find it on their own.

He does not interfere with the predator cycle.

I do.

I can walk back to my tent. Let Eli Marsh map his foxes. Let the cycle run the way it runs. Lose birds I have been tracking for three seasons to a female fox feeding her pups.

Or I can ask him to show me where the dens are.

I cannot have both. His data and my birds are not available at the same time.

“Show me the dens,” I say.

He looks at me for a moment. Reading the data the way people do when they are deciding something.

“Now,” he says.

“Now.”

We walk north into the gold light of the Alaskan July. The colony loud around us. The sun hanging where it always hangs this time of year — not rising, not setting, just present and indifferent and completely itself.

The sun does not set here in July.

I have stopped noticing.

I have not stopped noticing him.

CHAPTER

2

He walks like he knows the ground because he does. No hesitation. No checking landmarks. Just a man who has been covering this island for six weeks in every light condition the Alaskan summer offers and has the whole of it in his head.

I follow.

The colony noise behind us. Eight thousand terns in various states of outrage and negotiation. The sound I fall asleep to and wake to and have stopped hearing the way I have stopped noticing the light. Both of them just present. Just the condition of this place.

“First one here,” Eli says.

A shallow depression in the tundra. Widened at the entrance. The particular smell of a den that has been occupied long enough to become a home. Two hundred meters from the east edge of the colony.

Too close.

“She has been using this one three seasons,” he says. “Same female. I recognized her by the scar on her left ear.”

I look at him.

“You have been coming back three seasons,” I say.

“Four,” he says.

He shows me the others. We move through the gold light of the Alaskan July, Eli walking his lines, me following. He narrates without being asked. Den location. Occupancy history. Litter size by year. The female’s range. The territory boundaries between the seven active dens and how they shift when the pups start ranging.

He pulls a field notebook from his jacket. Worn through at the spine. Pages that have been wet and dried and written on in every condition this island offers.

I recognize the notebook. I have the same one. Three of them in my tent, full.

“You do this alone,” I say.

“Yes.”

“No team.”

“The university sends me alone because I work better alone.” He says it without apology. Just a man being accurate about his own conditions. “I do not need a team for what I do.”

I understand this completely. I wish I did not.

We reach the seventh den. The furthest from the colony. A rise in the tundra with a view of the water to the north. The female has chosen well.

"Why foxes," I say.

He is quiet for a moment. The way people are quiet when the answer is real.

"My father trapped them," he says. "Ran a trapline in the Brooks Range. Fifty miles of it. I went with him every winter from the time I was seven." He looks at the den. "I watched him kill them for twenty years. I wanted to understand what I had watched."

He closes his notebook.

"Understanding is not the same as forgiving," he says. "But it is a start."

The seven active dens between us and the colony. Four pups old enough to hunt. G47 somewhere in the gold air above us doing what terns do regardless of what gets decided on the ground below.

We walk back toward camp.

The colony coming up loud around us. The sun doing its endless circle. My watch says four thirty in the morning but my watch has been meaningless since May.

"You have been here six weeks," I say.

"Yes."

"I have been here six weeks."

"I know." He glances at me. "I have seen your camp lights. Heard the drone surveys." He pauses. "I watched you band the second string of nests on the north slope three weeks ago."

“You did not introduce yourself.”

“You were working,” he says simply.

A man who watched me work for three weeks and waited until he had a reason to knock. Until he had something to offer. A tern in his hands and the location of seven fox dens.

I do not know what to do with a man like that.

We reach the place where the path splits. My camp to the left. His to the right. Two hundred meters between them. Six weeks on the same island without knowing.

The colony loud and golden around us.

I can say goodnight. Thank him for G47. Go back to my tent and my data and the six weeks I have left in this colony before the dread comes and everything goes quiet and I leave.

Or I can ask him if he drinks coffee.

I cannot have both. The distance I have maintained for six weeks and whatever happens if I close it are not available at the same time.

“Do you drink coffee,” I say.

He looks at me. Something behind his eyes settling into place.

“Yes,” he says.

“I make it at six. When the colony quiets between the early feeding flights.” I look toward my camp. “If you want.”

“I want,” he says.

We stand in the four thirty light of the Alaskan July. The sun going nowhere. The colony loud and alive and completely indifferent to the two of us standing at a fork in the path deciding something.

“Six o’clock,” I say.

“Six o’clock,” he says.

He walks right. I walk left.

CHAPTER

3

He said six o'clock.

The colony is in its brief morning quiet. The early feeding flights done. The birds back on their nests. The particular hush that falls over eight thousand terns between four and seven in the morning when the chick feeding slows and the colony breathes.

This is my hour. Coffee and notebook and the hush before the day starts again.

I made two mugs.

Six o'clock becomes six ten. Six ten becomes six twenty. The coffee in the second mug going from hot to warm to the particular temperature of a decision that has not been made.

I am not waiting. I am sitting with my notebook drinking my coffee and happening to have made two mugs by accident.

I am waiting.

I see him at six twenty five.

Not coming toward camp. Already on the ridge to the north, two hundred meters out, notebook open, completely still in the way Eli

Marsh is completely still when he is watching something — the particular stillness of a man who has learned that movement ends observation.

I follow his sightline.

The scarred female. Moving along the east edge of the colony in the low gold light. Not hunting yet. Ranging. Teaching. Two of the pups behind her learning the geography of a place they will be hunting alone in three weeks.

The colony has not clocked her yet. The terns nearest the edge are on their nests. Unaware.

Not for long.

I pick up both mugs and walk to the ridge.

He hears me coming. Does not turn. Just shifts slightly to make room on the flat rock he is using as a seat the way you make room for someone you were expecting.

I sit down beside him. Hand him the second mug.

He takes it without looking away from the female.

“She came out of the third den,” he says quietly. “Forty minutes ago.”

“The pups.”

“Learning the approach angles.” He makes a notation. “She will not hunt today. She is showing them.”

We watch in silence. The female moving along the edge with the patience of something that has done this before and knows exactly how much time she has. The pups behind her. The colony beginning to stir.

It happens fast.

One tern sees her. One alarm call. Then the colony erupts — eight thousand birds off their nests in under ten seconds, the air above us suddenly white and screaming, the dive bombing beginning immediately. The female tucks low and runs. The pups scatter. The terns following them to the edge of their territory and no further.

Three minutes. Then the colony settles back onto its nests like nothing happened.

Eli is still writing.

I am still holding my coffee.

“She will be back tonight,” he says.

“I know.”

“Different angle.” He closes his notebook. “She always comes back a different angle.”

He finally looks at me. The gold morning light on his face. The look of a man who has been watching things long enough to know that the most important information is never in the first approach.

“Thank you for the coffee,” he says.

The ridge in the gold morning. The colony loud and alive below us. Two mugs. Two notebooks. The scarred female somewhere in the

tundra with her pups learning the angles.

I came up here with two mugs of coffee. That is a fact about me that I cannot take back.

I can let it be what it was — practical, collegial, two researchers sharing information on a ridge at six thirty in the morning. Professional. Contained.

Or I can let it be what it was.

I cannot have both. The version where I brought the coffee for practical reasons and the version where I brought the coffee are not available at the same time.

“Same time tomorrow,” Eli says.

Not a question.

I look at him. The gold morning. The colony below. The skua already gone with its stolen fish.

“Same time tomorrow,” I say.

We sit on the ridge while the colony finds its morning rhythm below us. The sun doing its endless circle. The coffee warm in my hands. Eli’s shoulder close enough that I am aware of exactly how much space is between us.

The skua appears from the north. Fast and direct. It hits the colony edge and a tern goes up screaming and the skua climbs with the stolen fish and is gone in under four seconds.

Eli watches it go.

“Yours or mine,” he says.

“Mine,” I say.

He makes a notation.

The sun does not set here in July. The colony does not stop. The fox will come back tonight at a different angle.

I am already looking forward to tomorrow.

CHAPTER 4

I am watching G47 settle onto her nest when the rifle goes off.

Not close. Two hundred meters west. But on this island sound carries the way it carries everywhere that is mostly silence and the Ambassador drops out of the sky like it has been personally offended and Kezia brings it down in both arms running back toward camp already talking into her radio.

“It’s fine it’s fine it’s fine the drone is fine—”

“What was that,” I say into the radio.

“Someone shot at the Ambassador.”

Eight thousand terns lift off the colony simultaneously. The alarm call going up like a wall of sound. G47 gone before I can move.

I stand on the tundra with my catching pole and watch my morning evaporate.

Kezia is twenty four years old and in her second field season and she loves the Ambassador the way some people love pets. She has it on the camp table when I get back, turning it over in her hands looking for damage, her field notebook forgotten entirely.

“One rotor housing scratched,” she says. “Otherwise fine.”

“Who shot it.”

“Cabin to the west. I have seen smoke from there before.” She pauses. Looks at me with the particular expression of a twenty four year old who has an opinion she is deciding whether to share. “Except there is no smoke today. There has never actually been smoke. I do not know what I have been seeing.”

She puts the Ambassador down.

“Eli would know,” she says.

She says it carefully. The way my three graduate students have been saying Eli’s name for two weeks. Carefully. With a slight elevation of pitch that I have been pretending not to notice.

Adaeze looks up from her data sheets. Looks at the ceiling of the tent.

Priya says nothing which from Priya means everything.

“I know,” I say.

I find Eli at his cabin on the south side of the ridge.

I have never been here before. Four seasons on this island and I have never come west of the colony boundary. I filed whatever was out here under not my business and left it there.

The cabin is small. One room. A table covered in field notebooks stacked in the precise order of a man who knows exactly where everything is. A shelf of dated spines going back four seasons. A single lamp burning fish oil.

He opens the door before I knock.

The cabin is warm.

“Someone shot my drone,” I say.

He reads my face. Looks west toward the colony boundary.

“Must have been Hank,” he says. “He thinks anything that flies is trying to spy on him.” He is already reaching for his jacket. “I will talk to him.”

We walk west. The colony noise fading behind us. The island opening up into the particular silence of a place that has been left alone long enough to become itself completely.

“How long has he been here,” I say.

“Longer than me.”

“Why.”

“World got too loud.” Eli looks at the horizon. “He grows vegetables in a greenhouse. Catches his own fish. Does not trade. Does not take.” He pauses. “Second season I was here I brought him something he needed. He let me cross his land after that. We have an understanding.”

“What did you bring him.”

Eli looks at me. “Something that runs quietly, and generates electricity,” he says.

We walk.

“He will not shoot at a person,” Eli says. “Only machines.”

“That is very reassuring.”

The almost smile. “I thought so.”

We stand at the fork in the path.

The colony is out there somewhere behind us. Eli’s cabin to one side, Hank’s to the other. The gold light doing what it always does.

I think about G47, gone from her nest in the alarm call, and how she will come back. She always comes back.

I think about the ridge and two mugs and the particular temperature of a decision that has already been made.

Hank’s cabin is lower to the ground than Eli’s. Built by a man who understands that the wind on this island respects nothing that presents itself as a target.

Inside it is warm and silent. Two weights hanging on cables in the corner moving slowly, imperceptibly, the way a grandfather clock moves. Hank is winding them back up when we walk in.

Hank sets the handle down. Looks at Eli. Looks at me. Looks at the catching pole I forgot to leave at camp. Looks at the scar above my left eyebrow from a tern in Iceland four seasons ago.

Looks back at Eli.

“She with you,” he says.

Eli looks at me. The gold July light coming through Hank’s one window. The colony just audible in the distance. The weights moving slowly in the corner.

He looks back at Hank.

“She’s not spying on you,” Eli says.

CHAPTER

5

She is coming across the tundra from the south and I know before she is close enough to recognize that it is Patricia because nobody else walks like that — like the ground owes her something and she is collecting.

Thermos in one hand. Field notebook in the other. Boots that have been on every significant Arctic tern colony in the northern hemisphere. She is sixty years old and she has not slowed down to accommodate that fact.

I go out to meet her.

“You did not tell me you were coming,” I say.

“I did not know I was coming until I was on the plane.” She looks at the colony. Eight thousand birds going about their business in the gold July light. She looks at them the way she always looks at them — like old friends she is quietly checking on. “The grant review is in November Faye.”

“I know when the grant review is.”

“Voss is nervous.”

“Voss is always nervous.”

She looks at me. The look she has been giving me for twelve years — the one that means she knows something I have not said yet and is deciding whether to wait or ask directly.

She decides to wait.

“Show me the colony,” she says.

She spends the morning with me on the colony. Reading bands through binoculars. Watching the drone survey. Reviewing the season’s recapture data in my field notebook with the focused attention of a woman who invented the methodology she is evaluating.

She says nothing about Eli’s cabin on the ridge. She says nothing about the two mugs I am carrying when she finds me at six fifteen in the morning. She says nothing about the worn flat rock on the ridge that has two distinct sitting positions.

She is Patricia Osei. She sees everything. She files it.

At noon she closes my field notebook and hands it back.

“The data is good,” she says. “Better than good.”

“I know.”

“Voss will be satisfied.”

“Good.”

She looks west toward the colony boundary. Toward the ridge. Toward the two cabins she has not visited yet.

“Who lives out there,” she says.

“A fox researcher,” I say. “And a man who has been here longer than anyone. Eli brought him a gravity generator second season. Runs his whole cabin off falling weights.”

Patricia looks west for a long moment.

“I would like to meet him,” she says.

We walk west.

Patricia stands at Hank’s door. It opens.

“Faye told me about your gravity generator this morning,” she says. “I’ve come to see it.”

Hank steps back from the door.

I stand outside on the tundra and look at the colony and give them ten minutes.

When I go back in Patricia is sitting at Hank’s table with her thermos open and Hank is sitting across from her and neither of them looks up when I come in.

I go back outside.

Ten minutes later Patricia comes out.

“Hank has invited us to a fish fry,” she says.

Eli catches the fish in the morning. Hank brings everything from his greenhouse — more than I knew he grew, more colors than the tundra has produced in weeks. Patricia produces a spice packet from her field kit that she has apparently been carrying across three

continents for exactly this kind of moment.

Hank sets a cast iron skillet on his stove outside. No flame. No smoke. No noise. The skillet gets hot while the stove surface stays cool. Kezia stares at it for a full minute trying to understand what she is looking at.

Eli does not explain. He just hands her the fish.

We cook outside. A camp stove for the fish. A real fire after because some things require actual fire. The gold July light around us — the sun at nine in the evening exactly where it was at nine in the morning, doing its endless circle, casting long shadows that rotate slowly around us like the hands of a clock that has lost its mind.

Hank has two chairs. Eli brings his. The graduate students sit on the tundra without being asked because they are field researchers and the ground is just furniture.

Patricia sits in one of Hank's chairs. Hank sits in the other. They are not talking. They do not need to.

Kezia serves the fish. Adaeze opens the greenhouse vegetables. Priya says nothing which means she is paying attention to everything.

Eli is across the fire from me. The flames between us. The colony loud in the distance. The weights falling slowly inside Hank's open cabin door.

We eat.

Kezia raises her voice. "Let's tell a story."

"One dark and stormy dismal night," she says, "three men sat by the campfire bright. Let's tell a story said one to another. So the story began—"

She looks around the fire.

"One dark and stormy dismal night three men sat by the campfire bright. Let's tell a story said one to another. So the story began—"

Adaeze sees it first. Then Priya. Then me. We are laughing before Kezia finishes the third repetition. By the fifth the whole fire is in on it. Kezia completely committed, completely straight faced, going around and around the infinite story with the particular authority of a twenty four year old who has found the exact right bit and is going to ride it all the way to the end which is also the beginning.

Hank is almost smiling.

Patricia is watching Hank almost smile.

I cannot have both. The woman who leaves in August and this fire and these people and this man across the flames are not available at the same time.

The satellite communicator buzzes in my jacket pocket at eleven at night in the full gold light of the Alaskan July.

I know before I look that it is not Voss. Voss calls. He does not text.

Hey Faye. Iceland is incredible this season. Thinking about you out there on your island. Maybe we gave up too soon. Maybe we should talk.

I look up from the screen.

Eli is watching the ridge above Hank's cabin. The foxes moving in the gold light. His notebook open. Even here. Even now.

I put the satellite communicator back in my pocket.

Kezia has started the story again.

One dark and stormy dismal night three men sat by the campfire bright. Let's tell a story said one to another. So the story began—

The fire burns in the midnight sun. The colony screams. The weights fall slowly in Hank's warm silent cabin.

I do not text Jeb back.

CHAPTER

6

I wake up and something is wrong.

Not wrong the way equipment failure is wrong or weather is wrong. Wrong the way absence is wrong. The particular wrongness of something that has always been there suddenly not being there.

I lie in my sleeping bag and listen.

Nothing.

I check my watch. Five forty in the morning. The gold light coming through the tent seams the way it always comes through. Everything exactly as it should be except the sound that has been the condition of this place for ten weeks is gone.

Eight thousand birds. Not one voice.

I am out of my sleeping bag before I finish the thought.

Eli is already there.

Sitting on the flat rock. Notebook closed for once. Just watching the colony spread out below us in the gold morning light. Eight thousand birds on their nests or standing beside them. Not feeding. Not calling. Not diving the skua or mobbing the fox or doing any of

the thousand loud urgent things they have been doing since May.

Just present. And silent. And decided.

I sit down beside him.

We watch.

The colony that has been the loudest place I have ever worked is so quiet I can hear the water moving against the shore two hundred meters away. I can hear Eli breathing. I can hear my own heartbeat which I have not been able to hear since late May.

"How many times have you seen this," I say.

"Let's see, fifteen I guess," he says. "What a happening."

"Fourth for me," I say. "Still does not make sense."

We sit.

We sit for a long time. The gold light moving the way it always moves here — slowly, circling, the shadows rotating around us like the hands of something that is keeping a different kind of time.

"Where do you go," Eli says. "After."

"Seattle," I say. "Fall semester. Then Tierra del Fuego for winter break. Then Seattle again."

"Tierra del Fuego."

"The birds winter in the Southern Ocean. I go to observe the departing population before they head north. It is a long way to go for six weeks." I look at the silent colony. "I go anyway."

Eli is quiet for a moment.

"What is it like," he says. "Tierra del Fuego."

Nobody has ever asked me that. They ask about the birds. The data. The migration routes. Nobody asks what it is like.

"Cold," I say. "Windy. The Beagle Channel is right there — you can see it from the cabin window. The light is different from here. Lower. More orange." I pause. "It is the loneliest place I have ever been."

Eli looks at me.

"Lonelier than here," he says.

"Here is not lonely," I say.

We both understand what I just said. Neither of us moves.

I start packing that afternoon.

Not because I want to. Because the dread means the colony is leaving and when the colony leaves I leave. That is the structure of my year. That is who I am.

Kezia helps without being asked. Adaeze breaks down the drone station. Priya packs the data cases in the precise order they need to be in for the flight. Three women who have been doing this with me long enough to know that the packing happens fast once it starts because if it does not happen fast it does not happen.

Patricia comes from Hank's cabin to say goodbye. She flashes her wedding ring. She looks more herself than I have ever seen her.

She holds me for a long time without saying anything. Then she steps back and looks at me with the twelve year look.

“Faye,” she says.

“I know,” I say.

“Do you.”

I pick up my field case. “I know Patricia.”

She lets me go.

The boat comes tomorrow morning. My cases are packed. My data is backed up in three places. Twenty three birds recaptured. G47’s geolocator downloaded. The season is complete.

Eli is on the ridge.

“The boat comes tomorrow,” I say to Kezia.

She looks at me. “I know.”

“We are ready.”

“We are ready,” she says. She pauses. “Are you.”

I look toward the ridge.

I want to stay. Will I stay if Eli asks me to stay.

“The semester starts in three weeks,” I say.

Kezia says nothing. Which from Kezia means everything.

I go to the ridge.

The gold light lower now. The colony silent below us. The island quiet in a way it has not been since May. Eli is sitting on the flat rock with his notebook open but not writing. Just holding it.

I sit down beside him.

We watch the silent colony for a long time.

“The boat comes in the morning,” I say.

“I know,” he says.

The water moving against the shore. The shadows rotating slowly. The weights falling in Hank’s cabin somewhere behind us.

“Eli,” I say.

“Faye,” he says.

Neither of us says the thing.

Then he reaches into his jacket and pulls out his phone. Opens it. Turns it toward me. A fox video — the scarred female in February, the island dark and snow covered, the night vision green and strange, the fox doing something he has never seen documented.

I watch it three times.

“You have to publish this,” I say.

“Someday,” he says.

I look at him. At the notebook. At the phone. At four seasons of this island in his hands.

“Can I have your number,” I say.

He looks at me for a moment. The gold light. The silent colony. The flat rock with two distinct sitting positions worn into it.

He takes my phone.

He puts his number in it.

He hands it back.

“I want you to stay,” he says. “Call me when you get to Seattle.”

The colony is silent. Tomorrow I leave.

CHAPTER 7

It's warm. It's dry. It's sunny. The last of the summer before the famous Seattle gray sets in. Highs in the mid to upper seventies. Light until nine thirty at night. The whole city out enjoying it before October arrives and everything turns wet for six months.

Jeb is at my office door with coffee and that easy smile. I hate that smile.

"Welcome back," he says.

"Thank you Jeb."

"Good season."

"Good season."

He leans against the doorframe. "I thought maybe we could grab dinner. Catch up."

I set my field cases down. Look at my desk. Three months of mail. A stack of faculty notices. My computer blinking with unread messages.

"I have a lot to unpack," I say.

“Tomorrow then,” he says.

“I have a lot to unpack tomorrow too,” I say.

He leaves the coffee on my desk and goes.

I sit down in my chair. Look at the window. Seattle warm and golden outside. Light until nine thirty. The whole city out enjoying it.

He said call me from there.

I am here.

Feels like the dread.

The Seattle gray arrives in October the way it always arrives — not dramatically, just permanently. The sun goes somewhere else and the whole city puts on its rain jacket and gets on with it.

I get on with it.

I teach my classes. I process the summer data. G47’s geolocator mapped — she went somewhere new again, further east than any bird I have tracked. I stare at the map for a long time.

Jeb stops by my office twice more. I am busy both times. He gets the message. He is a smart man. That is one of his better qualities.

The rain on my office window. My desk lamp making its small circle. The phone on my desk.

He said call me from there.

I am here.

Feels like the dread.

I do not know what is happening on the island.

I do not know if the scarred female has shifted her territory. I do not know what the colony ground looks like without the birds. I do not know if the first frost has come or if the dark is back or if there are stars visible for the first time since May.

I know one thing.

He has not called.

November. The grant proposal on my desk. Tierra del Fuego in December. The birds already in the Southern Ocean heading for their wintering grounds.

Jeb in the hallway. Friendly. Patient. Coffee. That smile.

The phone on my desk that does not ring.

Eight thousand birds going silent without explanation. One morning everything stops and you do not know why and you cannot make it start again. I have studied the dread for four seasons and I still cannot explain it.

Now I am living it.

November rain on my apartment window. My desk lamp making its small circle. His number on my screen.

I can call him. Cross the silence the way the terns cross the ocean — no guarantee of arrival, just the direction and the going.

Or I can wait. Let him call. Keep what is left of the thing we did not say.

I cannot have both. The woman who calls and the woman who waits are not available at the same time.

I pick up the phone.

I call him.

It rings four times. Then nothing. Not voicemail. Not a message. Just the particular silence of a call that went somewhere and found no one.

I try again.

Nothing.

I put the phone face down on my desk and sit in the November rain and the small circle of my desk lamp and the silence that is exactly like the dread except I do not know when it ends or if it ends or what comes after.

I book my flight to Tierra del Fuego.

He said call me from there.

Maybe the silence will explain itself.

CHAPTER 8

I am watching the terns when the phone rings.

I hear — hello my love.

“Who is this,” I say.

A pause. Then —

“It’s Eli.”

I sit down on the shore rocks. The Beagle Channel in front of me. The terns working the water. The southern summer light low and orange the way I told him it would be.

“Your phone has been dead for three months,” I say.

“Six lonely months,” he says.

I look at the terns on the water.

“You boated to the mainland,” I say.

“Yes.”

“For a phone.”

“Yes,” he says.

The southern summer light on the channel. The birds diving and rising. Four hundred meters offshore doing what they always do.

“Hello my love,” I say.

We talk for two hours.

He tells me what three months of silence looks like from his end — the satellite relay dying in the first week of September, the realization that he had no way to reach me, the decision to wait for the supply boat in October, the supply boat delayed by weather, November arriving before he could get to the mainland.

“I tried to get a message to you with Patricia’s help. That didn’t work. I don’t know why,” he says.

I look at the terns. At the channel. At the orange light that is nothing like the gold light of the Alaskan July and is still the most beautiful thing I have seen since August.

“Six months,” I say.

“Dreadfully frustrating,” he says.

I tell him about Tierra del Fuego.

The cabin. The woodstove. The Beagle Channel outside the window. The light that is lower and more orange than Alaska. The birds working the water offshore — the same birds, the same G47 somewhere out there in the southern summer doing what she always does.

I tell him it is the loneliest place I have ever been.

“Still,” he says.

“Still,” I say. “But less than before.”

He is quiet for a moment. The good quiet. The one I know.

“The scarred female had a good autumn,” he says.

“Tell me,” I say.

And he does. The territory shift. The pups ranging. Forty seven video clips from September. The first frost. The stars coming back. The island in the dark that I have never seen.

I listen to all of it sitting on the shore rocks of the Beagle Channel with the terns working the pewter water and the orange light going slowly toward evening.

I look at the channel. At the birds. At the southern summer light almost gone now, the sky going colors that have no names.

There are things I want to say. I have been carrying them since August. Since the ridge and the silent colony and the phone number in my hand.

The silence has explained itself. Now I know what comes after.

“Hello my love,” I say.

He is quiet for a moment.

“I have been wanting to say that for three months,” he says.

The terns are still working the water. The channel dark and pewter and moving. The southern summer going on regardless.

The silence explained itself.

CHAPTER

9

The spring semester is almost over.

My field kit is half packed on my apartment floor and Kezia has texted four times about drone battery replacements and I have answered all four texts before answering a single student email.

The colony is assembling on the island. I can feel it the way I always feel it in May — not literally, not scientifically, just the particular restlessness that starts in my chest around the third week of April and does not stop until I am on the plane.

Eli called on Tuesday. The scarred female has a new litter. Four pups again. Same den.

I am going back.

Something is wrong. I am not myself.

I have not been myself since February. I told myself it was the Seattle winter. The gray. The rain. The particular exhaustion of a spring semester that started before I was ready for it.

I told myself I would feel better when the sun came back.

The sun came back. I do not feel better.

My joints ache in the mornings. I am tired in a way that eight hours of sleep does not fix. I dropped my coffee mug last Tuesday — just lost my grip on it for no reason — and stood looking at it on the floor for longer than made sense.

I make the appointment.

I sit in the waiting room with what I do not know yet.

The doctor comes in. Looks at my chart. Looks at me. Asks the questions doctors ask. I answer them the way field researchers answer questions — directly, completely, without editorializing.

She orders the tests.

I wait.

She comes back with the results and sits down in the way doctors sit down when they have something to say.

“Delayed vaccination reaction,” she says. “The booster you received in February. Joint inflammation. Fatigue. The weakness you have been experiencing.” She looks at me over her glasses. “Uncommon but not unheard of.”

“How long,” I say.

“To fully resolve. August. Maybe September.”

I look at her. At the window. At the Seattle May outside — warm now, finally, the cherry trees done and the whole city green and the light lasting until nine.

“I have a field season starting in three weeks,” I say.

“I know,” she says. “I would recommend against it.”

The doctor’s words sit in the air around me.

August. Maybe September. I would recommend against it.

My field kit half packed on my apartment floor. Kezia’s texts about drone batteries. The colony assembling without me. G47 returning to the same nest site she has returned to for four seasons.

The island does not wait. The season does not wait. Eli is already there.

I call Eli from the parking lot.

He answers on the second ring.

“The scarred female,” I say. “Four pups again.”

“Same den,” he says. “She came back to the same den.”

I sit in my car in the Seattle May with the doctor’s words still in the air around me and Kezia’s texts about drone batteries and my field kit half packed on my apartment floor.

“I will be there in three weeks,” I say.

The colony is assembling. G47 is already there. The island says come.

I am coming, Eli.

CHAPTER

10

I feel good.

“He’s moving north toward the stream,” I say. “Bear is twenty meters back and closing. Terns have scrambled from the east section — eight thousand birds airborne and they are all going for the bear.”

Kezia has the Ambassador up and the monitor is showing us everything from above and I cannot stop talking.

“The bear just stopped. Swiped at a tern. Missed. Eli is pulling ahead. The terns are not letting up — they are hitting the ears, the nose, the top of the head — the bear does not know which problem to solve first.”

Hank takes the binoculars.

“Bear stopped again,” I say. “Three terns on his head simultaneously. Eli is at a hundred meters from the stream. Seventy. Fifty—”

“He is going to make it,” Kezia says.

“He is going to make it,” I say.

"Bear is at the water. Bear sees the salmon. Bear has made a decision."

The monitor shows it from above — the bear wading in, the salmon scattering, the terns peeling off one by one as the threat to the colony recedes. Eight thousand birds standing down with the particular efficiency of an air force that has completed its mission.

Eli is already scooping salmon into his backpack.

"He was fishing," Kezia says.

"He was fishing," I say.

Priya is laughing. I have never heard Priya laugh. Adaeze has the binoculars and is not giving them back. Patricia has her hand over her mouth. Hank is almost smiling which for Hank is a standing ovation.

Kezia brings the Ambassador down low over Eli.

He looks up at the camera.

He waves once.

We are having fish tonight.

I watch Eli through the binoculars. The bear fishing twenty meters away. Eli scooping salmon into his backpack like a man who has somewhere to be.

Kezia is beside me.

"You love him," she says.

Not a question.

The bear catches a salmon. Eli zips his backpack. Twenty meters apart on a salmon stream on an Alaskan island in the gold light of July and neither of them particularly concerned about the other.

I do not answer Kezia.

I do not need to.

Patricia sits beside me.

She does not say the twelve year thing. She does not say anything. She just hands me a plate and sits with me while the binoculars go around and Priya keeps laughing and the gold light does its endless circle.

“He saved my colony,” I say.

“Yes,” she says.

“By accident,” I say.

“Yes,” she says.

“He went to get fish for dinner.”

Patricia looks at me. The twelve year look.

“Is that what he did,” she says.

The island is exactly as it should be. The colony loud and gold. The bear downstream. Eli on his way back with a backpack full of salmon.

Patricia is watching me.

There are things I should tell people. The doctor’s words. August. Maybe September. The joints that ache in the mornings. The grip that

sometimes fails.

The salmon stream is very far from a Seattle waiting room.

I will tell them when the time is right.

He comes back with a backpack full of salmon and the most reasonable expression in the world.

He sets the backpack down in front of Hank.

Hank looks in the backpack. Looks at Eli. Opens the cast iron skillet.

Eli sits down beside me.

The colony is loud. The island is exactly as it should be. Priya is still laughing. Kezia is already editing the drone footage. Patricia is cooking with her spice packet. The gold light doing its endless circle.

“G47 stayed on her nest,” he says.

“I saw,” I say. “I was announcing.”

He almost smiles.

“I know,” he says. “Kezia recorded it.”

I feel good.

CHAPTER

11

Patricia has her hook.

“Good morning Faye. I’m here to help,” she firmly says.

“Coffee?” I ask.

“Do you have any extra protective gear?” She replies.

I send Kezia to the ridge at six with the second mug.

I stay at camp. Process data. Answer emails. Reorganize the geolocator cases that do not need reorganizing. Drink my coffee alone at the camp table while the colony goes about its morning and Kezia goes about mine.

She comes back at seven thirty.

Looks at me.

Says nothing. Which from Kezia means everything.

I send Adaeze to the ridge.

Adaeze comes back with the mug still full. Looks at me. Looks at the mug. Sets it on the table.

“He said to tell you G47 is on the nest,” she says.

I look at the full mug.

“Thank you Adaeze,” I say.

I send Priya.

Priya comes back alone. Sits down across from me. Looks at me with the particular expression of a woman who has been saying nothing for three days and has decided that today is different.

“He is still there,” she says. “Every morning. Two mugs. Same rock.”

I look at my hands.

“He knows,” Priya says.

The joints in my hands. The fatigue. The mornings I wake and lie still for a moment to take inventory before I begin.

I can stay at camp. Let the island come to me. Let Kezia and Adaeze and Priya go to the ridge while I manage my condition with reasonable rest and reasonable caution.

Or I can go to the ridge.

I cannot have both. The woman who is careful and the woman who is here are not available at the same time.

I go to the ridge.

He is there. Two mugs. Same rock. Notebook open. The colony loud around him and the gold light doing its endless circle and fifteen years of this island in his face.

He does not look up when I sit down.

He hands me the mug.

Exactly right without asking.

We watch the colony.

He does not say anything about the three days.

Neither do I.

I can barely move.

I am here.

CHAPTER

12

Someone is knocking at my tent. I can't move.

"I'm here to help."

A cool hand on my forehead.

The smell of something botanical. Something old. Something that knows what it is doing.

I stop fighting and let it.

I come back in pieces.

The smell first. Then the cool hand again. Then a voice — low, calm, completely unhurried — saying something I cannot quite make out. Then the light through the tent wall. Then the particular sound of the colony which has been there the whole time and which I had stopped hearing.

My joints still ache. Less than before. Considerably less than before.

I open my eyes.

A woman. Perhaps forty. The look of someone who has been on these islands a long time. Capable hands. A small case open beside her with things in it that I do not recognize but that are clearly doing their job.

She looks at me. Nods once. Goes back to what she is doing.

"I am Ellen," she says. Not looking up from the case. "I am a close friend of Eli's."

She says it the way people say true things — simply, without elaboration, without watching to see how it lands.

I watch how it lands.

"He called you," I say.

"He came to find me," she says. "There is a difference."

She applies something cool to my wrists and the backs of my hands. The joints that have been arguing with me for weeks go quiet almost immediately. Not completely. But quiet.

"You had a vaccination reaction," she says. "I have seen it before. The antidote is straightforward if you know what you are looking at."

"And if you do not," I say.

"Then it runs its course," she says. "Weeks. Maybe longer."

I look at the tent ceiling. At the gold light coming through the seams.

He came to find her.

I am almost fully recovered by afternoon.

Not completely. But enough to sit up. Enough to drink the tea Ellen made from things in her case. Enough to be aware of the world outside my tent.

I hear Eli's voice. Low. Then Ellen's. Then a silence that is not an empty silence.

I look through the tent opening.

Eli and Ellen standing outside. The colony loud in the distance. The gold July light on everything.

He kisses her.

Not a greeting. Not a farewell. A fairly long kiss that has history in it.

I let the tent flap fall.

I sit with what I saw through the tent opening.

The tea cooling beside my sleeping bag. The colony going about its business in the gold afternoon.

Ellen, who came when he went to find her. Who knew the antidote. Who has a kiss with history in it.

He took two days to reach her and two days to bring her back. Four days on the water to find someone who could help me.

I do not know what to do with that yet.

He comes into the tent an hour later.

Sits down beside me. Looks at me the way he looks at things he wants to be completely certain about.

“You look better,” he says.

“Ellen knew the antidote,” I say.

“Yes.”

I look at my hands. At the joints that are quiet for the first time in weeks. At the tea Ellen made sitting half finished beside my sleeping bag.

“She is a close friend,” I say.

“Yes,” he says.

I look at him. He looks back. Completely. Nothing missed.

I do not ask.

Not yet.

CHAPTER

13

Ellen crosses the tundra below the colony with her case and her particular unhurried way of moving. Stopping. Crouching. Moving on. The mugwort stands are thick this side of the ridge and she is working through them systematically the way I work through the colony — completely, nothing missed.

She handles the yarrow and fireweed. She digs in the ground.

I watch her for longer than is strictly necessary then go back to reading bands.

Six in the morning. The ridge. Two mugs.

Eli tells me about the scarred female.

She has been ranging further north this week — past the colony boundary, past the salmon stream, into ground she has not used in the four seasons Eli has been watching her. The pups are fully independent now. She is doing something he has not documented before.

He shows me the notebook. Three pages of observation from yesterday alone.

I read every word.

This is what we do. Every morning. The coffee. The notebook. The colony loud around us. The flat rock with two distinct sitting positions worn into it.

I drink my coffee.

G47 comes back to her nest at eight fifteen.

I know this because I have been watching her nest site from the colony edge for forty minutes with the catching pole and the patience of a woman who has been doing this for four seasons and knows that G47 circles twice before she lands.

She circles twice.

She lands.

I move.

The noose drops clean over her. She is in my hands in under three seconds. Outraged. Completely herself. The geolocator downloaded in four minutes. New tag attached. Released.

She stands for one moment looking at me with the complete contempt of a bird who has been caught four times and has not changed her opinion of the process.

Then she lifts into the gold air.

Patricia is at my elbow with the data sheet.

"That is twenty one," she says.

"Two more to find," I say.

Patricia looks at the e-van parked near Eli's cabin. Looks at me.

Says nothing.

Evening. Eli at the camp table with his notebook open.

He tells me about the fox pups. Not the scarred female tonight — the pups. The one that ranged furthest. Six kilometers from the natal den in one day. A juvenile male who has been pushing boundaries since August.

"He reminds me of someone," Eli says.

He does not say who. He does not need to.

I look at the e-van. At the soft light visible through the window. At the mugwort hanging to dry from the side mirror.

"How long has Ellen been coming here," I say.

It comes out before I decide to say it.

Eli looks up from his notebook.

"Seven years," he says.

Seven years.

I look at the e-van. At the mugwort. At the soft light inside.

Seven years is not nothing. Seven years is a pattern. A return. Something that keeps coming back.

I have the question in my mouth. I have had it since the tent opening.

I can ask it. Know the answer. Whatever the answer is.

Or I can look at his face, which I know, and see what is there.

"The kiss," I say.

Eli looks at me. Completely. Nothing missed.

"Gratitude," he says. "She came when I called. She had what you needed." He pauses. "Ellen kisses her friends."

I look at the e-van. At the mugwort drying from the mirror. At the soft light inside.

"She is a free spirit," I say.

"Yes," he says.

"She is very attractive," I say.

"Yes," he says.

I look at him.

He looks back.

"Faye," he says.

"Eli," I say.

The colony loud around us. The gold light doing its endless circle. The scarred female somewhere to the north doing something nobody has documented before.

He takes my hand.

We sit.

CHAPTER

14

The colony is quieter this week.

Not the dread. Something earlier. A change in register. The birds on their nests. The feeding flights shorter.

I make two mugs at six o'clock and carry them to the ridge.

Eli is already there.

He has his notebook open but is not writing.

I sit beside him. Hand him his mug. We watch the scarred female moving north again — past the colony boundary, into ground she has not used before. Patient. Deliberate. Completely certain of her direction.

We work the morning.

Kezia's voice over the radio with the count data. I write it down. Everything exactly as it should be.

I am aware of every inch of space between us.

At ten o'clock Eli puts his pen down. He looks at me the way he looks at something undocumented — completely, without

assumption.

“Faye,” he says.

I look at him. The gold morning light. The notebook in his lap. Ten weeks of the ridge.

“I love you,” he says.

“I love you,” I say.

He takes my face in both hands and kisses me.

I love Eli.

We sit on the ridge for a long time.

The two mugs cold between us. His shoulder against mine.

The scarred female comes back through the colony edge at noon. Eight thousand birds off their nests. We watch it the way we have watched it all season.

When the colony settles he says: “Here next May. Same ridge.”

“Same rock,” I say.

Kezia brings the survey data at evening.

At the tent door she stops.

“Dr. Alcott.”

“Kezia.”

“It’s about time,” she says.

She goes.

I open my notebook. Write the date. The survey numbers. Everything that needs to be written.

CHAPTER

15

Two emails arrive on the same morning.

I am at the camp table with my coffee when the satellite connection comes in. The first is from Voss.

I read it twice.

The grant review did not go well. Budget cuts at the federal level. The Alaska colony program is defunded effective end of season. My position at Seattle is restructured. There will be a role for me but not this role. Not this work.

I set the tablet down.

The colony is loud outside the tent. G47 is on her nest. The scarred female is somewhere to the north. Everything exactly as it should be.

I pick the tablet back up and open the second email.

The Shoals Marine Laboratory.

Full time research scientist. Directing the Black Guillemot mercury study. Year round.

They want an answer today.

I read it three times. I accept the offer.

Kezia appears at the tent opening with the morning data sheets. She looks at my face. She sets the data sheets on the table quietly and goes back out.

Eli is on the ridge.

I sit beside him. No coffee today. He reads my face the way he reads the foxes — completely, without assumption, waiting for what the data says.

I tell him about Voss. He listens.

I tell him about the Shoals. He listens to that too.

When I finish he looks at the colony for a long time.

“New Hampshire,” he says.

“Yes.”

“Year round.”

“Yes.”

The scarred female moves through the colony edge below us. The alarm goes up. Eight thousand birds.

We watch it come down.

“I cannot leave,” he says. “I committed myself to a twenty year study. That’s four more years Faye.”

“I know.”

"And you cannot stay."

I look at the colony. At G47 on her nest. At the island I have come back to for four seasons because it is the truest place I know.

"The Shoals work matters," I say. "The guillemot mercury problem. The southernmost colony in the world. I cannot turn it down."

He nods. He already knew this. He has known it since I said the word Shoals.

We sit on the ridge until the colony goes quiet for the afternoon.

The dread is coming. Another week. Maybe two.

The Shoals. The island. The three thousand miles between them.

We know where the other one is. That is different from not knowing.

When you know where something is you can wait.

I leave tomorrow.

Eli is on the ridge when I come to tell him. He does not say anything for a long time. Then he stands and picks up his notebook and walks down toward his cabin.

I stand on the ridge alone. The colony loud below. The sun going nowhere. G47 on her nest.

Same ridge. Next May. Same rock.

I will be here.

CHAPTER

16

The boat from Portsmouth takes forty minutes.

I stand at the bow with my field cases and watch the Isles of Shoals come up out of the Atlantic. Low. Rocky. Gray-green in the September light. The terns are gone.

A man is sitting on the dock.

Long hair. Long beard. Boots that have been everywhere. A flask in one hand.

He looks at me.

“They call me Castaway. Castaway Harvey at your service Ma’am — the mercury marine biologist.” He stands. “The best way to meet people around here is the square dance hall. I’m headed there now. Come with me.”

I look at my field cases.

“Leave them,” he says.

The square dance hall in Portsmouth is warm and loud and smells of sawdust and fiddle rosin and people who have been coming here every Saturday for twenty years.

I took square dancing as an elective sophomore year. I was good at it.

Castaway pulls me into the set before I can say anything and the caller calls and the fiddle goes and the muscle memory comes back like it never left.

Allemande left — do si do — promenade your partner home.

Clean. First set. No mistakes.

The second set Castaway puts on the style.

The high-stepping walk — neck up, shoulders back, feet hitting the floor with the precise confidence of a man who owns whatever room he is standing in. The swing — his hand at my back, the turn clean and fast, my feet leaving the floor for half a second.

I match him figure for figure.

He notices. Something shifts in his expression — not surprise exactly. Recognition.

The third set I stop thinking.

That is the thing about square dancing — the caller keeps calling and the fiddle keeps going and there is no room in your head for anything except the next figure. Circle left. Star right. Ladies chain.

Castaway is beside me, across from me, swinging me, passing me to the next couple and taking me back. His hands are certain. His feet never miss. He calls the figures under his breath half a beat ahead of the caller the way a man does when the dance is in his bones.

At the break he produces the flask.

I take it.

The whiskey is good. I hand it back. He raises it slightly — not a toast, just an acknowledgment — and we get back on the floor.

Four sets. Five.

My feet know the figures now without asking my brain. Square through four. California twirl. Bend the line. The hall turning around me, warm and loud, the fiddle and the caller and the particular joy of a room full of people moving together.

Castaway swings me at the end of the fifth set and this time I swing him back and he laughs — a real laugh, nothing performed in it — and the hall turns and the fiddle goes and I am not in Alaska and I am not on a ridge at six in the morning and I am not anywhere except exactly here.

This is what fun feels like, I think.

I had forgotten.

Midnight. The Portsmouth dock.

The water black and cold. The island somewhere out in the dark.

We wait for the boat. Castaway has the flask. I have the particular loose-limbed warmth of a woman who has danced for four hours straight and does not regret a single minute of it.

“Same time next Saturday,” he says.

“Same time next Saturday,” I say.

The boat comes. We get on.

The guillemots are on their rocks when we dock. White shapes in the September dark. That thin high spinning-wheel sound carrying across the water.

I pick up my field cases from where I left them on the dock.

I am going to like it here.

CHAPTER

17

Monday morning. The harbor.

Six guillemots on the breakwater rocks. One female with a notch in the trailing edge of her left wing.

Castaway appears at seven with his notebook and the flask.

“She dove fourteen times between six and seven,” he says. “Mostly sculpin. One butterfish.”

“How do you know butterfish.”

“She holds it crosswise before she swallows. She holds sculpin headfirst.”

He does not look up from the notebook.

I watch the notch-winged female dive and come up with something silver in her bill. She holds it crosswise.

Butterfish.

Feather collection takes two hours.

I work the colony. Castaway moves with me, not assisting, just present.

At nine he opens his notebook to a page of numbers. “The male on ledge three. Mercury levels rising since 2021. Seventeen percent.”

Clean numbers. Dated. Continuous. Four years of one bird’s diet recorded by one man on a rock in the Gulf of Maine.

“He changed his foraging range that year,” Castaway says. “Went deeper. More sculpin, less sand lance.”

“Why.”

“Water temperature. The sand lance moved. He followed what was left.”

I look at the numbers for a long time.

“You never published this,” I say.

“No.”

Tuesday afternoon. The breakwater.

Castaway closes his notebook.

“Do you eat steak and lobster?”

“I love steak and lobster,” I say.

“Good.” He stands. “It’s a date, Faye. Tonight at seven.”

The restaurant is on the Portsmouth waterfront.

Castaway is not the man from the dock. Clean shirt. The long hair pulled back. The flask absent. The beard exactly as it always is.

He orders lobster for both of us without asking.

I look at him.

"The Shoals lobster is clean," he says. "Penobscot is another story."

"The eight year story."

"Yes." Something tightens in his face. "Scientists sat on that data for eight years. People were eating contaminated lobster. Children." He picks up his water glass. "They knew."

"And said nothing."

"And said nothing."

The lobster arrives. We crack the claws.

"Don't eat the tomalley," he says.

I push the green aside. "Your guillemot data," I say. "Twenty-five years."

He is quiet for a moment.

"My data is at the community center," he says. "Anyone can see it. Has been for twenty years."

I look at him for a moment. Then back at my lobster.

That is different.

We finish the lobster and walk back to the boat.

October. The island cold in the mornings.

The guillemots fully in their winter plumage. The black gone. Gray-white in the harbor, barely recognizable as the birds they were.

The mornings on the breakwater. The flask passed between us. The square dance on Saturdays. The work.

I notice the accumulation. The morning flask. A glass before the data work. Small daily installments adding up to something I have not named yet.

I file it under later.

Sunday morning. The breakwater.

Castaway hands me the flask without being asked.

Two guillemots on the notch-winged female's rock. They face each other bobbing their heads. The thin high spinning-wheel sound between them.

"Same male every year," Castaway says. "Same rock."

"How do you know it's the same male."

He points. A faint asymmetry in the white wing patch. Left side slightly smaller than the right.

I look at the bird. Then at Castaway.

He has been watching this pair for years. He knows their asymmetries.

I hand the flask back.

CHAPTER

18

Wednesday morning. The sailboat.

Kezia stays on the island — harbor count, feather sampling on the breakwater, the notch-winged female due for observation at seven. She has her clipboard and her data sheets and the particular focus of a woman who has decided the guillemots are her birds now too.

Castaway and I take the sailboat out to the outer ledges.

The Gulf of Maine is gray and cold and completely itself. No tourists. No traffic. Just the water and the boat and the birds working the surface in the distance.

I take the binoculars. He pulls the water samples.

We work until noon without needing to fill the silence.

On the way back in he says: "Tonight. You and me."

I look at him.

He produces two tickets from his jacket pocket.

How To Be Funny When You're Not. Danny Rosenberg. With Polly Cebos.

The theater is in Portsmouth. Small. Every seat taken.

A note in the program: Mr. Rosenberg is a fictional character. His advice is not medical advice. His observations about your life are coincidental. Any resemblance to your actual situation is purely the result of his paying very close attention.

I read it twice.

Then Polly Cebos walks out.

Eleven years old. Clipboard. Reading glasses slightly too large for her face. The particular authority of someone who has done extensive research.

The audience applauds. Polly waits for silence with the patience of a scientist.

"Good evening. I am Polly Cebos. I have several items of data to share before Mr. Rosenberg appears." She consults her clipboard. "Item one. Danny Rosenberg is a fictional therapeutic comedian from the novel Expander Reaction. Item two. He is aware that he is fictional. Item three. This does not appear to affect his performance in any measurable way." She turns a page. "Item four. Tonight Danny is going to install a meme called I Love You I'm Happy which may completely control your thoughts." She looks up. "I have data on the transmission rate. It is very high. You are welcome to attempt resistance. Nobody has succeeded yet."

The audience laughs.

I look at Polly.

Polly nods once. Satisfied.

"Item five. You must laugh tonight. It is therapy. Item six. Mr. Rosenberg sometimes believes he is performing live when he is not. Tonight he is actually live. I have confirmed this." She tucks the clipboard under her arm. "Ladies and gentlemen. Danny Rosenberg."

The hologram appears center stage.

Full sized. Fully present. The particular quality of someone who has walked into a room they have been looking forward to all day.

"Hello. Danny Rosenberg here. I'm a fictional therapeutic comedian from the book Expander Reaction. You will find me giving shows mostly in love stories. They seem to always find me."

He pauses.

"You're in a love story right now. Some of you know it. Some of you don't know it yet. Some of you are absolutely certain you're not in a love story and I want those people to look to their right."

The audience looks right.

Laughter.

I look right.

Castaway is there.

He is not laughing. He is watching me.

I look back at the stage.

"Life is meant to have fun. That's not a bumper sticker. That's a diagnosis."

He reaches into his jacket and pulls out a large card. The audience goes quiet. Four words in clean block letters.

LOVE GRATITUDE JOY INSPIRATION

“This is Card Six,” Danny says. “I carry it everywhere.”

He holds the card higher.

“These are not instructions. They are not a checklist. They are not something you achieve and then put away. They are a condition. A weather system you live inside. And the entry point — the door that lets you into this weather system — is the simplest sentence in any language.”

He looks at the audience.

“I love you. I’m happy.”

Silence.

I am very still.

“Not because everything is perfect. Not because nothing hurts. Not because you figured it all out. Because love and happiness are not responses to conditions. They are decisions. Made before the conditions arrive. Installed ahead of time so that when the hard thing comes — and it always comes — you already know where you live.”

The meme is in the room.

“You are going to realize it was already there,” Danny says. “You just forgot.”

Someone in the back says it out loud. I love you. I'm happy. Then someone else. Then the whole room.

Castaway says it beside me. Quietly. The voice of someone who means it more each time.

I say it.

I love you. I'm happy.

Danny grins. "There it is."

On the boat back to the Shoals Castaway stands at the wheel and the Gulf of Maine is black around us and the stars are out and neither of us says anything for a long time.

It was already there, I think. I just forgot.

CHAPTER

19

Thursday morning. The Portsmouth dock.

Castaway is waiting with three guidebooks — Portsmouth, the Seacoast, the White Mountains. Dog-eared. Annotated in the margins in his precise field-notebook hand.

He spreads them on the dock rail.

“You choose,” he says.

I look at the pages. The old streets of Portsmouth. Star Island. The mountains two hours north.

“Portsmouth today,” I say. “Star Island tomorrow.”

He picks up the books. “Good choices,” he says.

Portsmouth is one of the oldest cities in America.

We walk Market Square and Castaway starts talking about a man who co-owned the New Hampshire Gazette — still in publication, oldest continuously running newspaper in the country — who also ran the Portsmouth Whaling Company, founded a reading club, served in politics, and ended up taking the lighthouse keeper job on White Island at the Isles of Shoals because he lost a postmaster

position to someone else.

"He moved his wife and two small children out to a bare rock in the Atlantic," Castaway says. "And fell completely in love with it."

"With the rock."

"With the rock. Bought most of the islands. Built a grand hotel. Four hundred guests at peak season."

"What happened to the hotel."

"Burned down in 1914."

"All of it?"

"All of it," he says.

At Strawbery Banke he stops in front of one of the old houses.

"1628," he says. "The Plymouth Pilgrims exiled a man called Thomas Morton to the Isles of Shoals."

"What did he do."

"Danced around a maypole with the Indians. Sold them guns."

"They exiled him for dancing," I say.

"And the guns. But mostly the dancing." He looks at the house. "They sent him back to England. He came back. They sent him again. He came back again."

"Persistent."

"Some people just keep coming back to the place that threw them out."

I look at him.

He is looking at the harbor.

Lunch at his waterfront place.

The owner looks at me once — the particular assessment of a person who has been watching Castaway Harvey come in alone for twenty years.

“Who’s this,” the owner says.

“Faye Alcott,” Castaway says. “She studies the guillemots.”

The owner nods once. Goes back inside.

“High praise,” Castaway says.

We eat. The Piscataqua running fast outside the window.

“What is the fastest it runs,” I say.

“Seven knots on the ebb.” He looks at the water. “There are days you cannot sail it at all.”

“Have you tried.”

“It always wins.” He picks up his water glass. “Except when it doesn’t.”

After lunch we walk to Prescott Park.

Ten acres on the Piscataqua. Flower gardens going gold in October. A stage for summer concerts, empty now. A whale sculpture on the lawn looking out over the river. The Sheafe Warehouse — timber frame, built in the 1700s, still standing. Piers over the water where you can walk out and feel the current moving underneath.

At the river railing Castaway stops.

Padlocks. Hundreds of them. Every size. Some plain, some painted, some with names scratched into the metal.

“Love locks,” he says. “Couples put them on the fence. Throw the key in the river.”

I look at the locks. Then at the river running fast below.

“Does it work,” I say.

He looks at the locks for a moment. Then he turns.

“You know what a gundalow is?”

“No,” I say.

“Flat-bottomed cargo boat. Worked this river for two hundred years.” He walks along the railing. “Lumber, bricks, salt hay. Built to work with the current not against it.”

“Smart boat,” I say.

“Very,” he says.

We hear the music before we see the venue.

Daniel Street. A narrow doorway. A sign: The Press Room. Est. 1976.

Castaway stops.

“Longest running music venue in Portsmouth,” he says. “Open since 1976. Founded for the nourishment of body, mind, and spirit.”

From inside — a fiddle, a bass, something with a serious backbeat. The sound of a room that has been doing this every Thursday for fifty years.

“In or out,” he says.

“In,” I say.

The Press Room is warm and loud and packed and completely itself.

A four piece band on the small stage — fiddle, guitar, bass, percussion. Great music to move to.

Castaway moves.

I move beside him.

The room turns. The music goes. The Piscataqua outside running seven knots in the dark.

On the boat back to the island he says: “Same time tomorrow.”

“Star Island,” I say.

“Star Island,” he says.

The island comes up out of the dark ahead of us. The guillemots on their rocks. The thin high spinning-wheel sound carrying across the water.

I am falling in love with Castaway.

CHAPTER

20

Friday morning. The Portsmouth ferry dock.

Cold and bright. The Piscataqua running fast under the Memorial Bridge. Castaway is already there with two tickets for the Star Island ferry.

The M/V Thomas Laighton pulls away from the dock at nine. The river opens into the harbor, the harbor opens into the Atlantic, and the Isles of Shoals come up out of the sea ahead of us — low, rocky, completely themselves.

“There,” Castaway says.

Star Island. Gray stone buildings. A white chapel at the highest point. The Oceanic Hotel standing exactly where it has stood since 1873.

We dock and walk the island.

Rocky paths. October light. The conference center empty, the summer people gone, the island returned to itself.

Castaway stops at the water’s edge on the south side.

"Blackbeard brought his thirteenth wife here for their honeymoon," he says.

"Thirteenth."

"He was optimistic." He looks at the water. "They walked these rocks holding hands. He told her — I may have to flee. I have buried my treasure on one of the islands. Promise me you will guard it and I will come back for you."

"And?"

"They saw a King's naval ship on the horizon one day. He fled." He looks at the rocks. "She waited. He never came back."

I look at the rocks where a woman once stood watching the horizon for a man who promised to return.

"She is said to still haunt the islands," Castaway says.

"Waiting," I say.

"Waiting," he says.

Further along the shore he stops again.

"Captain Kidd buried treasure on Lunging Island," he says. "Man spent forty years digging for it."

"Did he find it."

"Died digging." He walks on. "Left a very large hole."

I look at him.

"Optimistic," I say.

“Very,” he says.

The chapel at the highest point.

Small. Stone. Built in the 1800s. The door open. We go in.

October light through the windows — low, orange, the particular quality of light over salt water in the afternoon.

We sit in the pews.

“Celia Thaxter,” Castaway says. “Grew up on White Island. Lighthouse keeper’s daughter. Wrote poetry. Entertained artists and writers out here — Childe Hassam painted three hundred paintings on these islands.”

“Three hundred.”

“He loved her garden.” He looks at the stone walls. “She grew it on bare rock. Her whole life on these islands. Born here. Died here.”

Outside the gulls. The water on every side.

“Some places keep you,” he says.

The ferry back docks in Portsmouth at four.

The NH Brewfest is on the grounds of Cisco Brewers — tents, live music, the whole Portsmouth community out in the October afternoon. Local brewers lined up along the waterfront. The smell of hops and salt air.

Castaway knows every brewer there.

“Twenty-five years,” I say.

“You know everyone after twenty-five years,” he says.

A brewer named Cal pours us both a sample and looks at me the way the restaurant owner looked at me — the particular assessment of someone who has been watching Castaway Harvey show up alone for a very long time.

“Finally,” Cal says.

Castaway says nothing.

I say nothing.

Cal pours another sample.

We stay until the music stops.

On the boat back to the island the stars are out and the Gulf of Maine is black around us and Portsmouth is a line of lights behind us and the Shoals ahead.

Castaway stands at the wheel.

“Same time tomorrow,” he says.

“The boat,” I say. “And the dance.”

“And the dance,” he says.

The island comes up out of the dark. The guillemots on their rocks. The notch-winged female’s thin high call carrying across the water.

I love Castaway’s long beard. The way it floats in the wind.

CHAPTER

21

Saturday morning. The harbor.

Cold and clear. Castaway's sailboat at the end of the dock. Kezia already aboard with her drone case and data sheets, the particular focus of a woman who has decided the outer ledges are hers now too.

Castaway hands me the water temperature reading from the mooring sensor.

Up again. Half a degree since last week.

"The sand lance will move deeper," I say.

"Already have," he says. "I pulled the trap data this morning."

Kezia looks up from her data sheets. "How much deeper."

"Enough," he says.

He starts the engine. We head out.

The outer ledges.

Kezia flies the drone low over Flat Rock — twenty-seven guillemots today, four more than Tuesday. The cold is pushing birds in from further offshore.

Castaway pulls water samples at three sites, sediment cores at two. I work the count sheets. The notch-winged female's mate is on the Sisters ledge — first time we have seen him this far out.

"He followed the sculpin," Castaway says.

"Or she did," Kezia says.

Castaway looks at her.

She does not look up from her data sheets.

On the way back in Kezia puts the drone away and sits at the bow with her notebook.

"I want to name the notch-winged female," she says.

"I told you," Castaway says. "I don't name them."

"I know what you told me." She opens the notebook. "I'm naming her anyway."

"What name," I say.

Kezia looks at the island coming up ahead of us. The guillemots on the breakwater rocks. The notch-winged female already back on her surface.

"Grace," she says.

Castaway says nothing.

Which means he has accepted it.

Saturday night. The square dance hall.

The three of us in the same set. The caller calls the Virginia Reel and Castaway takes my hand for the lead-down and we go the length of the set together, the other couples arching over us, the fiddle driving hard, and at the bottom he spins me out and I spin back and the hall turns.

Kezia is putting on the style.

I do not know when she learned to do that. I do not think Castaway knows either. She is moving through the figures with the complete confidence of someone who has been paying very close attention to how it is done.

A man named Curtis asks her to dance.

She goes.

The break.

Castaway and I on the bench along the wall. The hall catching its breath around us.

Kezia is still dancing with Curtis. She has not stopped since the Virginia Reel.

“She is good,” Castaway says.

“She is good at everything,” I say.

He looks at Kezia on the floor. Then at me.

“Tomorrow,” he says.

“The boat,” I say.

“Just the two of us,” he says. “No sampling. No data.”

I look at him.

“Just the boat,” I say.

Midnight. The Portsmouth dock.

The boat back to the island. Kezia below with her notebook, already writing up the day’s data. Castaway at the wheel.

The Gulf of Maine black around us. The stars out. The Shoals ahead in the dark.

I stand beside him at the wheel.

The island comes up. The guillemots on their rocks. Grace on her surface, her male beside her, the thin high call between them carrying across the water.

CHAPTER

22

Sunday morning.

Kezia has the island. Her clipboard. Her count sheets. Grace on the breakwater at seven, the male on the Sisters ledge, the data accumulating the way data does when someone is paying complete attention.

Castaway is at the dock with the sailboat ready.

No sampling equipment. No sediment core rack. No drone case. Just the boat and the Gulf of Maine and the November sky coming in cold and blue over the water.

“Ready,” he says.

“Ready,” I say.

We sail east.

Away from the islands, away from Portsmouth, away from the research and the data and the twenty-five years of notebooks. The wind is northwest — cold, steady, the kind of wind that has been coming off the Canadian interior for a week and knows exactly what it is doing.

Castaway has one hand on the wheel and one on the sheet. He reads the wind by the feel of it on his face, adjusts the sail by a degree, reads it again. His eyes go to the horizon, to the telltales, to the water ahead. Not restless. Just present.

I sit at the bow and watch the water and the sky and the particular quality of November light on the open Atlantic — flat, gray-silver, the horizon clean and sharp and going all the way to Portugal.

There is nowhere I would rather be.

An hour out.

No land visible in any direction. Just the boat and the wind and the water moving under us.

Castaway cuts the engine and lets the sail do everything.

The boat slows to the rhythm of the swells. Long, easy, the Gulf of Maine in its November state — serious but not hostile, cold but not cruel.

A single guillemot surfaces thirty feet off the bow. Winter white. It looks at us. Then dives.

"Grace?" I say.

"Too far out," Castaway says. "Grace doesn't come this far."

"How do you know."

He looks at me. "I don't."

We eat lunch at the bow.

He brought food. Bread, cheese, something wrapped in paper from the Portsmouth market. He thought of everything without making anything of it.

The wind in the rigging. The boat moving easy. The open Atlantic in every direction.

“Faye,” he says.

I look at him.

“I love you,” he says.

“I love you,” I say.

Our lips meet. My heart soars high into the clouds.

The boat moves under us. The wind steady out of the northwest.

He takes my hand.

We sit at the bow for a long time.

The Atlantic around us. The sky going gold in the west over the invisible mainland. A gannet working the surface a hundred yards off — long wings, white body, diving clean and deep for whatever is down there.

“What happens now,” I say.

“We keep courting,” he says. “I love you. I’m happy.”

I look at the gannet coming up with something silver.

“I love you,” I say. “I’m happy.”

CHAPTER 23

"Eli!"

I run to him.

"I love you Faye."

"I love you Eli."

We kiss. A total kiss.

My heart fills to the brim.

I turn.

Castaway is standing at the dock gate.

"I love you Faye."

"I love you Castaway."

Two men.

My heart tears down the middle.

It won't stop tearing.

Kezia steps forward.

"Choose."

"What?"

"Choose."

I hug Eli.

"I love you."

"Marry me Faye."

"Yes Eli. Yes."

CHAPTER

24

. . .

Part One

The theater is full. Polly walks out first. Clipboard. Reading glasses slightly too large. The particular authority of someone who has been keeping the record for a long time and knows the record is good. The audience applauds. Polly waits for silence with the patience of a scientist.

“Good evening. I am Polly Cebos. Several items of data before we begin.” She consults her clipboard. “Item one. Tonight’s guest is Dr. Faye Marsh, née Alcott. Wildlife biologist. Arctic tern migration specialist. Author.” She turns a page. “Item two. Dr. Alcott has tagged eight hundred and forty-three individual terns over eleven field seasons. She has recaptured the same bird — tag number G47 — on the same nest site seven consecutive years.” She looks up. “Item three. Arctic terns migrate from the Arctic to the Antarctic and back. Every year. The longest migration of any animal on earth.” She pauses. “Item four. On the night this story begins Dr. Alcott was asleep.” The

audience laughs. Polly tucks the clipboard under her arm. “Ladies and gentlemen. Danny Rosenberg.”

The hologram appears. Full sized. Completely present. The grin of a man who has been looking forward to this all day. I am in the guest chair.

“Faye Alcott,” he says. “Danny Rosenberg,” I say. He looks at me with the look that is warm and forensic at the same time. “Two forty in the morning,” he says. “The sun is up because it is always up in the Alaskan July. A fist on your tent. Two knocks. Deliberate.” He pauses. “You are already unzipping your sleeping bag before you know who is there.” “Yes,” I say. “What were you unzipping toward.” “I didn’t know yet,” I say. “But you were already moving.” “I am always already moving,” I say.

He looks at the audience. He does not say anything. He does not need to.

“The bird,” he says. “He is standing in the gold light holding her in both hands. Not quite correctly — the hands of a man who is not sure he is holding her correctly.” He looks at me. “You take her. Run your hands along the wings. Check everything. Then you say — she will be fine.” He pauses. “Were you talking about the bird.” “Yes,” I say. He waits. “Mostly,” I say.

The audience laughs. Polly looks up. “Item five. G47 was recaptured healthy and uninjured. Item six. Dr. Alcott’s condition upon receiving her — not recorded.” Danny looks at me. “She controls what gets recorded,” he says. “Yes,” I say. “Field researchers,” he says to the audience.

He takes my face in both hands and kisses me. And so the evening unfolds — two researchers, a ridge, a flat rock, twelve documented mugs of coffee. The colony. The dread. The Beagle Channel. Hello my love. The Shoals. The bear. The dance. The card. The corridor.

Danny looks at me for a long moment. “Faye Alcott,” he says. “Danny Rosenberg,” I say. He nods once. We are done.

. . .

Part Two

Eli walks out in his field jacket. He looks at the theater the way he looks at new terrain — completely, taking inventory, nothing missed. Then he sits.

“Eli Marsh,” Danny says. “Sixteen years on a single island in Alaska documenting a predator cycle nobody else was documenting.” He pauses. “A man who watched someone work for three weeks before introducing himself.” “She was working,” Eli says. “She was working,” Danny repeats.

“Three weeks,” Danny says. “You saw her camp lights. Heard the drone surveys. You watched her band the second string of nests on the north slope.” “Yes,” Eli says. “And then a fox got into the colony.” “Yes.” “And you found G47 on the ground.” “Yes.” “And you knocked.” “Yes,” Eli says. “Two knocks,” Danny says. “Deliberate.” “Yes.” “Why two.” Eli is quiet for a moment. “One would have been enough,” he says. “Two was certain.”

“The declaration,” Danny says. “Chapter fourteen. You put your pen down. You look at her. I love you.” “Yes,” Eli says. “You said it first.” “Yes.” “Why then.” Eli looks at the stage floor for a moment. “Ten weeks on the ridge,” he says. “The scarred female going north. G47 on her nest. Everything exactly as it should be.” He looks up. “It was time.” “Just — time.” “Yes,” Eli says.

Something moves across his face. Not quite a smile. The private version of one.

Danny looks at him for a long moment. “Eli Marsh,” he says. “Danny Rosenberg,” Eli says. Danny nods once. They are done.

. . .

Part Three

Castaway Harvey walks out the way he walks everywhere. He sits. Short hair. Clean shaven. A dark blue suit.

“Castaway Harvey,” Danny says. “Twenty-five years on the Isles of Shoals. Mercury marine biologist. A man who knows every story these islands ever held.” “Yes,” Castaway says. “And then she arrived on the dock.” “Yes,” he says. “Tell me about the first night,” Danny says. Castaway looks at the stage floor for a moment. “She had field cases and a catching pole and the look of a woman who had been somewhere real and was not sure yet where she had landed.” “What did you do.” “I told her to leave the cases,” he says. “I took her to the square dance.” “First night,” Danny says. “There was no reason to wait,” Castaway says.

“Eight days,” Danny says. “Tell me what those eight days were.” Castaway looks at the audience. Then back at Danny. “The loneliness was gone,” he says.

“The corridor,” Danny says. “The dock. She sees him.” “Yes,” Castaway says. “And she runs.” “Yes,” he says. “You were at the gate.” “Yes.” “What did you feel.” Castaway looks at his hands. “I felt like a castaway,” he says.

Polly writes something in her notebook. She does not look up. Danny looks at Castaway for a long moment. “Castaway Harvey,” he says. “Danny Rosenberg,” Castaway says. Danny nods once. They are done.

. . .

Part Four

Kezia comes out. She sits. The audience does something warm.

“Kezia Asante,” Danny says. “You were twenty four years old when this story began. Second field season.” “Yes,” she says.

“Three mornings,” Danny says. “She sent you to the ridge with the second mug.” “Day one,” Kezia says. “I went. I came back. I said nothing.” “Day two she sent Adaeze.” “The mug came back full,” Kezia says. “He said to tell her G47 was on the nest.” “Day three she sent Priya.” “Priya came back and said he knows.” Kezia looks at Danny. “Priya never says anything. When Priya says something it counts.” “And day four.” “Day four I said nothing,” Kezia says. “Sometimes you have to let people find the ridge on their own.”

“It’s about time,” Danny says. Kezia looks at him. “When they came back from the ridge,” he says. “You said it’s about time.” “Yes,” she says. “One word.” “Four words,” she says. Danny smiles. “Were they the right four words.” “They were the only four words,” Kezia says.

Danny looks at her for a long moment. “Kezia Asante,” he says. “Danny Rosenberg,” she says. He nods once. They are done.

. . .

Part Five

Fifteen years later. Castaway Harvey walks out. He sits. Short hair. Clean shaven. A dark blue suit.

“Castaway Harvey,” Danny says. “Fifteen years.” “Fifteen years,” Castaway says. “Tell me about the suit.” Castaway looks down at it. Almost smiles. “It was a gift,” he says. “From.” “From my wife,” he says.

“Faye left,” Castaway says. “Her job was available. Kezia applied.” “Kezia got the job.” “Kezia got the job,” he says. “And.” “And she already knew the guillemots,” he says. “She had named Grace. She knew the breakwater. She knew the data.” “She knew you,” Danny says. Castaway is quiet for a moment. “She knew me before I knew she knew me,” he says.

“The flask,” Danny says. Castaway nods once. “She didn’t say anything about it,” he says. “Not once. She just — was there. Every morning. The breakwater. The birds. The data.” He pauses. “One

morning I left it in the cabin. The next morning I left it again." He looks at his hands. "After a while I stopped picking it up." "She never said a word." "Not one," he says.

"The suit," Danny says again. "She gave it to you." "Our first anniversary," he says. "She said — you are not a castaway anymore. Act like it."

"Are you happy." Castaway looks across the stage. Toward the wings where Kezia is. The dark blue suit. Fifteen years. No loneliness. "I am not a castaway anymore," he says.

Danny nods once. They are done.

. . .

Part Six

Fifteen years later. Eli and I come out together. We sit. Danny looks at us for a moment. The look of a man who has been waiting for this all evening.

"Fifteen years," he says. "Fifteen years," I say. He looks at Eli. Then at me. Then back. "The cabin," he says. "Tell me about the cabin." Eli looks at me. Something in his face settles. "One room when I built it," he says. "Fourth season on the island. Just enough." "And now." "Four rooms," he says. "A proper kitchen. A study with two desks. Bookshelves on every wall." He pauses. "We ran out of wall." "When did you run out of wall." "Third child," I say.

The audience laughs. Danny laughs with them. Polly looks up. "Item one. The Marsh cabin on the Alaska island has been expanded six times in fifteen years." She turns a page. "Item two. The bookshelves currently hold four hundred and twelve field notebooks. Two hundred and nine belonging to Eli Marsh. Two hundred and three belonging to Faye Marsh." "You are nine notebooks ahead," Danny says to Eli. "She writes faster," Eli says. "She will catch up."

"August is eleven," I say. "She came to the island at seven weeks in a front carrier. She has not stopped asking questions since. She wants to study the terns." Danny smiles. "Eli says she already reads tracks better than he did at her age." "He is right," Eli says simply. "Gus is eight," I say. "He is quieter than August. He watches the foxes with Eli for hours without moving." "And the youngest." "Nora is four," I say. "She found a feather last summer and carried it everywhere for two weeks." "What kind of feather," Danny says. I look at Eli. "G47," he says. "I recognized the band color."

The audience applauds. Polly looks up. "Item three. G47 was last documented on her nest site two seasons ago. Age estimated at nineteen years." She pauses. "The oldest Arctic tern in Dr. Alcott's study population."

Danny leans forward. The softest question. "Faye," he says. "The sun does not set in July. You stopped noticing. And then one morning at two forty someone knocked." "Yes," I say. "And you were already unzipping your sleeping bag." "Yes," I say. "Was it worth it," he says. "All of it. The dread. The silence. The three thousand miles. The eight days. All of it."

I look at Eli. At the fifteen years in his face. At the island we keep coming back to and the children who grew up in its gold light and the flat rock with two distinct sitting positions worn into it.

“Life is meant to have fun,” I say.

Danny grins. The full grin. The one that takes its time. “Yes it is,” he says.

Polly looks at her clipboard. She reads the last number quietly. “Item four,” she says. “The colony on the Alaska island. Current population. Eight thousand and twelve nesting pairs.” She closes her notebook.

The show is complete.