Here's a preview of the next Will North romance:

Water, Stone, Heart

August 16, 2004

5:10 p.m.

Pass to all emergency services. This is a major incident. Repeat, major incident. We require all the standby aircraft and all available land-based emergency crews as we are in danger of losing Boscastle and all the people in it.

Captain Pete McLelland, RNAS Culdrose rescue helicopter 193, to RAF Kinloss Aeronautical Rescue Coordination Centre

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August is statistically the second hottest month of the year, just behind July . . . but August 2004 also turned out to be the wettest since 1956. A combination of humid subtropical air masses, slow-moving frontal systems and several hurricane remnants were reported as possible reasons for the exceptional precipitation conditions. . . .

Boscastle Flood Special Issue,

Journal of Meteorology 29, no. 293

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one

“You all right down there?”

Andrew Stratton looked up toward the cliff top, ten feet above his head, but the afternoon sun was in his eyes and all he could make out was the silhouette of a woman’s head and shoulders etched against a Wedgwood-blue sky. Stratton was standing on a narrow grassy ledge above the sea which he shared with a loudly bleating black-faced sheep. The shape of a dog appeared beside the woman. The shape barked.

“Um, yes,” he called back. “I was just walking along and saw this sheep stranded down here.”

“And you decided to join it?”

“Yes . . . well, no . . . I mean, I thought I’d try to help it back up to the top. But whenever I get near it, it looks as if it’s going to jump.”

“Do you always have that effect?”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing.”

From the slender shelf he and the sheep occupied, it was, he guessed, at least two hundred feet straight down to the Atlantic breakers crashing far below—so far, in fact, that he could barely hear the thudding combers above the whistle of the wind. He’d been walking along the cliff path just north of the Cornish village of Boscastle and had paused to watch the waves roll in and dash themselves to foam and mist on the jagged rocks at the base of the cliff when he’d heard the sheep. There was a scar of loose rock and torn vegetation where the sheep had descended to the ledge, on the theory, Andrew imagined, that the grass there was greener.

“That’s Darwin’s sheep, that is,” said the voice above.

“You know the farmer?” Andrew was suddenly more hopeful.

He heard the woman laugh. “No, I mean that what you have there is the dimmest sheep in the flock, the one that has to die to protect the gene pool and assure the survival of the species.”

“Oh.”

There was something in her tone that implied she thought he and the sheep had more in common than just the thin sill of grass they shared.

“Any suggestions?” he called.

“Not a one. The general idea is to let nature take its course.”

He let this sink in.

“Right, then,” she said. “As long as you’re okay, I’ll leave you to it.” And with that the head pulled back from the cliff edge and disappeared. He could hear her whistling as she crunched off along the path.

Andrew Stratton—professor, from Philadelphia—did not know a great deal about sheep. He hadn’t a clue, now that he was down here, how he would get the sheep back up. Come to think of it, he wasn’t at all sure how he’d get himself back up, either. He approached the skittish animal once more and it backed away again, its rheumy red eyes wild with fear, until it was perched at the very lip of the precipice.

He gave up. He turned toward the cliff face and started climbing, only to slip back almost immediately when a chunk of rock came off in his hand. He could almost hear his wife Katerina’s voice—ex-wife, to be accurate: “Never climb shale or slate if you can help it: it flakes off and you fall.” She had taken up rock climbing more than a year earlier—taken up with a rock climber, too, and left Andrew for him shortly thereafter. Now he remembered some of her safety rules: Plan your ascent several moves in advance; maintain three reliable points of contact with the rock before you reach for the next hold; test each hold before you use it to bear weight. He’d often wished, in the weeks following her departure, that there had been similar rules for protecting oneself in the case of domestic landslides.

In a few moments of more-careful climbing, he regained the rim and hoisted himself up to the footpath. In the far distance, he could see a figure, a woman, striding along the cliffs, a large brown and white dog running circles around her. For reasons he could not fathom, she was waving her arms, as if in urgent communication with the dog.

He looked down. The sheep had returned to munching, utterly oblivious to the fact that it would soon be out of grass and luck. The woman had been right: This was a very dim sheep—although in his experience, limited though it was to the few days since his arrival in Cornwall, in the stupidity sweepstakes all sheep seemed equally qualified. He resolved to tell the manager at the Visitor Centre in the village about the stranded sheep and let someone who knew what he was doing rescue it.

THE DAY HAD begun pleasantly enough: He’d taken a guided tour of the Valency river valley. His tour guide was an expert who knew every twist and turn of the tumbling stream, every nook and cranny in the valley: the places deer came to drink early in the morning; the springs and bogs that were the best spots to find frogs; the pool of deep water where, if you kept very still, you could sometimes see fish hanging motionless below the mirrored surface. Her name was Lilly Trelissick, and the Valency valley was her favorite place in the whole world. Lilly was nine. She hated her name and preferred to be called Lee. Naturally, she called Andrew Drew.

Lilly—or, rather, Lee—was the only child of Roger and Anne Trelissick. They lived at Bottreaux Farm on a hill above Boscastle, a small village in a steep-sided, V-shaped valley on Cornwall’s stormy Atlantic coast. On the lush pastures above the valley, Roger raised Devon Ruby Red cattle, a breed much prized for its flavorful meat, and Anne worked part-time as a freelance illustrator of children’s books. Andrew was renting a seventeenth-century stone cottage off in one corner of the farm, which the couple had renovated. Roger and Anne’s house was newer—Georgian, Andrew thought, given its tall windows and pleasing proportions. He suspected his cottage, which seemed to have grown out of the ground rather than having been built upon it, was the original farmhouse and far older.

Lee Trelissick charged a small fee for her tours, payable in the form of an ice cream bar—specifically a Chunky Choc Ice—readily purchased from the newsagent’s shop just up the main road from the harbor and conveniently situated near the beginning of the footpath up the Valency valley. A few steps downhill from the shop, just above the narrow stone bridge that carried the only road through the village, the Valency met the Jordan, a smaller river that tumbled down the lesser arm of the valley toward the sea. In truth, both were little more than streams. Normally, at this time of year—for it was high summer—water levels in both streams would be low. But August had begun with unusually muggy, sunny days punctuated by sudden, short rain squalls, so the ground was saturated and both streams were flowing picturesquely fast and full.

Below the bridge, the conjoined streams followed an arrow-straight channel neatly bounded by ancient, hand-laid stone embankments. The little river clattered over rock shelves, ducked under another, even smaller stone bridge, and then lost itself in the harbor. Eons of water relentlessly seeking sea level had exploited fault lines in the towering slate cliffs of Penally Point and carved a narrow dogleg gap that formed the harbor mouth. Tiny and tidal, protected by two massive stone jetties, Boscastle harbor was the only protected cove along twenty miles of wild, shipwrecking Atlantic coast. The harbor had once been a bustling little cargo-shipping port, supported a modest coastal fishing fleet, and, in the old days, trafficked in no small amount of smuggled tea, tobacco, and brandy.

Standing on the cliff above the harbor entrance on the day he arrived, Andrew had thought about exhausted fishermen returning home, pitching through the tide rips and coastal swells after a long day out on the heaving ocean, only to face the daunting prospect of negotiating the diabolical harbor mouth. The first hazard to avoid was Meachard Rock, a massive outcrop of ragged, knife-sharp slate several stories high and situated squarely in front of the narrow entrance. Then the passage turned ninety degrees to port and ran a good hundred yards north between beetling crags before turning another ninety degrees to starboard and around the tip of one of the jetties, finally reaching a tiny area of protected water. It would be difficult and perilous enough to navigate this approach with today’s sturdy, snub-nosed, diesel-powered fishing boats; he couldn’t imagine how they’d done it during the age of sail.

What was hell for mariners, though, was heaven for tourists. The tortured sedimentary cliffs, the crashing sea spray, and the scenic harbor netted the quaint old fishing village great shoals of visitors every summer. These days, Boscastle’s economic survival depended on the tourist trade. August, with schools closed and many Europeans on holiday, was high season, the make-or-break month for the gift shops and cafés that lined the narrow street, the month that would measure how some of the residents would fare the rest of the year.

Lee, however, was having none of it.

“I can’t wait till all these people leave!” she hissed between licks along the exposed vanilla core of her chocolate-coated ice cream bar. She and Andrew were standing outside the newsagent’s, just uphill from the big car park that had been built along the north bank of the Valency to accommodate the tourists.

“And anyway, just look at them,” she sputtered as another tour bus stopped to disgorge a stream of travelers who then waddled off downhill like so many over-nourished ducks, “Bet you none of them makes it to the top of Penally; they’re all too fat! ”

“I dunno, Lee; keep eating those ice creams and you could end up the same way,” Andrew said calmly.

The girl lifted an eyebrow. “You want the tour or not, Drew?”

Andrew laughed. “Okay, okay; you’re the boss. Lead on.”

Stratton had only been in Boscastle for a few days, but he’d already developed a fondness for the wiry little girl. There was nothing fussy about this kid. She seemed to live every day in the same worn khaki shorts, a T-shirt from someplace called the Eden Project, and olive-green rubber wellies—the better to wander through the woods below the farm and along the river’s soggy upper reaches. Her arms and legs were bony and browned by the sun, and her sandy hair was cropped close to the skull, with a ragged fringe at the forehead. When she looked up at him, and especially when she smiled, her eyes narrowed to slits so thin he marveled she could see out of them at all. He never saw her with any other children; she seemed perfectly happy in her own company. And whenever he saw her crossing the fields beyond his cottage, her strides were strong and determined. No loitering among the meadow flowers or daisy-chain making for this one; Lee always seemed to be on a mission.

It worried him a bit that she wandered the countryside all alone. It was a city-dweller’s worry, he knew, and, anyway, Anne had told him she’d long since stopped trying to keep track of her daughter. “She’s a bit of an old soul, is our Lilly; she goes her own way,” Anne had said, with what Andrew thought was a hint of awe, as if her daughter was something of a mystery to her. “Mind you, she’s a good girl, smart and strong and trustworthy, but stubborn as a goat. And she either likes you or she doesn’t.”

Apparently, she liked Andrew. At least, he guessed she did, since most mornings he found her sitting on the stone wall by the gate to his cottage, facing the front door as if impatient for him to get a move on. She’d been there the first day after he arrived from the States. Jet lag had kept him asleep until nearly midmorning. Yawning, a cup of tea in his hand, he’d opened the top half of the split door at the front of his cottage and been greeted with “Who are you?”

“I’m Andrew; who are you?” he’d replied.

“Lee. I live here.”

“No you don’t; I do.”

“On this farm, I do.”

“I see. So Anne’s your mother?”

“Uh-huh.”

“But Anne told me her daughter’s name was Lilly.”

The girl screwed up her face in disgust. “I hate that name.”

“I see.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m renting this cottage.”

“Are you on holiday?”

“Not really; I’m taking a course, starting Monday. It’s like being at school.”

“School? In the summer? That’s daft.”

“Oh, I don’t know; I think I’ll enjoy it.”

“What are you going to school for?”

“Stone-wall building. I’m learning how to make walls . . . like the one you’re sitting on.”

“Why? We’ve already got plenty of them.”

Andrew could see the door opening to a very long discussion, one he wasn’t really prepared to enter, especially with an inquisitive little girl. The plain fact was, at least part of his brain worried that he was simply running away from his grief. That, and what he was sure were the unvoiced theories of friends and colleagues about why Kat had left him—was he a wife beater, a lush, a failure in bed? Why, he realized, was a very complex question. So he dodged it.

“Would you like a cup of tea?”

“Had some already.”

“Like some more?”

“Nope. Gotta get going. Busy day.” And with that, her curiosity apparently satisfied at least for the moment, the girl hopped down and dashed off across the meadow beyond the wall.

And ever since Wednesday, that’s how their days had begun. He’d throw open the top half of the door and shout, “Good morning, madam!” (She liked that.)

“Guess what, Drew?!” she’d begin, hopping off the wall and skipping to the door. Lee seemed to think every new thought needed to be introduced this way: “Guess what?! The cat’s had kittens.” “Guess what?! Gonna rain later.” “Guess what?! Dad’s movin’ the calves today.”

Andrew had taken to answering. “I don’t know, what?” just to tease her, but she just ignored him and launched right into the latest bit of local news. It was better than any morning newspaper. The news was always varied, interesting, and unexpected. It was a delightful way to start the day: a cup of hot, sweet, milky tea, and Miss “Guess What?!”

That’s how today, Saturday, had started.

“Guess what, Drew?!”

“I don’t know, what?”

“It’s a good day for you to have my famous and ex-clu-sive guided walking tour of the river valley. Complete with sacred wells and witches!”

“Famous is it?”

“It is. Far and wide.”

“How often have you conducted this tour?”

“Loads of times.”

“Hmmm. Doesn’t sound very exclusive.”

She hesitated.

“A few times, then?” he ventured.

“Nearly once!” she said, giggling behind her hand.

“Ah, now that’s what I call exclusive. When do we leave?”

“Soon’s you finish that tea, because—Guess what?!—Mum’s taking me to Wadebridge this afternoon to get new wellies; my feet’ve got too big for these ones.” She hopped around on one foot and shook the other by way of emphasis.

“Well, then, I guess I’d better get a move on. I’ll just get my boots.”

When he emerged again, a day pack slung over one shoulder, she was waiting by the gate.

“Where shall we begin?” he asked.

“At the bottom, of course. In the village.”

Given that he knew there was a back route from the farm directly into the valley, this seemed odd to Andrew, but he didn’t argue; he liked the girl’s company too much. “Right, then. Down to the village it is!”

It was a luminous morning; a bit of ground fog drifted up in wisps from the cooler fingers of the valley, evaporating quickly in the warming air. They followed a narrow lane that dipped into the side valley cut by the little River Jordan, passed a whitewashed old mill perched above the stream, briefly joined the main road from Camelford, then turned into steep, one-way Fore Street and followed it as it twisted downhill. Over the centuries, Boscastle had evolved two centers: “Top Town,” high above the valley, where they were now, and “Quay Town,” down around the harbor, though hardly anyone called them that anymore. Fore Street—which, somewhat confusingly changed its name to Dunn Street halfway down the hill—linked the two. Andrew loved the almost medieval character of the narrow street, lined as it was on both sides with squat stone cottages leaning one against the other, as if exhausted by time. They passed the village hall, the old Methodist chapel, the primary school Lee attended, and the post office. Lee rapped on the window with her knuckles and waved to Sam Bonney, who was behind the service window at the back. Beyond the post office, the street turned sharply right and plunged downhill even more steeply, paralleling the course of the Jordan, which clattered through the valley far below. Although it was barely ten o’clock when they reached the bottom, tourists already packed Quay Town as tightly as salted sardines in a barrel.

It was here that Andrew was informed matter-of-factly by his guide that there was a small fee for the tour. Ice cream seemed to Andrew a fine breakfast, so he bought Chunky Choc Ices for them both. Soon they’d left behind the crowded car park and were heading upstream through the trees bordering the Valency. The tourists all seemed to have been drawn like iron filings by the magnetism of the cliff-ringed harbor, and Andrew and Lee had the leafy riverside footpath to themselves.

Trees arched overhead, their branches cloaked in gray-green lichen, their trunks often wrapped in glossy green ivy. Here, just above the port area, the valley’s wooded slopes climbed steeply up from the banks of the stream, leaving just enough room for the riverbed and the narrow footpath. But a little farther on, the floor of the valley opened, and the path meandered through a grassy meadow. Here and there, massive boulders of creamy, apricot-veined quartz lay about in the riverbed like some giant’s abandoned marble collection, washed down from who knew where by some terrible force.

“You’ve missed most of the flowers,” Lee said, as if Andrew hadn’t been paying attention.

“What do you mean?”

“There are masses and masses of primroses, and daffodils, and blue-bells, and things here in the spring. You should see Minster churchyard then; there’s so many daffodils then you can barely see the gravestones. But they’re all gone now. You came too late.”

Andrew felt as if he should apologize. “Still lots of flowers here, though,” he countered, somewhat defensively. “Like this, for instance.” He pointed to a bush flecked with pale pink blossoms maturing to ivory.

Lee snorted. “That’s just dog rose. It’s a weed, like these nasty, prickly blackberry brambles. They get everywhere. I hate them.”

“Your mother told me she makes blackberry wine.”

“Lotta good that does me.”

Andrew couldn’t argue with this line of reasoning.

They passed through a wooden gate in a stone wall.

“Mind the stinging nettles,” Lee warned.

“Which are they?” He pushed aside the branches of a fringe-leafed plant that clustered around the gateposts and his hand suddenly felt on fire. “Damn! I think I just found out.”

Lee stopped and shook her golden head with disgust. “I told you! Now I’m going to have to find you some dock!” She stomped off up the path, then bent and snapped off a broad, bladelike, greenish-yellow leaf. Andrew followed.

“Here. Crush this and rub it where it stings.”

He did so, and in moments the pain vanished.

“How’d you know that would work?” he asked, amazed.

The girl looked at him as if he was brain-damaged. “Everybody knows dock cures nettle stings. Why do you think they grow near each other?”

Having no idea what either nettles or dock were, Andrew had never given this question much thought.

“Come on,” Lee said. “I don’t have a lot of time to waste.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

A gentle bend revealed a pool created by a low stone dam that slowed the stream’s flow. They stopped and sat on a rock, where Lee said you could see fish in the still water. Andrew stared at the surface intently.

“I don’t see any,” he said finally.

“They’re shy sometimes.”

“Are they big?”

“I should say so; really big.”

“How big?”

“That’s a weir, that is,” Lee volunteered, changing the subject and pointing toward an outlet just upstream of the dam. “It used to shunt water to the leat.”

“Leat?”

“You know, leat . . . what carries the water to the mill. I thought you Americans spoke English.”

“I used to think so,” Andrew said, “but now I’m not so sure.”

“Okay, you know that big red wooden waterwheel by the leather shop, down near the car park? Used to be a mill there. Water that ran it came from here.”

“What kind of mill?”

“A mill that grinds stuff, silly.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“You sure have a lot of questions for a grown-up.”

“You sure know a lot for a kid.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“I never compliment before lunch.”

Lee smiled. “You remind me of my friend Nicki. She says things like that. You’d like her. She’s funny.”

“Am I funny?”

“Not before lunch.”

Lee hopped off the rock and spun off up the path again, sometimes walking, sometimes skipping. From time to time, she’d stop and peer at something in the bushes—a bird or a butterfly—and name it.

Andrew was amazed at how much Lee already knew about the natural world. “Where did you learn all this?” he asked when he caught up with her.

“Mostly from Elizabeth. Mum says I’m to call her ‘Mrs. Davis,’ but she says I can call her Elizabeth. She runs the Visitor Centre and knows loads of stuff.”

“But wait, you’re not a visitor.”

Lee looked at him a moment, as if trying to decide whether he was teasing or just stupid.

“That’s silly,” she said, and off she skipped again.

Andrew followed happily, his eyes sweeping the hillsides. The trees climbing the slopes included ash, beech, and hazel, but mostly they were gnarled sessile oaks which looked to him like something from a fairy tale, their mossy branches thick, twisted, and dense. It was the kind of woodland that should have fairies and elves, and he said so.

“I never saw none, but Nicki says there are piskies down here.”

“Piskies?”

“You know; little folk.”

“Has she seen them?”

“Never asked. Mostly, if Nicki says something, that’s good enough for me.”

Andrew was admiring the elaborate structure of one particular oak, a very old one that overhung the river, when Lee piped up.

“Guess what, Drew?!”

“I don’t know, what, Lee?”

“That’s my secret tree.”

“Is it indeed?”

“Uh-huh. I climb way high up in it sometimes with a book and read there.”

“I bet it’s peaceful up among the leaves.”

Lee’s secret tree was made for climbing; its branches began low and continued, ladderlike, far up its thick, knobby trunk. Andrew swung up onto the lowest branch and said, “Come on; show me where you sit!”

Lee scrambled up past him with the sureness of a monkey, until the two of them were deep in a cylinder of green leaves, virtually invisible from the ground.

Lee settled into the crotch of one of the branches and leaned against the trunk. Andrew balanced on a branch beside her.

“Maybe I’ll come up here and read sometimes, too,” he said.

“Better ask me first,” she said with a proprietary frown. “It’s my tree, after all.”

“Of course.”

She leaned toward him and confided, “Sometimes I sit here and spy on people walking along the footpath.”

“No kidding! See anyone interesting?”

“Uh-huh. Saw the vicar once.”

“What was he doing?”

“Not ‘he,’ silly, ‘she.’ He’s a she! ”

“You’re joking.”

“Don’t you go to St. Symphorian’s?”

“I’ve only been here a few days, Lee; gimme a break.”

Her eyes narrowed to slits. “You’re not one of those Methodists are you?” She asked this as if Methodists had horns.

“No, I’m not. Wait a minute; how can St.—what was it?”

“Symphorian’s.”

“Right, Symphorian’s. How can they have a priest who’s a woman? I didn’t think Catholics allowed that.”

“It’s not Catholic; it’s C. of E., innit!”

“Huh?”

“Church of England. You don’t know a whole lot, do you?”

“Geez, I guess not.”

“Me and Mum, we’re C. of E. Dad is, too, I think, but he’s too busy with the farm most Sundays to go to church. Goes Christmas and Easter, though.”

“And the C. of E. has lady priests?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Wow.”

The girl shot him a look. “You got a problem with that?”

“No!”

“ ’Cause some people do, I guess. My friend Nicki, she calls them ‘nanderthals.’ ”

“Ne-anderthals. Boy, your friend sure uses big words.” He wondered whether all the kids in Boscastle were as precocious as these two.

“Yeah, Neanderthals; that’s it. It means backward, sort of. You’re not one of them, are you?”

Andrew placed his right hand over his heart. “Neither a Methodist nor a Neanderthal, to the best of my knowledge. Promise.”

This seemed to satisfy Lee. Back on the ground, the two of them continued along the riverbank until they reached a narrow wooden footbridge that crossed the stream to a path that led up the thickly wooded hillside opposite.

“End of tour,” Lee announced.

“That’s it? What about the wells and witches?”

“Have to wait till next time. Got to meet my mum so’s we can go to Wadebridge. For the new Wellies!”

She dashed across the footbridge.

“Thanks for the ice cream,” she called over her shoulder.

“I’m going to complain about this to the Visitor Centre,” Andrew called after her. There was no reply, but he thought he heard a distant giggle.

He slipped off his day pack, unzipped it, and pulled out an Ordnance Survey Explorer Map. He checked it for a moment, shouldered his pack, and continued upstream. At a tiny cluster of cottages the map identified as Newmills, he climbed out of the valley and turned seaward. He was heading for the coast path and, unbeknownst to him, an encounter with a stranded sheep.

Flash floods are sudden and often unpredictable events resulting from massive and sudden rainstorms, a rapid snowmelt in mountain regions, or a failure of natural or man-made water defenses. Although these events are relatively rare in the UK, flash floods do occur, often with devastating consequences.

Boscastle Special Flood Issue,

Journal of Meteorology 29, no. 293

two

Nicola Rhys-Jones was berating herself. And not quietly. She was shouting into the wind.

“Idiot! Bloody idiot! Meet a nice-looking guy with a conscience, toss off a few wisecracks, walk away. Brilliant!”

Randi, her seven-year-old Siberian husky, rocketed around her, barking, as she tramped along the coast path. Randi liked this game: His mistress yelled and waved her arms, and he ran in circles. Any minute now, he knew, she’d stop, look at him, and say, “What the hell do you think you’re doing, you crazy dog!” Then she’d kneel down and give him a big hug, because she felt even more foolish than he looked. He knew this. He loved it. Especially the hugs.

Nicola did exactly that, then stood up and looked back along the cliffs to the north. High above Pentargon, near the stream of the same name that flung itself over the cliff edge, becoming no more than mist by the time it reached the beach far below, she saw the tiny figure of a man. The handsome man who’d tried to help the idiot sheep. The handsome man with the thick, curly, salt-and-pepper hair and the gentle, caring face. She would not wait for him to catch up. She wanted to, sort of, but mostly she didn’t. Too obvious. She passed the tall pole with the fish-shaped weather vane at the top of Penally Point, then trudged down the steep path toward Boscastle harbor and her tiny stone cottage–cum-studio near the jetty.

Nicola Rhys-Jones, single—divorced, if you wanted to be technical about it—was rapidly approaching “woman of a certain age” status and pretending it didn’t matter to her in the least, though it did. Anyone—any man, at least—passing her on the coast path would have observed a woman beautiful by any definition but her own: long, softly wavy dark-brown hair; big brown eyes beneath thick, expressive brows; a handsome nose admittedly a bit too big for her face; high, angular cheekbones; skin slightly olive and remarkably unlined; full lips that curved up at the corners with the perpetual hint of a smile, as if she was keeping a secret; the beginnings of softness beneath the chin—the only part of her, so far, that was giving way to gravity. She was nearly forty, but didn’t look it. Yet. She stood three inches shy of six feet (a little too tall, she thought) and had broad shoulders (a little too broad, she worried), generously proportioned breasts (too generous—her Italian heritage), and slender legs attached to shapely hips she worked hard to keep from spreading (thus the dog walking, not that she didn’t enjoy it). Her ex-husband, Jeremy, used to say something coarse she had secretly enjoyed, before she began hating it: “I like seeing daylight between your thighs.”

Nicola unlocked the low wooden door to her tiny stone cottage, went into the kitchen, filled a bowl with water for Randi, then mixed herself a gin and tonic and climbed the steep stone steps to her studio. She loved the house, especially the light-filled studio with its view of the harbor. She lay back on the chaise opposite her easel and put her glass on the floor. The upper story of the cottage had once been a loft for drying fishing nets. The ground floor had been an office and a storage room for crab pots. The place suited her at this stage of her life, though it was a far cry from the gracious home she had shared with Jeremy.

Jeremy. What a disaster. Ten years of marriage to a rich, well-educated, hopelessly narcissistic Englishman who also happened to have an abusive streak. As if she hadn’t had enough of that as a girl.

Nicola DeLucca, graduate student at the Art Institute of Boston, had met Jeremy Rhys-Jones, son of an English peer, while she was on a fellowship in Florence, Italy. His family had a modest estate on Cornwall’s rocky, wind-wracked Penwith peninsula, near the artists’ colony of St. Ives. She was the sole daughter of a working-class immigrant family from the claustrophobic Italian enclave that was Boston’s North End. She had had two brothers: one younger, James, the older one, John—named after apostles, saints, though only James would later warrant that honor. Her father, Anthony, had abandoned his family when she was only six, and her mother, Angela, had been forced to go to work cleaning offices in the State House at night—an unspoken source of shame in the neighborhood.

After high school, Nicola had won an art scholarship to Boston College. Four years later, she graduated and landed a part-time job as a book jacket designer for a publisher. In her free time, she took advanced painting courses at the Art Institute. Winning the fellowship freed her from the need to work and forced her to take seriously her talent as a painter.

In Florence, she floated in a nearly perpetual state of sensory overload. Her breakfast was cappuccino and biscotti amid the continuous hiss of the espresso machine behind the long marble counter of the steamy corner café near her student rooms. Then she wandered out into the city. She quickly realized that the elaborate palaces left her cold. Even the glorious Duomo felt strangely oppressive. The places that stirred her were far more pedestrian: tiny shops lining the narrow stone-paved alleys and arched arcades; the agricultural abundance of the public markets at the Piazza Lorenzo Ghiberti; the black and red capes the Florentine police wore as they sat astride horses so white and muscular they seemed carved from the same dazzling Carrara marble as Michelangelo’s David; the street artists chalking pastel reproductions of Renaissance masterpieces on the pavement of the Via Santa Maria; and the equally brilliant artistry that went into the product displays in every cheese and smoked-meat shop in the city, as if their owners considered artful merchandising as important as the mouthwatering quality of their foods. She spent hours sketching the alleys, rooflines, the window displays, and the milling crowds in the piazzas of the city for oil studies she would later complete in class.

Jeremy was not in Florence studying art; Jeremy was in Florence studying Italian women. It was just her luck that he preferred his Italian women to be English-speaking. Though a year younger than she, he was mature, and cultured, and charming. And tall. And dishy. And unlike anyone she’d ever met in the North End. His accent, which exuded solicitude and breeding, reached her in a way the salaciously insinuating voices of her Italian classmates never could.

Nicola fell hard. Many afternoons, she and Jeremy climbed the hill opposite the city to the terrace of the Piazzale Michelangelo to watch the setting sun gild the stone and stucco walls and red-tiled roofs stretching toward the distant, mauve hills. One evening, Jeremy took her to the Ponte Vecchio to see the statue of Cellini, the famous goldsmith. Every post and railing of the cast-iron fence surrounding the statue was trimmed with padlocks. Lovers, he said, sealed their love by attaching locks inscribed with their names to the fence and then throwing the key into the Arno River, far below. And when he presented her with a similar lock etched with their names, she was surprised. She was even more surprised when she clasped the lock to the fence, turned the key, and flung it into the river.

Jeremy returned to England while she continued studying and painting in Florence, but he wrote ardent letters to her almost daily. No one had ever done that for her before. He flew down every few weekends. Then, as winter approached, he invited her to spend Christmas with his family in Cornwall. Charmed by the biscuit-tin image of Christmas in England—the thatched cottages, the mistletoe, the horse-drawn sled tracks in snowy lanes—and unable to afford the airfare back to Boston anyway, she accepted. She flew to London and took the long train ride down nearly to the tip of Britain’s southwest peninsula. Jeremy met her at the station in St. Ives in a drafty, beat-up Land Rover. He was wearing an oily-smelling, waxed-canvas waterproof jacket, a flat tweed cap, and green rubber boots she learned were called Wellingtons, though she didn’t know why.

Jeremy had described his family’s home as a “country house,” and Nicola had in mind something small, sweet, and ivy-clad. So when they passed through pillared gates, she was completely unprepared for either the scale or the grandeur of the granite mansion to which the long, tree-lined drive led. Compared to the cramped row houses of the North End—or, for that matter, to the houses in Florence—the house seemed to her palatial.

Trevega House, as it was called, lay in a sheltered valley cut by a stream that raced west from the high moor tops before plunging into the sea. The estate included a clustered hamlet of former tenants’ cottages, a farm complex, even a disused water mill. Over the generations, the Rhys-Joneses had created lush landscape gardens and broad lawns around the manor house, as well as a massive walled vegetable garden. Even at Christmas there were fresh herbs, salad greens from glass-topped cold frames, beets, kale, turnips, rutabagas (“Swedes,” the cook called them), and arm-thick leeks.

Inside the house, the rooms were high-ceilinged and spacious. Tall, multi-paned windows flooded the front rooms with light. The interior of the house was saved from feeling austere and intimidating by its furnishings, which were informal, comfortable, and decidedly English—a hodgepodge of patterns, colors, and textures that somehow worked as a whole. There were big, overstuffed sofas and plush chairs, thick drapes, sturdy and well-used antique oak and pine tables and cabinets, worn but beautiful Persian rugs, shelves and shelves of books, and cozy fires in the wide, stone-linteled fireplaces that anchored many rooms.

For the holiday, evergreen boughs, red-berried holly branches, and ropes of ivy were arranged on windowsills and tabletops. The evergreen clusters were studded with tiny bunches of dried baby’s breath, which made them look dusted with snow. In the stone-flagged reception hall, the floor was strewn with lavender sprigs and bay leaves, so that every time you entered or left the house, fragrance rose in your wake. There were candles everywhere.

The coastal landscape beyond the valley, however, was a far cry from the “green and pleasant land” Nicola envisioned when she thought about England. The hills around the Rhys-Jones estate were rugged and wind-whipped. Miles of ancient stone walls crawled across bare, rocky slopes, which rose to massive granite outcrops that looked like the bleached bones of some prehistoric beast sticking up through the skin of the earth. Where the terrain was too rough to be grazed, it was scabbed over with dense, dun-colored blankets of heather and prickly gorse. What trees there were, and they were few, were twisted and salt-stunted, their trunks and limbs bent away from the wind screaming in from the Atlantic. Their bare winter branches put Nicola in mind of the frozen tresses of a maiden standing on a cliff top, face-on in a winter gale.

And wherever Nicola walked there were remnants of Bronze and Iron Age settlements: stone hut circles, rings of standing stones, hilltop burial quoits, and enigmatic granite monoliths, all of them, Jeremy explained, thousands of years old. Some of the buildings in Boston’s North End dated to before the Revolutionary War, but this was antiquity beyond anything in her experience, beyond even Florence—a landscape steeped in mystery and magic.

Then there were the place-names—Pendeen, Zennor, Morvah, Porthmeor, Treen—as rough-edged and raw-sounding as the landscape itself and as alien to her as if they were in some foreign language. And indeed they were. They were Cornish, an ancient Celtic tongue closely related to the original languages of Wales and Brittany. Other villages were named after obscure Celtic saints: St. Just, St. Buryan, St. Sinar, among others.

Someone else might have found this midwinter world impossibly bleak, but Nicola felt strangely at home. It took her a few days of wandering to understand why: The rocky crags and the windswept cliffs, she realized, were simply colder, windier, wetter versions of pictures she’d seen as a child of the sparsely clad hills her father and mother had come from in Sicily.

For all the estate’s ruggedness, though, the grazing meadows nestled within its snaking stone walls were, even at Christmastime, impossibly green. The climate here was gentle, even if the wind wasn’t, and the rainfall plentiful. So, though the soil was shallow (the granite bedrock was only a few inches below the turf ), the coastal plateau was prime grazing land, and Jeremy’s father’s farm manager, Nigel Lawrence, ran a large herd of Black Angus cattle on this land.

Jeremy’s small family—his father, Sir Michael, and his younger sister, Nina—received her warmly. Nicola knew that his mother, Jemma, had died years earlier not far from their London town house when she flipped her antique MG convertible while driving too fast—“As usual,” Jeremy had said with disgust—along the Thames Embankment. Nicola liked Nina immediately. Jeremy’s sister was a talented landscape designer who had helped in the restoration of the long-abandoned Victorian-era gardens at Heligan, outside nearby St. Austell.

And, after a few days (and a few large whiskies), his father, Sir Michael, a large man in his midseventies with an unruly mane of white hair and a sparkle in his clear, blue eyes, told Nicola that she reminded him of his wife. “Strong-minded and high-spirited, she was,” Sir Michael had rumbled, his gentle, jowly face creasing in fond remembrance. “Just like you, my dear, just like you; fine thoroughbred stock, both of you.” Nicola thought about the near poverty in which she’d been raised and simply smiled, not even knowing how to respond.

Jeremy had described his mother as wild and his father as intimidating, but Nicola and Sir Michael got along famously right from the start. He was courtly and kind and made her feel at home. She simply adored him—as the father, perhaps, she’d always dreamed of but had been denied. Nicola and Sir Michael shared a language of aesthetics that Jeremy did not comprehend. Sir Michael’s artistic passions were on display on walls throughout the great house. He was a lifelong collector of the works of the English artists who had painted in the Cornish coastal art colonies of St. Ives, Lamorna, and Newlyn at the beginning of the twentieth century: Stanhope Forbes, Frank Bramley, Laura Knight, Borlase Smart, and Alfred Wallis, among others. But it was Laura Knight’s talent for capturing the clarity, intensity, and purity of the light unique to the far southwest of Cornwall that affected Nicola most—and later influenced her own painting.

On Christmas Day, Jeremy gave her a complete set of Winsor & Newton oil paints and a portable easel. Sir Michael gave her a charcoal sketch of a woman with a small boy in her lap. It was some days later that she learned, from Jeremy, that it was a portrait of his grandmother and his father as a boy, by Stanhope Forbes.

Then, on New Year’s Eve, Jeremy surprised her by asking her to marry him, and Nicola surprised herself by accepting.

Her mother disapproved: Why couldn’t she marry someone from the neighborhood, someone whose family they knew? And these people weren’t even Catholic! But Sir Michael wrote Nicola’s mother a long letter full of admiration and affection for her daughter, and it charmed Angela DeLucca completely.

NICOLA LOOKED DOWN at her gin and tonic and was surprised to find the glass empty. Should she make another? The day had been strangely hot and close. Maybe it was global warming. It wasn’t supposed to be humid in Cornwall, even in August.

She worried she drank too much. It hadn’t always been that way. Only since St. Ives. She went to the tall window overlooking the harbor and saw below her the man from the cliffs. He was walking along the path on the opposite side of the river, past the youth hostel and the Harbour Light, toward the center of the village. His stride was easy, loose-limbed. She wondered who he was.

AT THE BEGINNING, everything seemed perfect. The wedding was in late May, just after Nicola’s fellowship ended. The ceremony was performed at the eleventh-century church in Zennor, the hamlet closest to the Rhys-Jones estate. The Anglican rector graciously allowed Nicola’s brother James, who’d recently been ordained a Catholic priest, to participate in the ceremony. Sir Michael had flown both her brother and her mother “over the pond” for the event. The stark stone sanctuary had been bedecked with white roses and chrysanthemums. Her mother had cried.

After a damp honeymoon of island-hopping in Scotland’s Outer Hebrides, she and Jeremy moved into Trevega House. It wasn’t her husband’s first choice. Jeremy had taken an economics degree at Cambridge and planned to work at the London headquarters of his father’s financial-management firm, tending to the arcane investment problems of his father’s many wealthy clients by day and enjoying the city’s social scene by night. But Sir Michael had other ideas. He sent Jeremy off to apprentice at the firm’s Penzance office and gave them the country house in which to live. Sir Michael tended to stay in London, close to the House of Lords and his club.

Jeremy was furious with this arrangement, but Nicola was thrilled. She loved the rambling old house, the gardens, the peaceful evenings by the fire, the long walks along the coast, and the horseback rides deep into the prehistoric granite hills. And then there was Sir Michael’s wedding present to her: a little painting studio of her own overlooking the harbor in nearby St. Ives, where the light was diamond bright and the aquamarine water in the little port looked positively Mediterranean. The truth, of course—the white sand beach notwithstanding—was that the water sweeping in from the Atlantic with each tide was so cold, even in midsummer, that only children (whose nerve endings seemed yet to have developed) could tolerate it for more than a few minutes.

Children. They’d had none, though not for want of trying. Nicola’s secret was that her own sexuality was complicated and fraught—she could be frisky and flirtatious one moment, remote and disengaged the next. It troubled her, but she kept it to herself, and the fact was that her husband was too involved in his own needs to even notice the shifts. Then, a few years into the marriage, years in which her husband increasingly lurched from solicitous to abusive, Jeremy decided it was time they started a family. After that, sex became his obsession. And when months passed with no pregnancy, he turned brutally primal, hammering away at her like a machine, as if his sheer determination were all it would take to plant new life. The harder he pounded her, though, the colder and more distant Nicola became. She could feel her consciousness detach itself from her body and rise above the bed. That wasn’t her down there; it was someone else, a ghost—a ghost she recognized, one who had done this before, who had this done to her before. She floated high above and away from it all, to safety.

And as she had once before, she stopped eating, as if to purify herself, as if the pain of hunger could expunge whatever it was that she had done, whatever sin she had committed, to bring this abuse upon herself. When Jeremy began to take ever-longer business trips to London, she found herself relieved. She suspected that he had a lover in the city, and she realized she didn’t care. It should have felt like loss, but instead it felt like relief.

NICOLA’S ONLY CONFIDANTE in those days was Annabelle Lawrence, the farm manager’s wife. A leggy, tomboyish blonde, Annabelle was several years younger than Nicola, but she and Nigel already had a child, Jesse, who, at two, seemed to be permanently and happily grafted to Annabelle’s left hip. Annabelle was one of those relentlessly upbeat, energetic women who take everything easily in stride. Faced with some difficulty, whether with the cattle or with her life, her perennial comment was “Oh well, it’s a temporary problem,” as if the only thing worth giving much serious thought to was death itself.

Annabelle liked Nicola and was worried about her. In recent months, Nicola had lost weight and seemed to have gone pale, as if the inner warmth of her Mediterranean skin, a radiance Annabelle so envied, had turned wintry. One dreary autumn morning at about eleven, when she noticed Nicola hadn’t driven to her studio in St. Ives, Annabelle paid a visit with a plate of freshly baked currant scones. She let herself in through the back door, called out, and found Nicola sitting alone at the scrubbed-pine trestle table in Trevega House’s cavernous kitchen, staring out a window toward the ocean as a cold mist crept in from the Atlantic.

“Foul day is what it is out there,” Annabelle announced gaily as she stripped off her wet jacket and set Jesse down in his carrier chair. “What say we girls have tea and get fat on these scones?”

Nicola looked up and gave her a wan smile.

“You all right, then, luv? You’re looking right peaked lately.”

“I’m fine, Annabelle, really; just tired.”

“You’re spending too much time in that studio of yours, that’s what it is. Wearin’ yourself right out getting ready for that exhibition.”

Nicola had been working hard preparing canvases for an opening at the Great Atlantic Gallery in nearby St. Just, but that wasn’t it.

“I’ll just put the kettle on,” Nicola said, rising and heading for the counter where it sat.

She never made it. She had only gone a few steps before the room began to swim around her. She shot an arm out for support, found nothing, and collapsed. She never felt the floor when it rose to meet her; she had blacked out.

“Mother of God!” Annabelle cried. Having had some training as a nurse before she’d married Nigel, Annabelle checked Nicola’s breathing and pulse, then raced to the sitting room, grabbed pillows from the couch in front of the big granite fireplace, and returned, using one to support Nicola’s head and the rest to prop her legs above her heart. It was when she unzipped Nicola’s hooded sweatshirt to help her breathe that Annabelle saw the bruises on her neck and collarbone. Someone had throttled her. There was only one likely candidate. Instinctively, Annabelle pulled the zipper up, then changed her mind and exposed the welts again. A fury built inside her. She was holding a cool, damp cloth over her friend’s forehead when Nicola came to.

“Well, that was stupid, wasn’t it?” Nicola said, blinking and struggling to sit up.

“No, sweetie,” Annabelle whispered, pulling Nicola close. “Stupid is letting him do this to you and not telling anyone.”

It had taken months, Annabelle’s persistence, and several visits to a social services adviser in Penzance for Nicola to leave her husband. When she did, in the middle of a freakishly cold March, she did it quietly one day when he was away. She took only her car, her clothes, and her art supplies.

She drove north along the coast, following narrow, rural lanes. From time to time, like someone testing the water temperature with a toe, she’d dip down into a tiny fishing village tucked in a cleft in the cliffs to see how she liked it. She was intuitively unwilling to stray far from the sea that gave her so much pleasure and that informed so much of her art. On the third day of her meandering journey, she turned down a steep hill and found herself at the harbor in Boscastle at low tide. Something about it was right: the way the colorful local boats leaned this way and that on the mudflats, waiting for the tide to turn; the pretty river twisting through the village; the protective folds of the valley. The trees had just begun to break leaf and the slopes were furred in pastel green. Daffodils and lemon-yellow primroses bloomed along the river, as if their color alone could bring warmth. Tucked beneath the cliff on the south side of the little harbor was a small, honest, stone building with a WELL-APPOINTED COTTAGE TO LET sign in the window. She punched the number into her cell phone and discovered there was no signal there at the bottom of the valley, so she phoned from a public phone in the Wellington Hotel. She agreed to rent the place for a week. A few days later, she extended her stay another week. Eventually, she came to an understanding with the owner, a born-again Christian who owned a gift shop in the lower village, for a year-to-year lease. What the owner lost in high-season rates was offset by the cottage’s no longer being empty during the winter and the fact that she no longer had to clean the place every week.

About a month later, Nicola was working in her upstairs studio when she heard a knock at the door. She had no friends at that point and couldn’t imagine who it might be. When she got downstairs and opened the door, she found Sir Michael there, leaning on his cane in the rain, with a large parcel under his arm.

“Good afternoon, my dear,” he said, his great head tilting downward, almost shyly. “Do you suppose I might come in out of the elements?”

Nicola felt a surge of fear. “Jeremy?”

“I come alone, Nicola. I should like a word with you, if you’ll permit me.”

Nicola stepped back from the door and the big man entered. He set down the parcel, leaning it against the wall with great care, straightened, and shrugged off his wet coat. Finally, he turned to her and smiled, his sagging, bloodhound face transformed with warmth.

“Hello, dear Nicola,” he said softly. “I have missed you.”

Tears slipped down Nicola’s cheeks and Sir Michael took her into his arms.

“Oh, Dad,” she said into his shoulder. “I’m so sorry. It’s just that I couldn’t . . .”

“I know, dear one. You couldn’t tell me. But I found out. Nigel told me, in the end. He didn’t want to, of course; managing the farm is his life, and he didn’t want to jeopardize that. Annabelle made him. He went after her, you know.”

“Nigel did?” Nicola was confused.

“No, dear girl. Jeremy. Made a play for her, you see. Well, attacked her, actually. First you, then the staff. Disgusting. My own son.”

Sir Michael looked around the tiny sitting room and dropped into a chair by the coal fire.

“I don’t suppose you have a whisky?”

Nicola shook herself out of her shock. “Um, no. Brandy? I have a nice cognac . . .”

“Splendid.” He inched the chair closer to the fire.

When she returned, Nicola sat on the floor and wrapped her arms around her father-in-law’s knees.

“How did you find me?”

The old man shrugged. “Not so difficult, really, for a man in my position. Put in a word at the Yard. They traced your auto, you see.”

“But why?”

Sir Michael looked at her, placed a wrinkled, age-spotted hand upon her shoulder, and chuckled. It was more a rumble. It came from somewhere deep within him, somewhere rich and sonorous. It was a sound that wrapped around her like a goose-down duvet.

“Thoroughbred stock, my dear; thoroughbred stock. Knew it from the moment you walked through the door. Told him that Christmas someone like you came along once in a lifetime and it was time he settled down. But I had no way of knowing my only son was a brute, I promise you. How could I? What do we ever really know about our children, except what they allow us to know? Feel like a fool, and worse. Lost someone very dear to me when you left. Love my daughter, of course, but you . . . well, you were—are—something else entirely.”

Nicola saw the watery shimmer in Sir Michael’s eyes and hugged his knees closer.

“I can’t come back, Dad. I won’t.”

“I know that, my dear, and have no intention of asking you to.”

“Then why are you here? Why did you track me down?”

“My son, I am sorry to say, is not a gentleman. But I am. It is my responsibility—and my great joy—to ensure you are provided for.”

“I don’t want anything from—”

“Hush, Nicola. I know you don’t. Don’t you see that’s partly why I am here? You conducted yourself throughout this horror like a perfect lady. In some respects, I rather wish you hadn’t; I would have understood what was happening sooner. I’ve come to tell you that I have arranged for the divorce and made Jeremy sign the papers. That is what you desire, is it not?”

Nicola nodded.

“Good. That’s sorted, then. In addition, I aim to make sure you experience no further hardship. You’ve had quite enough.”

“But—”

He put up a hand. “There will be a small stipend—nothing embarrassing, I assure you—but you will not be uncomfortable. It will be deposited to an account in your name every month. I have also kept your studio in St. Ives, and am leasing it out. Of course, should you ever wish to have it again . . .”

“Dad, you know how I love St. Ives and that studio—oh, the light! But so long as Jeremy is at Trevega House, I couldn’t possibly . . .”

“I know. I haven’t yet decided what to do about him. But in the meantime, I’m doing quite well on the studio rental, if I do say so myself!” His old eyes sparkled like those of a thief with a diamond. He took another sip of the brandy. “Oh, and there is one more thing.”

He hoisted himself from his chair, groaning from the effort, and moved slowly toward the door, where the parcel leaned against the wall.

“Nicola, I want you to have this. I know you love it, and it would please me to no end to know it was with you. Besides, should you ever find yourself in difficulties, Christie’s will, I’m sure, be happy to auction it at some princely sum.”

He lifted the parcel, which was wrapped carefully in heavy brown paper, and set it before her. Nicola unwrapped it slowly, but thought she knew what it was. It was the painting she admired most in Sir Michael’s collection: Laura Knight’s exquisite Ella, Nude in Chair. When she lifted it from its wrapping she stared at her father-in-law, shaking her head.

“No. I couldn’t—”

“I’m afraid you must, my dear; it’s already written into my will. It was, actually, long before any of this trouble began. Do you know the story behind it?”

Laura Knight and her husband, Harold, Nicola knew, had been members of what became known as the Lamorna school, a group of painters who settled in the leafy Lamorna Valley, on the coast a few miles west of Penzance, in the years before World War I. Their painter friends included S. J. “Lamorna” Birch and his family, and Charles and Ella Naper. Most of these artists, drawn by the natural setting and the scintillating light, painted coastal landscapes and scenes of fishermen at sea or bathers along the shore. But Laura Knight also produced a number of studio paintings, including this nude of her best friend, Ella Naper, whom she’d posed in a gilded armchair draped with a black and red silk robe. The painting had a slightly unfinished look; though the figure in the chair was perfect, and Ella’s skin was luminous, much of the background was filled in roughly, with broad brushstrokes. Nicola loved its freedom.

“Turns out,” Sir Michael began, “Laura’s husband, Harold, never loved her. Oh no. He was head over heels for Ella, his friend Charlie Naper’s wife. Times being what they were, of course, friendship was as far as it got. Always felt sorry for Laura, though. Knew them all, you see; Mother was part of their circle. Told me she thought the complexity of the relationship spurred Laura’s art. The nude’s splendid; she painted it in one sitting, is what Mother told me. Can you imagine? Pleasure to give it to someone with your talent.” He glanced again at the painting. “Maybe she’ll be your muse—eh, my girl?”

NICOLA ROSE FROM the chaise and descended to her kitchen. Outside, the sun had set, and the harbor was in shadow. She fed Randi, refilled his water bowl, and made herself another gin and tonic. Then she went into her sitting room, lay down on the sofa, sipped her drink, and stared at the painting of Ella Naper that now hung above the rough granite mantel. She thought of Ella as her spiritual companion, though one nearly a century removed—a free spirit, naked and confident in her world. It was who she wanted to be. It was, in fact, who she’d become in the nearly four years she’d lived in Boscastle.

Moments later, she was asleep. After a while, Randi came in from the kitchen, nuzzled his mistress’s hand, got no response, and curled up in his usual place, on the rug in front of the hearth.

. . . flash floods arise when the ground becomes saturated with water so quickly that it cannot be absorbed. This leads to “run-off.” Run-off is part of the hydrologic cycle connecting precipitation and channel flow. It occurs when the infiltration capacity of the soil surface is exceeded, and the subsurface can no longer absorb moisture at the rate at which it is supplied.

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three

“Guess what, Drew?!”

Andrew had just opened the door of his cottage to a soft August Sunday morning. Lee was in her usual place. She had on her new wellies.

“You’re going to finish the tour today and take me to see the sacred wells and the witches?”

“No, silly; it’s nearly time to go to church! You’d better hurry up.”

“Well, thank you for that reminder, but I’m afraid I have other plans. I’m going walking this morning, since somebody I know cut short yesterday’s outing. . . .”

Lee squinted at him from the wall. “You sure you’re not one of those Methodists?”

“Positive.”

“Well, suit yourself, then. I’m off.”

And she was. She pivoted on the stone at the top of the wall, legs outstretched, hopped off the other side, and dashed across the meadow toward home.

Lee Trelissick made Andrew’s heart ache, the way it does when you long for something you know you will never have. Lee was exactly the kind of child he’d dreamed of having with Katerina—and was glad they hadn’t. Andrew was a professor of architecture at the University of Pennsylvania when he and Katerina Vogel met, at an awards dinner for the school’s most promising graduate students. She’d worked in real estate but had discovered that her strength was in finance, not selling property. When she completed her MBA at the top of her class, Mellon Bank snapped her up and put her on their executive fast track.

Katerina—“Kat” to her friends; “the Ice Queen” to those jealous of her poise and style—was older than her fellow students and far more sophisticated. When Andrew first saw her, it seemed to him as if she’d been created by a Cubist. She was all sharp angles and hard edges. Even her shiny, jet-black hair was asymmetrically cut. Almost painfully thin and taller than average, Kat stood apart from her classmates and, Andrew noticed, spent most of her time talking with the professors. That evening, she was wearing a simple sleeveless sheath dress in smoke-gray silk charmeuse. It fell to her calves and was kept from simply pooling on the floor by two thin spaghetti straps that emphasized her broad shoulders. When she turned away, he realized that the back plunged in soft, draped folds almost to her waist. The only color she wore was a small red clutch purse that matched perfectly the scarlet of her lipstick. She was the kind of woman who, had she smoked, would look perfectly normal holding her cigarette in a long ebony holder. She stood as if she was waiting for someone with a lighter. It put him in mind of old black-and-white movies. When she noticed him in the crowd, she simply lifted an eyebrow. He was mesmerized.

When they married a year later, she was far too busy with her career to consider children. That made perfect sense to him at the time; though he was a full ten years older than she, Katerina, at thirty, had plenty of time left on her biological clock. But he also sensed that she was ambivalent about children, as if she feared she wasn’t mother material. This surprised him because whenever they socialized with his colleagues, she was imaginative and playful with their children. It made him happy and proud. But later she’d say, “I love to be with them, and then I love to leave them with their parents.” When she passed her thirty-fifth birthday, Andrew began to resign himself to childlessness.

Then she left him. Now, he’d learned, she was pregnant.

It was hard to know which had been more of a surprise. Or more painful.

HE FINISHED HIS tea, laced on his boots, grabbed his day pack, and headed north along a single-track lane above the farm. After a half mile or so, he turned left onto the path that led down through Minster Wood to the footbridge over the Valency where Lee had left him at the day before. He was headed for St. Juliot’s, an isolated parish church the young architect Thomas Hardy had restored before he became a novelist and poet.

ANDREW HADN’T SEEN the end coming. Yes, Kat had been distant for some weeks, but he put that down to mourning: Her mother, a lifelong smoker, had died of lung cancer three months earlier. Katerina had grown quiet, distracted, and cold—not that she’d ever been especially passionate, come to that. When she announced she was leaving, one Saturday just before the end of the spring term, he had been so stunned, so utterly blind-sided, he’d simply stared at her. He felt poleaxed.

“When?” he’d finally said.

“Today. Now. I’ve already packed my car. My lawyer will contact you. Don’t worry; I don’t want anything that’s yours.”

But Andrew was still back at the leaving.

“Why?”

She looked at him with a mixture of pity and disgust. “You really don’t have a clue, do you?”

His forehead furrowed, as if he was puzzling out a design problem.

“I’m sorry; no, I don’t.” And he didn’t.

“I can’t believe I have to spell this out for you.”

He stared at her, and what went through his head was that he thought being her husband warranted at least an explanation. Then she unloaded.

“Look, I want to spend my life with a man who wants to make a mark on the world. You call yourself an architect. But what do you actually do? You sit in your tidy, minimalist university studio and develop abstract notions about shape and form and space. You lecture to your doting students. You write papers for scholarly journals. I used to think it was great to be ‘Mrs. Professor Stratton,’ until I realized how dull your life is. Our life is. Tell me something, Mr. Architect: Where are your clients? Where are your buildings? Where are your muddy construction sites? Not to mention that you could be making ten times as much as they pay you at that damned university.”

“I guess I’m just not that interested in money,” he’d said. “And I don’t see what this has to do with money, anyway.”

“Everything has to do with money, but that’s not even the point. The point is, you have no passion; it’s like you have ice in your veins instead of blood.”

“That’s not true; I love working with my students—”

“And here’s the saddest thing.” She was on a roll now. “You don’t even know this is a lousy way to live! You don’t even know you’re only half alive. You know what being half alive means? That you’re also half dead! And I’m dying being here with you. That’s why I’m leaving!”

Andrew had heard some of this before, but never delivered with such fury. He didn’t understand how, suddenly, his profession had become a reason for leaving. He didn’t understand how being good at what he did was now a fault. He didn’t understand how the Ice Queen could tell him he was passionless. He listened stoically, as he sometimes did at faculty meetings when one of his more “artistic” colleagues went on a rant. He breathed slowly to calm himself in the face of Kat’s verbal flame throwing.

“Have you arranged someplace to stay?” he asked when Katerina finally flared out.

She stared at him in disbelief, then abruptly stood.

“I am so out of here,” she said.

And then she was.

Andrew and Kat lived in an early-nineteenth-century brick row house—three windows across, three stories high—on Delancey Street. Andrew had spent years renovating the old house, turning its stacked warren of dark, cramped rooms into a flowing, light-filled, contemporary space. An inventive cook, he’d built himself a sleek commercial-grade kitchen on the ground floor—an oasis of stainless steel and marble that opened to a dining room overlooking an urban garden. A blackened steel staircase with maple treads rose to the second-floor living room and library; a second stair climbed to the master bedroom, bath, and guest room on the top floor. Skylights opened the master bedroom to the stars. To warm up what would otherwise have been a visually cold interior, he had collected a number of primitive pine antiques, most from the Pennsylvania Dutch country west of the city: a stripped pine dining table; a large, hand-painted cabinet originally made for storing bread dough; a wormwood side table to stand by his favorite reading chair; a thick and worn cobbler’s workbench, cut down to serve as a coffee table.

An hour after Katerina left—an hour spent staring blankly out at the garden and replaying the scene on a continuous loop in his head—Andrew got up from the dining table at which he’d been sitting since her departure. He left the house and walked across Rittenhouse Square, picked up a couple of bottles of Australian Shiraz at the state liquor store, then went on to the Italian delicatessen on South Nineteenth Street, where he’d shopped for years. He felt scorched. Blistered. Charred. Part of him wondered why no one on the street noticed and called an ambulance.

“Buongiorno, Professore!” Mario, the deli owner, roared above the heads of the shoppers crowding the store. “The usual?”

Andrew nodded. The usual was a selection of cured meats—dry salami, prosciutto, thinly sliced bresaola—and a plastic container each of oil-cured black olives with thyme and green picholine olives in brine. These latter were from the south of France, and Mario always gave him a hard time about his preference for them over the fat Sicilian green olives. Andrew’s response was always “If you don’t want me to buy them, why do you sell them?” Mario’s response was always a shrug and a smile. In fact, he carried them especially for “il Professore.”

Andrew had always been fond of Mario; they’d known each other now for almost a decade, ever since Andrew started coming into the store. It had taken a couple of years before he realized the source of the fondness: He wanted to be Mario. He longed to come from a big Italian family. A noisy family with a multitude of brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles. A family that yelled a lot. And laughed a lot. And talked and fought and loved. A family whose members were inseparable, no matter who wasn’t talking to whom that week. A family, in short, awash in emotion.

Instead, he’d grown up as the third member of a pathologically peaceful triad: a father who embraced his English heritage by wearing tweed and being a man of few words (and those mostly platitudes), and a mother who knew her husband could have married someone more beautiful, more vivacious, more sophisticated, but didn’t. The war threw people together and made them think they’d better grab whomever they could, as soon as they could. She’d become pregnant within a month of meeting Andrew’s father and, times being what they were, Graham Stratton and Sheila O’Leary married immediately. The child, a daughter, died hours after being born. It was quite a few years before Andrew came along, and, looking back, it seemed to him his parents had run out of child-rearing energy by then. He’d been left pretty much to his own devices as he’d grown up.

As he was ringing up Andrew’s order, Mario said, “So, some nice antipasti, olives, wine . . . a party tonight, eh, my friend?”

Andrew looked blankly at his old friend and suddenly Mario knew something was wrong.

“Ah, no; trouble with a woman, I think.” He tapped a pudgy forefinger on the side of his nose and nodded, the universal Italian gesture of confidentiality and understanding.

Andrew gave him a thin smile.

On the walk back across the square, he paused at the play area. The day was warm and fragrant from the flowers in the formal plantings at the park’s four corners. All around him, children of privilege dashed about in absurdly expensive spring outfits. Their sleek young mothers, in equally stylish clothes, lounged on the dark-green benches lining the walkway, skirts hiked up a few inches so their long, lithe legs could catch the sun.

At the corner, while he waited for the light, a hand touched his elbow and a silky voice purred, “Hey, handsome.”

The voice belonged to a rather Rubenesque beauty called Phyllis Lieberman, a colleague in the art and architecture school who lived a few blocks away. Single, roughly the same age as he, Phyllis never missed an opportunity to flirt with him. Andrew liked her: liked her irreverent take on modern art, about which she was an expert; liked her cavalier attitude toward the university bureaucracy; liked the easy rapport she had with her students—“her children,” as she called them. He also liked her flirting. Much as he loved her, Katerina didn’t have a seductive bone in her entire elegantly trim body. Phyllis was a walking embodiment of eroticism, squeezed into a small but lush package.

The light changed, but he didn’t cross. He thought briefly of giving Phyllis a jaunty, deflecting response. Instead, he turned toward his friend and said, “Kat’s left me.”

The woman hesitated a moment, then slid her arms around him and gave him a warm, full-body hug. Then she stood back, shook her mane of henna-tinted hair, flashed him a dazzling smile, and said, “Well now, this is my lucky day!”

Andrew laughed in spite of himself, and they crossed the street.

Phyllis slipped her arm in his and said, “How about we two go for a walk?”

“Sure,” Andrew replied, but without much enthusiasm.

She steered him east toward the river. They walked slowly, Phyllis, in her customary three-inch heels, gracefully picking her way along the uneven brick sidewalk. They’d reached Washington Square and were taking a turn around Independence Hall when she said, “You might as well hear this from me, ducks: not many people are going to be surprised by your news.” She hugged his arm.

“No, apparently I haven’t been a particularly satisfactory husband. That’s what Katerina says, anyway.”

“That’s bullshit, for starters. For Christ’s sake, Stratton, you’re a first class gent; and anyway, the affair’s been going on for months. She hasn’t exactly been discreet about it.”

Andrew stopped dead in the middle of the street and stared at her.

“Affair?”

Phyllis blanched and clapped a hand over her mouth.

“Oh my God! You don’t know, do you?” She sounded like someone being strangled.

In a moment, she recovered and tugged him to a bench. There were tourists everywhere.

“Look, it’s a guy she met at the climbing gym,” she whispered, “a fat-cat lawyer. That’s what I hear, anyway. Somebody saw them playing kissy-face outside the art museum a few weeks ago.”

She took one of his hands in both of hers. “Oh, ducks, I’m so sorry. . . .”

He looked around the square. He’d always loved the old colonial part of Philadelphia—the brick, the stone, the history. But none of it gave him comfort on this day.

Phyllis leaned across the bench and kissed him on the cheek, then pulled him to his feet. “Come on, you; I have an idea. I see you’ve got goodies, most notably wine, in that shopping bag. We’re going to my place.”

Andrew didn’t resist. Like an automaton, he followed the rhythmic click of her heels on the bricks. He glanced behind him and was surprised he wasn’t trailing blood.

Phyllis Lieberman’s elegant apartment on Spruce Street had the same sensual warmth as the woman herself. The walls in the foyer and the living room were painted the color of antique gold leaf. The plush upholstered couch and chairs were covered in thick, ivory linen and scattered with ornate pillows in black, chocolate, and leopard-skin prints. Gauzy white linen drapes pooled on the polished pine floors like trains on bridal gowns. A fan of the American Impressionists, she had a limpid Childe Hassam seascape in a thick gold frame above the black marble Victorian mantel opposite the couch. He couldn’t imagine how she’d afforded it. The only primary color in the place was a huge vase of scarlet-tipped lilies on a glass-topped coffee table, so thick with fragrance you almost felt drugged. There was a zebra-skin rug beneath the coffee table.

She led him into an all-white kitchen.

“Sit,” Phyllis commanded, gesturing to a stool beneath a marble counter. She laid out the smoked meats, added a sliced baguette and some cheese, then pulled the cork on the first bottle of Shiraz. She filled two big balloon glasses almost to the lip, and then leaned across the counter, deliberately displaying the very generous cleavage revealed by her scoop-necked, black silk T-shirt. “Here is how we are going to spend the afternoon, mister. I am going to feed you with your own food and ply you with your own wine and you will become happy. There will be no arguing about this. You will remember this day as one filled with love, not loss.” She flashed him an utterly lascivious smile. Andrew just shook his head in disbelief and accepted the first of what were to be many glasses of wine. They clinked glasses.

“L’chaim!” Phyllis said.

“What’s that mean?”

“To life, you idiot; yours has just begun again.”

But why did it feel like it had just ended?

ANDREW CLIMBED HIGH up the west slope of the Valency valley. A side stream cut across the footpath he’d been following as it raced downhill. He picked his way across stepping-stones and then stopped to take in the view. Over the eons, the almost infinitesimal friction of water slipping over stone had cut a winding channel deep into the surrounding plateau. At the outer edge of the sharpest curves, he could see where seasonal floods had chewed away at the friable slate bedrock, creating bluffs. Away to the east, the hills were patterned with neat, green fields. Here and there a cluster of stone farm buildings laid claim to the land. A distant single-lane macadam road with occasional wider passing places—looking a bit like an anaconda that had swallowed several pigs—wound down the opposite side of the valley, plunged right through the shallow river at the bottom, and slithered up the other side. And for as far as he could see, the fields were defined by ancient stone walls, some ramrod straight, others sinuous. It was as if the landscape had been stitched, the walls the warp and weft knitting the disparate parts into a coherent whole. There wasn’t a single square foot of the world before him, he realized, that hadn’t been shaped by the hand of man. But here, unlike so much of the landscape back home, that hand had brought beauty, not blight, to the land.

He was thinking that Phyllis would like this world, with its sensuous hills and valleys. When he’d let himself out of her apartment late that evening, months ago, she was fast asleep on the couch. There had been kissing. There had been caressing. There had been sweet words of caring and solace. But while Andrew had a prodigious ability to absorb alcohol without getting drunk, Phyllis did not; she’d passed out. He’d put a pillow under her head, covered her with a cashmere throw, and gone home. He had been sober enough to know he had no business having sex with anyone that day—maybe ever—especially a colleague from the university. He felt radioactive. He felt that in the dark, he would blink on and off—LOUSY HUSBAND—like a neon sign in the window of some disreputable corner bar.

Andrew had had no idea, not the faintest inkling, how to respond to Katerina’s attack the day she left. He should have said something, he thought—and yet it was clear she really wasn’t interested in a response. It was as if she was that famous plane in World War II, the Enola Gay: Drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and fly home. Don’t look back at the destruction.

Even if she had stayed, though, he had to admit he wouldn’t have known what to say. In his stiff-upper-lip New England Presbyterian family, feelings were neither expressed nor discussed—not in his presence, anyway. He couldn’t remember a single display of emotion—either affection or anger—between his parents. He’d read enough as an adult to know that feeling pain was natural and that expressing emotion was only human, and yet he’d had no practice in either.

If he hurt himself as a child, his father would check him for damage, brush him off, pat his shoulder, and shoo him away with a hearty “You’re fine, lad; off you go.” His mother’s perennial response to any of his personal tragedies was “Don’t worry; it’ll be better before you’re married” or, if her Irish Catholic roots were in the ascendant that day and overcame her Presbyterian reserve, “Offer it up, son”—as in, offer up the pain to God and get on with it.

So that’s what he did after Kat left: He offered it up and got on with things.

Except that things didn’t go well. It wasn’t just that he felt shell-shocked by the breakup; that would have been handicap enough. But his work seemed to have hit a brick wall as well. He had been researching what he believed would be an important contribution to his field: a book he was calling “The Anatomy of Livable Places.” One summer when he was in grad school, he’d hitchhiked across Europe and been captivated by the way hill towns in Italy or Spain, or fishing communities in Greece, or villages in rural England, seemed to possess a kind of wholeness, a certain harmony of form and material, the result of which was that they made you feel “at home,” even if you didn’t live there. These places settled into him, into his bones, and years later, while he was wrestling with the problem of the increasing soullessness of American communities, the comforting livability of those places came back to him. And an idea grew.

Andrew was convinced that if you could deconstruct that feeling of livability, of “home-ness,” if you could identify its component parts and understand how they worked together, you could design new communities with the same comforting character. The older he got and the more he observed the built environment around him, the more convinced he became. The subject had become his passion. He’d already written and published several papers on it.

There were certain components of livability he thought were obvious. Most places that felt livable seldom had a building more than three or four stories high, so the scale wasn’t dehumanizing the way it was in many American cities, where builders seemed to think bigger and higher was synonymous with better. Also, the buildings in livable communities tended to be clustered together companionably, with breathing space provided by small squares or plazas. They also tended to have what Andrew called “public living rooms”—coffee shops, outdoor cafés, or pubs, for example, where people gathered to chat or simply watch the world go by. He noticed that livable places had a sort of structural honesty, too. Typically, they were constructed of local materials—stucco-coated stone in Spain or Italy; granite, limestone, local brick, or slate in England; native wood in Scandinavia or New England. As a result, such places looked as if they had grown organically from the ground, rather than having been imposed upon it.

It was characteristics such as these, Andrew believed, that created that evanescent sense of rightness, of feeling at home, of welcome, of belonging. And it was the absence of these same characteristics that made many American neighborhoods, subdivisions, and entire communities so cold and uninviting. “Placeless” was the word he used.

But his editor at the University of Pennsylvania Press didn’t get it. “If you’re trying to define what ‘home’ means, why are you looking in Europe, for God’s sake? You’re an American!” To Andrew, the answer was personal and visceral: He’d never felt at home in America. Growing up in the suburbs of Boston, he’d known few of his family’s neighbors. And to do anything—shop, go out to eat, see a movie—you had to get into a car. There weren’t even sidewalks in some of the subdivisions around him, as if, in the real-estate developers’ theory of evolution, they’d become as vestigial as the tails we lost when we evolved away from monkeys. The result, for Andrew at least, was a profound sense of alienation, a sense of not belonging to the place he was from.

But there was another problem with his project, too: His department chairman didn’t think the subject of his research was sufficiently “professional”—which meant it flirted with the real concerns of everyday people. In academia, that was the kiss of death. The more he argued with his editor and his chairman, the more he felt like he was banging his head against a wall. His gut told him he was onto something, but Andrew had very little experience in trusting his gut.

Still, he had his champions, and steadfast, candid Phyllis was one of them. When Andrew hit bottom, both emotionally and intellectually, on the first anniversary of Katerina’s departure, it was she who suggested he get away, do something different.

“Go someplace where the landscape speaks to you, and just become a part of it, if only for a few weeks. Don’t think; just find out how the place feels. Figure out why later.”

The idea both intrigued and unsettled him. It had always been his nature to study the world from a distance. It was easier, and safer, to be an observer than a participant. Being a superb observer was what had made him an expert in his branch of architectural theory in the first place: He studied, he took notes, he analyzed, and then he presented theories. It was a formula that had led him to prominence in his field.

A few weeks later, after the summer break had begun, he’d been taking a walk through the colonial part of Philadelphia. Not far from Independence Hall, two men were restoring the pavement of a plaza. The new pavement was being made with large rectangular blocks of blue-gray granite—Belgian blocks, he knew they were called. Roughly four inches wide, ten inches long, and six inches deep, they had originally been ships’ ballast during the age of sail. The surplus stones had been used as street pavers back then, but in the 1950s they’d been resurfaced with asphalt. Now the whole plaza was being torn up again and the men were restoring the original stone pavers. The two men had laid down a bed of gravel and leveled sand and now were setting the granite blocks in a handsome herringbone pattern.

Andrew sat on a bench—the same bench, he later realized, he’d sat on with Phyllis the day his wife had left—and watched the men work. It was a muggy afternoon, and both workers were stripped to the waist, their tanned backs glistening with sweat. One man, wearing rubber knee pads, laid a zigzag course of blocks, each individual stone rectangle separated from the next by a gap of perhaps a quarter inch. He gave each a tap with a rubber mallet to set the stone, and then, a few moments later, his colleague—younger, an apprentice, perhaps—followed behind with a broom, sweeping a mix of fine sand and dry mortar into the gaps to stabilize the blocks. The stonelayer’s hands were raw from working with the granite, and it was obvious the stones themselves were heavy. Still, each man worked with consummate care. Every so often, the man on his knees would pause, lean back on his haunches, look at the pattern developing, and smile. The result of their work—nothing more than stone and sand—was breathtaking in its artistry and simplicity.

So it was that Andrew Stratton decided it was time he got his hands dirty. And in that strange way events sometimes transpire, the opportunity presented itself. As part of his research, Andrew had contacted several organizations in Europe devoted to historic preservation and sustainable building techniques, and they regularly e-mailed him their electronic news letters. The day after he’d sat watching the workmen setting the stone pavers, he heard from the Southwest Council for Sustainable Building, in England. Among other bits of news, he noticed that a course on mortarless stone-wall building was being offered by the Guild of Cornish Hedgers, in partnership with the National Trust, a land-protection organization. The weeklong course would be held in August in Boscastle, on Cornwall’s wild Atlantic coast. Andrew looked at a map and discovered Boscastle was not far from the town from which his father never tired of telling him his ancestors had come: Stratton, in North Cornwall.

Normally, Andrew was not a superstitious man; he knew too much about probabilities and statistics for that. But he took the course announcement as a kind of sign: a chance to do something tangible and physical, to create something real and lasting from local materials, and in a place where he had ancient connections. On impulse—in itself a breakthrough for him—he e-mailed back to register for the course. A few hours of Internet searching later, he’d also found Shepherd’s Cottage, and e-mailed the owners. Anne Trelissick had written back that the cottage normally would have been booked at least a year in advance, but they’d had a cancellation and he was in luck. He reserved the eighteenth-century stone cottage for two weeks.

As Philadelphia slouched into the dog days of August, he escaped, flying first to London’s Gatwick Airport, then to Newquay, in Cornwall. There, he hired a taxi for the ride down the coast to Boscastle, arriving on a clear, warm afternoon just after a brief sun shower that left the air freshly laundered and the narrow, wet streets shimmering. He was immediately entranced. He didn’t believe in ancestral memory or past lives, but he could not deny that he felt as if he’d just come home.

AT THE TOP of the Valency valley, Andrew climbed over a stile in a stone wall, walked through the cemetery of St. Juliot’s church, with its lichen-encrusted headstones leaning this way and that like old men, and ducked under its fifteenth-century porch. He’d been looking forward to this moment; he wanted to see what Hardy had done during the restoration of the church in the late 1800s. But when he pushed open the church’s heavy oak door, he found a small clutch of parishioners, Lee and Anne included. A female priest—the one Lee had been telling him about, he guessed—stood at a raised pulpit.

He mumbled an apology and took a seat in a pew at the rear.

Boscastle (SX098909) is located on the north Atlantic coast of Cornwall. Cornwall’s most distinguishing feature is its long and thin peninsular character which influences the region’s weather. This peninsula is one of the warmest and wettest regions in the country, and there is significant variation within the area largely influenced by proximity to the coast and topography . . . with the effects of altitude having a clear influence with Dartmoor, Exmoor and Bodmin Moor all receiving on average 1231–2584 mm of rain a year.

Special Boscastle Flood Issue,

Journal of Meteorology 29, no. 293

four

Heads turned to regard the stranger who had joined them. Lee grinned at him and waved. The priest looked across the tiny congregation and smiled.

“Welcome,” she said, in a voice that was gentle as a breeze but nonetheless carried the length of the vaulted nave. “I was just about to tell one of my favorite stories.”

The priest’s informality—so unlike the sour, doctrinaire Presbyterian minister of his childhood—won him over immediately. Andrew smiled back and nodded. She began.

“I’m sure you’ve all heard variations of this joke: A mountain climber loses his footing and begins to fall from a cliff—perhaps a cliff like those along the coast path here in Boscastle. He grabs the branch of a shrub growing from the cliff face—perhaps it’s gorse, or heather—and it arrests his fall. But the branch is slender and brittle and he knows it will not hold him long.

“ ‘Help!’ he cries. ‘Is anyone up there? Help!’

“And a deep voice answers, ‘I am the Lord, your God. I can save you if you believe in me. Do you believe?’

“ ‘Oh yes, Lord, I do—with all my heart, and especially right now!’

“ ‘Good,’ says the Lord. ‘Let go of the branch.’

“The climber hesitates.

“ ‘Is there anyone else up there?’ he asks.”

There was a faint titter of laughter in the congregation. Lee, Andrew saw, had her hand over her mouth to disguise her giggles.

“The Bible tells a similar story,” the priest continued. “Actually,” she said, with what Andrew thought was almost a wink, “I think we get a lot of good jokes from the Bible.

“In this case, Jesus has just performed the miracle of feeding the multitudes. Five thousand people gather to hear him preach. Afterward, he tells his disciples to feed them. They reply that they have only two fish and five small loaves of bread, and it is impossible.

“But Jesus takes this meager larder and somehow manages not only to extend it to the entire crowd, but to have leftovers as well!

“Now, I don’t know about you, but I think that would have made me a believer for life. But apparently some of the disciples were slow learners. When the crowd disperses, Jesus tells his disciples to get into their boat and set across the sea. He stays behind to pray and reflect, and tells them he will join them soon.

“That night a storm rakes the sea and the disciples’ boat is tossed for hours. Finally, as Matthew tells us, on the fourth watch, early in the morning, they see Jesus walking toward them on the surface of the water. They cry out in fear, ‘It is a ghost!’ But Jesus says, ‘Take heart; it is I. Be not afraid.’ Then Peter jumps up and says, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you over the water.’

“And here’s where I think Jesus shows us his sense of humor—in a way not all that different from the joke we began with. What does he do? He says, simply, ‘Come.’ And so, Peter clambers out of the boat. He lets go with one hand. He lets go with the other. And he walks across the water toward his Lord.

“So here is Peter, striding across the surface of the sea, when he sort of wakes up and looks around. He sees that the sea is rough and the sky is stormy. And suddenly he is afraid. He has, to put it simply, a crisis of faith. He fears that the branch of salvation, like the branch our climber was clutching, is slender and brittle.

“What happens next? Well, it’s useful to remember that the name ‘Peter’ means rock . . . which is exactly what he begins sinking like.”

“ ‘Lord, save me!’ Peter cries.

“And Jesus reaches out, pulls him up, and returns him to the safety of the boat. ‘O ye of little faith, why did you doubt?’ Jesus asks. And the rest of the disciples, in awe, declare, ‘Truly, you are the son of God.’ ”

The priest paused and rested her eyes on the clutch of villagers before her.

“We are only human,” she said. “We are not made to be unwaveringly faithful. Our day-to-day lives test our faith repeatedly—in ourselves, in those we love, and in God. And sometimes we sink. What does Matthew’s account of this episode in the life of Jesus and his disciples tell us? That faith can buoy us up. That faith can calm the storm. That faith can produce miracles—big ones, little ones, it hardly matters. Faith can enable each and every one of us to ‘walk upon the water’ of our lives. Faith can still our doubts. Faith can be our salvation. This is what Matthew wants us to understand when he tells us Peter’s story.

“Now, let us pray . . .”

The service continued, but Andrew was still thinking about the vicar’s sermon. Though he had gone to church dutifully every Sunday with his parents as he was growing up, Andrew had never had much faith in faith. He had even less faith in organized religion. The Bible seemed to him a patchwork of contradictions, not a reliable guide for human souls; you could find scriptural justification for any belief or action, however tender or brutal. You didn’t have to be an historian to know that the armies on both sides in any battle believed God was with them and would speed their victory. The sheer devastation wrought by those who believed this over the course of human history was staggering. Religious organizations seemed to him little more than businesses aimed at protecting and expanding their market share, lining their pockets, and stifling dissent. He’d experienced this part of religion firsthand. As a teenager, he’d admired—almost idolized—the assistant minister at his church, a young man passionate about helping poor people in disadvantaged neighborhoods in Boston. He was doing what Andrew believed was the true work of the church, living the values of Christianity and leading by his example. But his social activism annoyed the wealthy and conservative members of the church’s board of trustees, and, soon enough, the assistant minister was forced out. Andrew’s father had said, “It’s for the best,” and Andrew wondered, The best for whom?

That was the end of Andrew’s churchgoing. Anything less than a total boycott seemed to him immoral. How could you remain a member of the flock in the face of such injustice and hypocrisy?

As he matured, Andrew found a new faith: a faith in the power of rational thought. He believed that the universe was explainable. He believed that the mysteries of religious faith were nothing more than natural phenomena awaiting logical explanation. Andrew had faith in science, in the rigorous process of examining and analyzing the world.

But he had faith, too, in the essential goodness of human beings. He believed in people, in their potential for grace. He believed most people were good and the rest wanted to be good, and either didn’t know how, had no experience of goodness, or somehow had been led astray. The reasons they failed at goodness, he believed, were sociological, not theological.

Andrew had also had faith in himself, in the importance of his work, and in the security and fullness of his love for his wife. But now his marriage was shattered and the value of his work was in question. In the year since Kat dropped her bomb, Andrew had felt his belief in himself, even his belief and trust in others, seeping away. It was as if his soul had sprung a leak. He imagined himself shrinking until all that was left was a puddle of clothing on the ground. O ye of little faith, Jesus had said. Yes, precisely.

Lee yanked him out of his bleak meditation.

“Come on,” she said, tugging at his pocket, “You have to meet Janet!”

“This is Drew,” Lee announced, dragging him over to the priest. “He’s living with us.” Andrew felt like the farm’s new dog.

The vicar smiled and offered Andrew her hand. “Janet Stevenson. It was nice you could join us this morning,” she said.

“Yes, well, I apologize for barging in like that. Look, I’m sorry to be so ignorant, but what does one call an Anglican priest?”

She chuckled. “Technically, I suppose it’s ‘the Reverend Janet Stevenson of Davidstow, Forrabury, St. Juliot, Lesnewth, Minster, Otterham, and Trevalga parishes.’ But most people just call me ‘Janet.’ ”

“Thank goodness,” Andrew said. The Reverend Janet was a tall, angular woman with shoulder-length, rather severely cut brown hair shot through here and there with strands of gray. But her eyes were gentle and her smile was warm and genuine—not simply part of her professional wardrobe.

“Your sermon’s given me something to think about,” Andrew confessed.

“Yes, I noticed you seemed to have drifted away afterward.” The priest leaned a bit closer and spoke quietly: “If there’s something you’d like to discuss, the rectory’s next to St. Symphorian’s, at the top of the village, by Forrabury Common.”

Andrew wondered whether clairvoyance was an essential skill among priests. “Thank you,” he replied.

Lee was tugging at his pocket again. “Come on, Drew, or you’ll be late at the Cobweb, too!”

“The Cobweb?”

“The pub,” Janet explained. “Nearly everyone goes there for Sunday lunch, there or the Wellington—you know, roast lamb and the works.”

“And if you don’t get moving,” Lee chided, “there’ll be none left!”

“You seem to have a friend,” the priest said.

Andrew laughed. “It feels more like I’ve been adopted. Or maybe kidnapped. Will I see you there?”

“I usually put in an appearance; have a pint at least. Professional responsibility, you see.”

Andrew smiled and gave her a wave as Lee tugged him across the churchyard toward Anne’s car. He never did get to look around at Thomas Hardy’s handiwork.

ANDREW DUCKED THROUGH the low door of Boscastle’s Cobweb Inn and thought he’d gone blind. After the shimmering brilliance of the midday August sun outside, the interior of the Cobweb was as black as the bottom of a well. He waited for his eyes to adjust; what emerged from the gloom was a pub unlike any he’d ever been in before. It had the same soft, warm lighting around the room and cheerful, backlit bottle glitter behind the bar as any other pub, and that ineffable sense of welcome that seems unique to pubs in the English countryside. But that was where the resemblance ended. The Cobweb occupied the first two floors of a massive four-story, eighteenth-century stone warehouse built deep into the black slate hillside across the road from the Visitor Centre. A formal dining room and function room occupied the upper floor, but the heart of the pub was two large, low-beamed, stone-walled, virtually windowless, cryptlike adjoining rooms on the ground floor. There were big stone fireplaces in each room, along with an eclectic collection of tables, chairs, antique high-backed settles, and miscellaneous artwork and wall ornaments. Andrew could imagine how warm and comforting it would be to step into the Cobweb on a winter afternoon to find all of the fireplaces ablaze. Mercifully, on this muggy Sunday, the hearths were cold and the pub was cool. From the thick beams overhead in the room nearest the door hung hundreds of antique beer bottles, along with all manner of other detritus. Andrew, who was only just over six feet tall, felt as if he needed to duck to move through the place.

On this Sunday moving toward the bar in the back was like trying to swim through mud; the room was packed with tourists and locals alike, all intent on tucking into one of the great bargains of British pubs, the Sunday roast lunch. Three waitresses moved through the throng with the grace of ballet dancers, balancing platters laden with potatoes, vegetables, and either roast lamb, beef, or turkey with all the trimmings.

Andrew had finally reached the long bar that spanned the two rooms and was about to order a pint of St. Austell’s Doom Bar ale when a woman’s voice rang out.

“Well, if it isn’t the sheep whisperer. Flora! It’s that bloke I was telling you about!”

Andrew turned to his right and saw a darkly beautiful woman perched on a high stool at the end of the bar. She had on a black, paint-splattered, ribbed cotton sleeveless tank top that left little to the imagination, and a pair of faded cutoff jeans. One very long, very tan leg crossed the other at the knee. From the suspended foot dangled a hot pink flip-flop. Her dark brown hair was long and gathered to one side, rather than to the back, in a ponytail held by a rolled and knotted kerchief. Her pupils were jet-black jewels surrounded by searchlight white. She smiled.

“Um . . . I’m sorry,” Andrew stuttered, “I don’t think we’ve . . . wait—you must be that woman on the cliff. With the dog.”

“And you’re the savior of stranded sheep, the Ovine Ranger.”

An older, plump, rosy-cheeked woman—Flora, presumably—bustled up behind the bar and gave him a smile as broad and bright as a crescent of beach on a tropical island.

She ignored the others with empty glasses in their hands and said, “Pay no attention to her; she’s just takin’ the piss.”

“The what?”

“You know, havin’ you on a bit. What’ll it be, me ’an’sum?”

“A pint of Doom, please.”

“On me, Flora,” the woman on the stool said, and the barmaid lifted an eyebrow as she pulled down the long-handled vacuum pump to draw the fresh ale up from the cellar casks.

“Best order two,” Flora said to Andrew with a wink. “You’re on a roll here.”

“One will do, I think.”

“How’s that sheep, then?” the woman in the cutoffs teased, bouncing her crossed leg rhythmically. Andrew watched the pink flip-flop dance.

“No idea.” He took a long slug of his pint. He loved British ales: amber, creamy, almost no fizz. “Thanks for the drink.”

“I was a little worried, frankly, about whether you’d get yourself up from that ledge.”

“But not worried enough to stick around to help.”

“Oh, no. I know too well how fragile is the male ego.” She tilted her head to one side and gave him a crooked, amused smile.

“So this,” he said, lifting his glass, “is guilt?”

“I don’t think so; I believe you ordered Doom Bar. Good choice, by the way.”

Suddenly, Andrew remembered the sermon. “I could have fallen,” he said.

“That would have been Darwin at work again. But you didn’t, did you?”

“Actually, I did. Fell nearly a hundred feet toward the knife-edged rocks and boiling surf, but arrested the fall by grabbing the branch of a bushy shrub growing from the cliff face. Unfortunately, it was gorse, so my hand was impaled by the thorns. Still, it held long enough for me to find a route back to the top, no thanks to you.”

He was about to reach for his pint again, but she grabbed his hand, flipped it over to see his palm, which was unscarred, wiped her own palm over his, then let it go.

“Liar.”

Andrew was trying to recover from the galvanic jolt of her touch. He’d never experienced anything like it in his life; his blood sizzled.

“I used the other hand,” he said.

“Liar twice,” she said. “You’re right-handed; that’s the hand you use to lift your glass.”

“How’s your dog?” Andrew asked, trying to buy time, trying to recover.

“Randi!” the woman shouted—which seemed to Andrew a somewhat unseemly answer to an innocent question. But then a big, furry dog that looked for all the world like a wolf appeared from the crowd, trailing several small children, including Lee.

“So there you are!” Lee called out amid the din of voices in the pub, as if Andrew were a wayward puppy wandering, lost, amid the forest of legs and ankles.

“Guess what, Drew? This is Randi, and he’s the bestest dog in the world.” The dog sat on his haunches beside the woman on the stool and regarded her with helpless adoration, tongue lolling.

“And Nicki!” Lee cried, noticing the woman on the stool. “Drew! Drew!” She was hopping with delight. “This is my best friend, Nicki!”

Andrew looked at the woman across from him, then back to Lee.

“Wait . . . I thought Nicki was one of your girlfriends.”

“She is, silly!”

“No, I mean a girl like you . . . not a . . . a grown-up!”

“Not an old crone, you mean,” the woman said, with something less than her former feistiness. Andrew glanced at her and wondered how old she actually was. Midthirties; forty, tops. Pretty young as crones go. Pretty, period. Something lush, slightly exotic about her. He was still buzzing inside from her touch.

Lee bailed him out.

“Nicki’s not like other grown-ups. She’s like me. A ‘free spirit.’ That’s what Mum says, anyway.”

Nicola slid off her stool and swept the girl into a bear hug, thinking just how wrong Lee was, but loving her for believing it. Lee giggled, squirmed away, and disappeared into the crowd, her introductions apparently now completed.

The woman stood facing Andrew, squinting, thoughtful.

“So you’re Drew . . . I should have guessed.”

Andrew smiled. “Why? Is my fame so widespread?”

“It is when Lee’s your publicity agent, and yes, thank you, I’d love another drink.”

Andrew laughed and signaled Flora.

“My treat this time,” he said to the barmaid when she arrived.

Flora fairly leered at him. “Aren’t we becomin’ chummy! Same again, Nicki?”

“Sure, but as long as he’s buying, make it a double.”

“So what do you do when you’re not cadging free drinks at the Cobweb?” Andrew asked.

“Oh, that’s so American: What do you do? As if that defined you! You’re in Europe, my friend. Here we inquire about your family, about life, about truth, about beauty . . .”

“Okay, then, tell me about your family.”

“Don’t have any; at least not here.”

“Your life, then?”

“Checkered.”

“Is that the truth?”

“Truth enough.”

“Okay then, beauty? Besides your own, which is perfectly obvious to anyone with at least one functioning eye.”

This seemed genuinely to have taken the woman aback. She turned to the tall gin and tonic Flora had left her and downed a third of it in one go. She stared at the glass for a moment, then turned toward him.

“Thank you,” she muttered. Then she smiled. “Liar.”

“You’re right, I’m lying. I spend my days photographing gorgeous, scantily clad models for fashion magazines, and I’ve just gotten used to telling women they’re beautiful. Apart from you, most of them seem willing to accept the compliment.”

“You’re a fashion photographer?”

“No. That’s the ‘liar’ part.”

She smacked his arm playfully and laughed, then raised her glass and clinked his. “You win this round.”

“I didn’t know it was a competition.” This, too, was a lie; he felt as if he’d been fencing ever since he arrived.

“It’s always a competition.”

“What is?”

“Flirting.”

“Is that what we’re doing?”

“Isn’t it?”

“Wait. This is making my head hurt. I asked first.”

“And I dodged the question.”

“You certainly did.”

Andrew felt weirdly off balance with this lovely but curious woman. And he realized this whole business of interacting with someone new was a little scary. It had been years. How do you behave? What do you say? Especially when the woman in question seemed armed to the teeth, at least verbally. Even more especially when you found yourself powerfully attracted to her.

For her part, Nicola was rather enjoying Andrew’s struggle. Although he stayed right with her in their quick-witted parry and thrust, she sensed she had the upper hand. She liked that.

Andrew did a verbal feint. “Look, I’m told the reason to be here on Sunday afternoon is the roast dinners. Are you eating?”

“Heavens, no; far too much food for midday. I’d be asleep by three.”

“So why are you here?”

“You mean, apart from the gin?”

“Apart from the gin.”

She scanned the packed pub. “For the company, I guess. It’s better in winter, without the tourists. But I don’t mind the crowds.” They fill up the emptiness, she thought. She waved at the Reverend Janet, who was working the crowd, a judicious half pint of ale in her free hand. “My work is pretty solitary.”

As if he’d been given a peek through a keyhole, Andrew saw through Nicola’s wall. But he was too much of a gentleman to pursue it.

“Ah,” he said, “we’re back to what you do.”

“Clever how you did that.”

“You brought it up, actually, but as long as you did, let me guess: You’re either an exceptionally messy interior decorator or an artist.”

“Aren’t you observant!”

“You’re an artist?”

“No. I’m an exceptionally messy decorator, and I’d better get back to my paint cans.”

She drained her glass and slung a canvas purse over her shoulder.

“Nice meeting you, Drew. Thanks for the drink.”

She had started to turn away from him but stopped. “Lee was right about what she said about you.”

“Which was?”

Nicki smiled a conspirator’s smile. “Oh, that’s just between us girls.”

“Do you have a name, besides Nicki?” Andrew felt like he was trying to lasso Nicola and pull her back.

“Nicola Rhys-Jones, formerly DeLucca.”

“Married then?”

“Not anymore.”

Andrew smiled. She didn’t.

“And you’re called . . . ?” she asked.

“Stratton, like the village up the coast. Andrew Stratton.”

“Married?”

“Not anymore.”

This time Nicki did smile.

Then she was gone. She slipped through the crowd like water through rocks, disturbing nothing. Andrew fought his way to the door, just in time to see her disappear across the narrow bridge over the river. She was swinging her purse and Randi was dancing around her again.