



What you see
isn't always the truth

MIRROR LAND

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LAND
MIRROR

PROLOGUE

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The sky was pink. Which was better than red, El said, when we started to get scared again. Grandpa had always told us, *Red sky at night, sailor's delight; red sky in the morning, sailor's warning.* And he used to be one. The wind was cold, getting colder. El's face was still streaked with tears, and her fingers twitched. I couldn't stop shaking.

We held hands and followed our noses, until every street of high, crowded tenements and terraces blurred into one looming dark house where the murderers of children lived and lurked and watched. But we saw no one. Heard no one. As if we were in Mirrorland again. Safe and scared. All that changed was the smell of the firth, getting stronger, nearer.

The harbour was grease and oil and metal and salt. Seagulls were waking up, crowing like cockerels. We stopped next to a wooden warehouse, stripped and wet-dark. In front of it, a crane

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that dangled a hook on the end of rusty chains and a stony slope that soon disappeared underwater.

High tide. The only time to set sail for the high seas.

El gripped my hand tighter as we looked out at all the bobbing round buoys, the long pontoons. We saw yachts, white and smooth with rattling metal masts. And out beyond the estuary, a tanker on the horizon. None were what we wanted. None were why we were there.

I searched through my rucksack until I found Mum's powder compact. Started to press its pad against El's cheeks.

'Your eyes are all red inside,' I whispered, as she pretended it didn't hurt.

'You're still bleeding,' she whispered back, hoarser than I was even though I had done more screaming.

'What are you two lassies doing out at this time of night, eh?'

His torchlight made me blink, but when I could look, he was just like Mum said he'd be: leathery and gap-toothed, a white and bushy beard. An Old Salty Dog.

'I'm Ellice,' El said. I felt the points of her nails against my fingers, but her voice was still like the harbour water. 'And this is my twin sister, Catriona.'

'Aye?'

He came closer then, and when he staggered, I could smell rum. My heart beat faster. I squared my shoulders. 'We want to join a pirate ship.'

The light from his torch bounced dizzy white circles that made my eyes squint and water. And then he said a curse word – one of Grandpa's, but not one of his favourites – and began backing

away from us, eyes wide like the Grebo masks of Côte d'Ivoire in Grandpa's encyclopaedias.

'Stay right there, all right? Don't be going nowhere. All right?'

'But is there a ship due soon?' El tried to shout, as he disappeared back into the shadow of the warehouse. We heard its door creak open and bang shut, and El turned to me, made a choked sound, let me go. 'Oh no! Your jumper. We forgot to take off your jumper!'

I suddenly felt something worse than just scared. As if I'd been swimming deep down in the cold and black and someone had reached in and pulled me out, and I couldn't remember how to breathe again. I dropped my rucksack, pulled off my coat, and even though I hurt all over, even though El's fingers pinched and scratched, I got my jumper off over my head, and dropped it on the stony ground as if it were crawling with spiders. I could smell it then, sour and warm.

'What'll we do with it?' El said, and her voice wasn't still or calm any more. 'He'll come back. He'll come back!'

She ran around the warehouse, picked up a broken mooring ring flaked with rust. We tied the jumper's arms around it in fisherman's knots, our hands cold, teeth chattering, and then we ran back to the choppy water beyond the harbour, threw it as far in as we could. The splash was loud. By the time we'd run back to the stony slip, we were out of breath, both trying so hard not to cry it sounded like we were choking.

When the wind suddenly turned, pushing us back from the edge, I thought I could smell the blood again: sour and dark. But the briny sea, like the squeeze of El's hand, was stronger.

'A wise sailor never leaves port on a Friday,' I whispered.

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El's fingers started to hurt mine. 'It's Saturday now, you idiot.'

But I knew she was just as scared. I knew she was wondering if it was too late to go back. 'Will we be all right, El?'

We looked out across the firth, past the small green islet of Inchkeith and that faraway tanker. Shivering, still holding hands, close enough to feel each other's heartbeat as that red sky moved in from the North Sea, spreading like a bruise. El didn't look at me again until we could see it creeping over the breakwater.

And then she smiled. The wide, terrible smile that I knew she'd wanted to smile even along all those endless empty streets. She didn't stop, even when we heard the first engine, the first siren. Or when the warehouse door creaked open and slammed shut again.

She smiled, smiled, smiled. 'We will not leave each other. Say it.'

Footsteps crunching towards us. Another, louder curse. Enough lights to blind us so that we could no longer see the firth at all. Only each other.

'We will not leave each other,' I whispered.

She gripped my hand even tighter, and I swallowed, watched her smile get sharper, darker, watched it disappear. 'Never so long as we live.'

'You'll be okay,' a man who wasn't the Old Salty Dog said.

And a woman with kind eyes and softer torchlight stepped between us, held out her other hand. 'Everything will be all right now.'

*

And that was the day our second life began.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

I wasn't there when my sister died.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Do we? I think.

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

Arsehole, I think. In El’s voice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I wasn't anywhere when my sister died.

Because she isn't dead.