

Aqua Vitae

Katrina first glimpsed the MacDougall's cottage around the last curve of a long, treed driveway, at the edge of a vast field, and her first thought was: this isn't a cottage, this is a castle. It was massive, with walls of granite stone, and it had actual turrets, and balconies, and several terraces looking out over the black-watered Loch.

She'd taken a Dramamine upon leaving the airport some hours earlier, and dozed in the backseat for most of the ride. Now she straightened up, adjusted her blouse and smoothed her hair. They circled past the front of the house and pulled up alongside several other cars to the left of the entrance.

As she climbed out, Katrina saw the sun was still high over the surrounding mountains. She asked Graham what time it was.

"Nine-thirty," he replied. Graham looked like the Euro-trash pretty boys who frequented the nightclubs on Lansdowne Street back in Boston, a type she was not attracted to in the slightest: petite, hardly taller than she was, in slim-fitting, narrow-legged jeans and a red Formula One racing jacket. Spiky gelled hair, bleached at the tips. She'd known at once, upon spotting him waiting for her in the Arrivals terminal, that he was Gemma's latest attempt at a setup. *Oh, Gemma*, she'd thought as he approached, *You have got to be kidding*.

"Won't get dark until almost midnight," he went on. "Light again a few hours later. These are the longest days of the year."

She nodded, stifling a yawn. She was still jet-lagged, still feeling the effects of the pill.

Before she could say anything else the door to the castle-cottage opened, and Gemma came jogging toward them across the lawn. As soon as she reached the car, she caught Katrina in an embrace of such force that for a moment the wind was knocked out of her. Then they went spinning across the grass together, giggling like children.

“You’re here!” Gemma cried. She leaned back to study Katrina’s face, then kissed her cheek and hugged her tightly again. “You’re really here! My little Kit-kat!”

Katrina laughed—both touched and slightly baffled, as always, by Gemma’s enthusiasm for her. Such a welcome might be warranted, she supposed, if she’d traveled some immense distance—from a volunteer post in an African refugee camp, or reporting from some war-torn country. But Boston to Scotland with a layover at Heathrow was the sort of minor, puddle-jumping excursion that Gemma and Gemma’s mother, Lady Agnes, might make for a weekend of shopping in Manhattan, something they did a couple of times a year.

Still, this journey she’d made for Gemma’s wedding wasn’t *nothing*. She’d crossed an ocean. She’d saved for months, scrimping from her meager Museum Program Assistant salary to pay for the ticket, which she’d bought with a credit card that was already nearly maxed. Gemma was covering all her other expenses, but Katrina had insisted on paying her own way. “That’ll be your gift, then,” Gemma had insisted. “Having you here will be the best gift I could ask for.” Gemma could say things like that, and somehow they seemed sincere. Katrina was working on a mixed media piece for her, as well—a collage that Gemma and her new husband, Ewan, could hang in their fancy flat in Edinburgh, but it wasn’t finished yet.

They were friends at college for a year before Gemma had revealed to Katrina that her father was Sir Roderick MacDougall—one of the wealthiest men in the U.K., a man whose fortune trumped the Queen’s. Katrina would discover this later, Googling him when she was

alone. It was then that she learned that Gemma, the cheerful and unassuming international student she had been assigned to show around campus as part of probation for an underage drinking infraction, was the sort of person who might appear in the pages of British tabloid magazines. Such people actually existed: people with multiple homes in multiple countries; people who owned Lamborghinis; people who donated more money at a single night's charity ball than she would likely see in a decade of paychecks from her job at the Museum—perhaps in a lifetime. But to her amazement and relief, even after visiting the MacDougall's palatial home in Edinburgh, and later their yacht in the Riviera, and the penthouse on the Upper East Side—her friendship with Gemma had remained unchanged. Gemma was the same girl she had gossiped with over breakfast in the university commons, or watched *Real World* marathons with on rainy weekends in the dorm.

Now Lady Agnes was striding toward them across the lawn. Like Gemma, she was close to six feet tall, with prominent cheekbones and a gap between her front teeth. Her intense affection was something else Katrina found hard to grasp—always going on about well Katrina had taken care of Gemma during the year they overlapped in Boston. As if it had been any trouble at all to befriend Gemma—she of the ready smile and infectious laugh. Gemma: whom people of all nations, creeds and colors seemed to gravitate towards.

Lady Agnes had visited Boston twice during her daughter's year there, and taken Katrina with them out to fancy dinners on Newbury Street both times. They went to restaurants Katrina would never have gone to with her own parents, who were only able to visit once in four years, on separate occasions. They lived apart now—her mother in the modest ranch house Katrina had grown up in, her father in a nearby mobile home community (“trailer park” had a lower-class

connotation than seemed to fit his abode, which sat on a paved street lined with other well-kept, multi-room trailers, some of which had screened porches and neatly tended flower beds).

They walked together now toward the castle-cottage, Katrina and Gemma and Lady Agnes, arms around each other's waists. She felt disoriented, slightly woozy—the lingering effects of the Dramamine. Graham had looked dismayed when she'd taken the pill not long after they left the airport, explaining that it would make her sleepy and therefore unable to chitchat. Unappealing as Graham was, she couldn't blame Gemma for wanting her to have a companion at the wedding; Gemma would be occupied with other guests, and of course with the ceremony itself. In two days, she was to marry her grammar school flame, Ewan Barry, the bland but kind-seeming son of an oil tycoon, whose family fortune was said to be on a par with the MacDougalls'.

Above the main entrance to the house was a stone slab, engraved with the words *Aqua Vitae*. “The house is ‘Balbridie,’” Lady Agnes said breezily, leading her into the high ceilinged foyer. “But the ancient Romans had a settlement here. We’ve found coins, bits of pottery and such. It’s possible they even had a temple. The Loch is on the site of a natural spring. *Aqua Vitae* means ‘water of life.’” An enormous Persian rug stretched the length of the slate-floored entrance hall. They walked through the living room to the kitchen, which had a sunken seating area beyond which a wall of windows faced out to the Loch.

Once past the forbidding exterior, the house had a surprisingly modern layout—the result of recent renovations, Lady Agnes explained. Balbridie was their country escape, far enough from home in Edinburgh and with sufficiently unreliable cell reception to provide a respite from the stresses of daily life. Katrina wondered privately what stresses Lady Agnes might be referring to—which roses to have the gardener plant that year? Which designer to wear to the

upcoming gala? She had no idea, really; it was possible such wealth carried stresses she couldn't fathom. "Everybody has troubles—every single person on this Earth. Don't think for an instant you're the only one." Her mother had said this once, in anger, after an argument in which fifteen-year-old Katrina had bemoaned her father's failings, their ongoing financial struggles, the general unfairness of life. Her mother had meant it as a reprimand—and had succeeded, in a way, in chastening Katrina—but the words struck a chord that resonated long after that particular discussion. The idea that every person, no matter how seemingly happy, harbored some inner struggle—she found a certain gloomy comfort in this.

Muted laughter drifted in over the clinking of dishes and the chattering of the kitchen staff. Katrina looked out to see guests mingling with drinks on the terrace, and felt a pang of anxiety. She was five months sober—her longest stretch yet, something her sponsor, Beck, kept telling her to be proud of. But Beck had also warned that this visit would be difficult, and emphasized the inner strength that Katrina would need, so far from everything familiar, and in the face of repeated temptation.

Even knowing this, she was dismayed to see the disappointment on Gemma's face, later, when she declined a glass of champagne. Her friends always seemed to take her efforts toward sobriety personally. *They're young*, Beck would tell her over cigarette breaks at their Tuesday night meetings in Cambridge. Beck wore no makeup, and her frizzy gray hair was always in a low ponytail. In the time that she'd known her, Katrina had never seen her without either a cup of coffee or a smoke in hand. *They'll grow up eventually*, Beck said about Katrina's friends. *Everybody does.*

During the toast that evening, Sir Roderick made a point to welcome "Gemma's dear friend from America," noting the journey she'd made to join their celebration. He was a tall,

barrel-chested man, typically jovial but prone to sudden and startling bouts of gravitas. His merry eyes could become fierce in an instant, his playful demeanor suddenly cool and impenetrable. Katrina guessed this was how he had achieved such an impressive station in life: his ability to frighten people, or at least to keep them on unsteady ground. She liked him. She liked how he greeted her with “Hello, my lovely,” in his Scottish burr, liked that he remembered her name—this man with something like 50,000 employees, who had once been to a party at Mick Jagger’s house. Being acknowledged by Sir Roderick felt like a gift. Her own father—on disability now, one foot gone to diabetes, still living with Marilyn, a woman who had been their next-door neighbor when Katrina was a child—seemed to belong to another species entirely.

After dinner, she joined a group of guests for a stroll through the sheep pasture. The air here in the countryside was bracing, clear and cold. The sun had finally gone down, but the sky over the Loch held a pink glow. They stopped to look out at the water, which was white-tipped in a gathering wind.

“Any monsters in this Loch?” Katrina asked.

An elderly man replied in an accent so thick she couldn’t understand. She smiled and nodded, and after he shuffled off Graham slid into step with her to translate. “Kelpies,” he said, leaning in close. “Have you heard of them? Magical water horses. They live in lakes and rivers.”

“Huh,” Katrina said.

“They’re not nice creatures,” he went on. “They like to drown children and eat them.” He described the kelpies: ghastly and green-skinned, always dripping wet, their ropy manes like black seaweed. They acted docile at first, he said, in order to trick you—but as soon as you touched one its skin became adhesive, and it would drag you to the depths to be devoured.

“Clearly these stories were meant to keep kids away from the water,” Gemma said.

“Don’t you think, Kat?”

“Probably,” Katrina said. “That’s what fairy tales were, right? Stories people told kids to teach them lessons: don’t go in those woods. Don’t go in a stranger’s house.”

“When we were in Boston,” Gemma said to Graham, “Kat was working on this amazing art project. It was, like, modern interpretations of fairy tales.”

“Sounds brilliant,” he said blandly.

“She *is* brilliant,” Gemma said. “It won this big award.”

Besides her art professor, J.D. Cavallo, Gemma was perhaps the biggest supporter of Katrina’s creative endeavors. She seemed to appreciate and understand it in a way that Katrina’s own parents did not. Her senior showcase had included a sculpture called “Subsumed,” consisting of wax molds of the faces and body parts of friends, slightly distorted during casting so that the finished works appeared at first to be realistic renderings, but upon closer inspection revealed tiny, odd details—fingers protruding from ears, or extra eyes emerging from their forehead and cheeks. Her father, hobbling around the display on his cane and prosthesis in what was to be his only visit to her in Boston, had seemed genuinely mystified: staring at each piece for a while with a frown, then glancing at her and raising his eyebrows, or offering a tight smile, before moving on to the next.

Gemma was different, though, expressing admiration for Katrina’s work with a fervor and astuteness that surpassed that of simply a supportive friend. She came from a family of collectors, after all. Her parents bought at Sotheby’s auctions, and lent works from their collection to museums around the world. Gemma had claimed to want to buy one of Katrina’s pieces from the show, which Katrina had of course given her for free, as a farewell gift.

“Someday I’ll be loaning this to a Museum,” Gemma had told her. “A retrospective of your work.”

“Brilliant,” Graham said again. This was clearly a filler-word for him, like ‘huh,’ or ‘wow.’ “I’ve a bit of interest in mythology, myself,” he added, and proceeded, for the duration of their walk, to tell her about the fairies and goblins that were said to occupy the surrounding hills. They liked to steal newborn babies, he said, replacing them with inhuman substitutes known as changelings.

Back at the cottage, guests were gathering in the great room to play billiards, and the doors to the terrace were open to the night. Katrina sat on the edge of a sofa, fighting jet lag and flipping through a catalogue of the contemporary Scottish artist Nick Boyd. His paintings often showed solitary, faceless figures in incongruous settings; she’d admired one not long ago at the Museum where she worked. She peered closely now at the reproduction of his most well known painting: a blank-faced man hovering in an overcast sky amidst tall, silvery-gray buildings. The image called to mind those horrible photos of people jumping from the towers. Katrina studied it: the man seemed to hang suspended, neither flying nor falling.

“Like that one?” a voice asked, and Sir Roderick sank onto the couch beside her.

“Yes,” she replied, her cheeks warming at the suddenness of his attention. “I like his work a lot.”

“I do, too.”

She glanced at Sir Roderick as he gazed down at the book on her lap, his moist eyes and flushed cheeks. He looked drunk. She could feel his breath on the back of her hand where she held the book open. “What do you like about it?” he asked, and just like that was transformed—his previously benign and sleepy gaze now piercing, focused intently on her.

“Um,” Katrina cleared her throat. “I like... the sense he creates, of time standing still? The precise detail, combined with this...dreamlike quality.”

He nodded, studying her a moment longer, then looked back at the page. “Indeed. I know the person who owns that painting, actually.”

“Really? The original? That’s... Wow.” She was never more aware of how naïve, how American she sounded than when she spoke to Sir Roderick. The flat, nasal tone of her voice. She might as well have called him “dude,” told him the painting was totally rad.

“Yes,” he went on. “I do wonder if he might have overpaid, though it’s certainly a lovely work.”

“How much?” The question embarrassed her as soon as she uttered it, but to her relief Sir Roderick didn’t seem offended.

“More than he should have,” he said, gazing at something beyond the page. “You work in that world, don’t you? How much would you say it’s worth—an original Nick Boyd?”

“I work at a museum,” she managed to say. “Gosh, I don’t know. I would think... more than a million...sounds about right.” She had no idea, really. The conversation was ridiculous, like debating whether you would rather be eaten by a shark or struck by lightning.

“Roddy,” A white-haired man with an impressively red and bulbous nose called from the billiards table. “Come on.” Sir Roderick heaved himself off the couch, patted her once on the shoulder and let his hand rest there. “Can I get you a drink, love?” he asked. When she declined he smiled and left her alone again.

She wandered out onto the terrace, realizing too late that Graham was holding court there with a group of friends. Before she could retreat, he called her over. She declined yet another drink, accepting a cigarette from him instead, and stood looking out over the water, imagining

some Nessie-like leviathan gliding through the silent depths, the places light never reached. A subaqueous creature, it would make sounds inaudible to human ears, like the keening of whales—but they could be sensed in these surroundings, somehow, even inaudibly; mournful cries that reverberated across the ancient hills, informing those macabre legends. Graham tried to get her to drink from his glass—he was drunk, too—and frowned and scolded her when she refused. Then he threw his arm around her, launching into a new story: this one about a cousin of his who claimed to have seen a real kelpie once, years ago, as a child.

This cousin and his friends had come upon a whole herd of the creatures, one autumn evening along the shores of this very Loch. Scoffing at the legends, and at the same time overcome with curiosity, unable to resist, they had dared each other to touch the horses. Graham's cousin just grazed the tip of one, realizing his mistake as it began to drag him toward the water. He did the only thing he could do, then: grabbed a jackknife from his pocket, and cut off his own finger to save himself.

“My father used to tell that story,” one of his companions groaned. The others laughed. “Don't believe a word, Katrina.”

“I don't,” she said, and they laughed again.

“Fuck off,” Graham told them, releasing her to gulp his drink. After swallowing he added, “My cousin has four fingers on his right hand. I'll show all you next time we're in Aberdeen.” During the ensuing laughter, Katrina excused herself, slipping back into the house to find her bed in the labyrinth of upstairs chambers.

The next day she slept late, and came downstairs to find Gemma in the kitchen, aglow from a morning run. They shared a breakfast of fruit and yogurt on the terrace, and then went up to Gemma's room, which was to serve as the bridal suite, so Katrina could try on her bridesmaid dress. A strapless, blue-green satin, it was the most expensive gown she had ever touched, let alone worn. She would later overhear a fellow bridesmaid, Gemma's freckled cousin Fiona, whisper to a friend in disbelief—or was it disdain? —that they'd cost two thousand pounds apiece.

Standing before the three-sided mirror, Katrina rotated slowly to the left, then the right, as Gemma and Lady Agnes cooed their praise. As the seamstress knelt at her feet, pinning the hem, Lady Agnes cried, "Hold it! I've got the perfect thing!" and left the room. A couple of minutes later she returned with a necklace in her hand. "Try it, Katrina," she said. "It will look gorgeous with her eyes, don't you think, Gemma?"

Like the Boyd painting, the necklace could have been something from a museum, all winking diamonds and sapphire teardrops. Katrina began to protest, but Lady Agnes insisted, reaching to fasten the clasp. When it was attached, they all fell silent. "There," she breathed. "You see—you simply must wear it."

Katrina turned to Gemma, who nodded. Her eyes shone. "It looks lovely," she said. "You look lovely. By the way, Katrina—I think Graham fancies you."

Katrina groaned. "Here we go." She couldn't pry her eyes away from her reflection. The metallic blue-green was unexpectedly flattering, bringing out the blonde highlights she'd had done at an expensive salon the week before, paying with the same nearly maxed credit card.

"Ach," Lady Agnes said. "Stay away from that boy, Katrina."

"Mum!"

“I’m sorry, he’s trouble with a capital ‘T.’”

“You hardly know Graham!” Gemma said. She sighed. “That’s what you say about every man, anyway.”

“Not Ewan.” Lady Agnes said. She smiled, her eyes still fixed approvingly on Katrina. “Ewan is perfect in every way.”

“Kat,” Gemma said, ignoring her mother, “Graham’s lovely, really. He’s a gorgeous person. He’s made a few mistakes. Who hasn’t?”

“Who hasn’t,” Katrina repeated—still eyeing the necklace, shifting slightly to make it catch the light.

“All I’m saying is,” Gemma said, “Give him a chance. You might like him. And then you can marry him, and move to Scotland, and we can be neighbors, and our kids will be best friends.”

“Easy,” Katrina said. The seamstress unzipped her, and she stepped out of the dress carefully to keep the pins in place. “One thing at a time.”

“Ladies,” a man’s voice called from the hallway, just outside the door. “Are you decent?”

Shrieking and flurrying—Katrina grabbed her tee shirt from the floor and pulled it on, then staggered one leg into her jeans.

“Hang on, Dad!” Gemma called. “What is it?”

“I want to show the American something. Just for a minute. You can have her back straight away.”

When Katrina emerged, Sir Roderick was staring out the hall window at a game of rounders that some guests had started on the lawn. He looked boyish, even with his silver hair, in

jeans and an un-tucked linen shirt. “Ah,” he said, when he saw her. “Thought you might like to see something. Come with me?”

He strode ahead, down the hall and around a corner, up a small flight of stairs and along a last narrow corridor, which ended in what Katrina assumed was the master bedroom. It was so massive that a king sized mahogany four-poster bed looked tidy in one corner. The room seemed sacred, and as they stepped onto the plush carpet she wondered what Sir Roderick could have possibly wanted to show her here, aside from its general air of opulence. “There, you see,” he said, directing her attention toward the wall opposite the bed. Katrina turned, and saw the faceless man floating between the buildings—the Nick Boyd painting, all X-million-pounds-worth. Dumbstruck, she stood beside Sir Roderick for what seemed a long time. Then she moved forward, carefully, as if afraid the canvas might vanish. It was larger that she had envisioned, more gorgeous even than it had looked in the posters and greeting cards in the museum gift shop. “Oh,” she said, amazed, stepping close to the canvas and then back again, letting her eyes swim in it. “It’s incredible.”

She tore her eyes away to find Sir Roderick watching her. “I thought you’d like it,” he said—seeming almost bashful now, a side of him she’d never seen.

“Thank you,” she said—words she uttered to the MacDougalls so often, she feared they would lose their meaning.

Sir Roderick took a step forward. His eyes lowered slightly from her face to her neck and he reached out, fingers just grazing her collarbone. Admiring the necklace. In her haste, she had forgotten to take it off.

“Oh.” She gave a stiff laugh. “It’s your wife’s. I’m wearing it with my dress tomorrow.”

He nodded; suddenly remote again, eyes traveling back to the painting. “Ay,” he replied. “It suits you.”

That afternoon, while Gemma and Lady Agnes were occupied with preparations, she joined the bridesmaids on the terrace where they were gathered with bottles of champagne. They were polite enough, asking questions occasionally to draw her into the conversation, but whatever she replied, they regarded her with expressions ranging from boredom to contempt and she soon fell silent again. They had all known each other since childhood in Edinburgh, and made constant reference to their shared past through a combination of inside jokes and unfamiliar slang which, in combination with their heavy accents, made the conversation all but incomprehensible.

Katrina drank Perrier from a champagne flute and stared out at the Loch, pretending to be absorbed in something on the far shore. There were no boats on the water, no buildings visible on the opposite side—nothing at all to fix her gaze on, just the rocky slope rising abruptly from the water. The water itself was a dull gray. She scanned the surface, saw something pop up in a swell and then dip under again. Only a bird—but she thought of the kelpies, and imagined them not far beneath the surface, looping gracefully through the silence as she’d seen penguins and seals do in the underwater footage of nature programs.

She brought her attention reluctantly back to the girls. The topic had turned to their recent holiday in Ibiza, a hen party for Gemma which Katrina was surprised to hear about now for the first time. She had not been invited—she assumed out of tact, as she would certainly not have been able to afford such a trip and the wedding as well.

To shrieks of laughter, Fiona was reliving now the late-night antics they'd witnessed at the villa of some Italian baron whom Gemma had befriended during what they called "the foam party at Amnesia." It was stupid to be jealous; Gemma had other friends, of course. Katrina had traveled with Gemma the summer after graduation, on a glorious sojourn through southern Europe, just the two of them. The round-trip flight had been a joint gift from Katrina's parents, who had acquiesced after repeated hints, followed by outright begging: all her friends from college had gone to Europe for a semester abroad. If she hoped to someday actually be an artist, or be involved in the art world in any way, her not having been to Europe could be *detrimental*. It could set her back *professionally*.

The girls opened another bottle of *Veuve Clicquot*. When one leaned in to fill Katrina's glass, she pulled it back quickly and said with a smile, "Thanks, I'm good."

"Aren't you, though!" The friend winked, and the others tittered.

"Only water?" asked another. "Did you overdo it last night like Laura?" More laughter.

"No," Katrina said, "I don't drink." She added, "Anymore," so they wouldn't think she was a goody two-shoes, or some kind of religious freak, but seeing their eyebrows raise at this she regretted the revelation. Now they were curious—sizing her up, wondering what unseemly story could be behind such a drastic decision: to stop drinking, at her age! Perhaps she had been to rehab already; perhaps she'd crashed her car; perhaps (as was the truth) she was simply unable to control her drinking, and blacked out whenever she did, no matter how careful she tried to be. Perhaps she was weary of the slow devastation this was causing—learning about her own actions in the aftermath, as if hearing stories about a stranger.

When the silence became awkward, she added, "Not right now, at least." And in uttering these words, knew already that part of her was giving in—that she would relent, and drink—if

not right now, then later tonight, or at the wedding tomorrow. She knew this, even as she steeled herself against the knowledge. She looked out toward the water again, where a single black bird wheeled in the air and dove.

That evening cloth-covered cocktail tables dotted the lawn like grazing sheep, guests mingling among them. Graham appeared beside her again, as he had all day, off and on. To Katrina's surprise, she was grateful for his attention this time, if not actually glad to see him. Gemma was occupied with her guests, and the other bridesmaids were gathered, chortling, in a closed circle beside the bar, already several drinks in.

"American girl," he said, by way of greeting.

"Scottish boy," she replied.

"Scottish lad," he corrected, and she said, "Ay, a wee bonny lad," and he laughed.

"God," he said. "I love your accent."

"I don't have an accent," she said. "*You* have an accent."

"Walk to the water with me?"

They descended together to the dock, which was at the moment deserted. Whatever boats the MacDougalls kept here were stored elsewhere for the wedding festivities. They walked to the end and stood looking at the water.

"Lovely, isn't it?" Graham said.

"Striking," Katrina allowed, after a pause. A few geese floated at the water's edge, but otherwise the Loch was desolate, and appeared incapable of sustaining life, its waters opaque even from this close, its shoreline craggy and barren. There was indeed a mythical air to the

place—the profound silence, and the sense of timelessness, which seemed to lend itself naturally to legend. What creatures might survive here, aside from magical ones? Those nightmare horses, the kelpies. The immortal fairies, and the soulless things they left behind to replace the human children they'd stolen.

“Gemma’s told me a lot about you, you know.” He smiled suggestively. He had large, slightly overlapping teeth.

“Oh?” Katrina said. “What did she say?” *I’m not flirting with you*, she thought, willing him to understand. *I’m just bored*.

“You know,” he said. “She just said you had a lot of laughs together in Boston .Sounds like it was wicked,” he added. “Just wicked. She also told us about Spring Break in Florida.” He shook his head, looked out at the water, pulling a pack of cigarettes from his jacket. Katrina followed his gaze, careful to keep her smile intact, wondering what, exactly, Gemma might have told him about that trip: the decrepit three-bedroom condo a few blocks from the beach, into which they had crammed a dozen people for a seven-day bacchanal? The crusted vomit discovered in one of the bathtubs, which no one ever owned up to, or even bothered to clean up? Or the night two men brought a stumbling, slurring Katrina—she would learn this later from the friends who’d last seen her, shit-faced as they’d been themselves—back to the condo and had sex with her before leaving her passed out, naked, in someone else’s bed, to piece together what happened the next morning?

No— Gemma wouldn’t share such a story with anyone. That had been Katrina’s lowest point, and Gemma knew this. Gemma had accompanied her to the hospital the following morning, and spent the last day of Spring Break in the waiting room as Katrina wept through first an internal exam, then a stern talking-to from the attending physician. In the end she had

declined to contact the police. It would have been impossible to find the two men, as none of her friends knew their names. She herself couldn't remember their faces. If it weren't for the physical evidence, and for the despair that had engulfed her once the initial shock wore off, she could have almost been convinced that nothing had happened at all.

The following day, she and Gemma had stopped at her mother's for lunch as planned. At the house Katrina felt a welcome emptiness, rather than the embarrassment she'd anticipated at showing Gemma the humble place she grew up. They'd eaten store-bought chicken salad and potato chips on the screened porch, and her mother had peppered Gemma with questions about life in Europe, and Katrina had viewed everything—the crabgrass of the overgrown yard, the cracked concrete patio, the small dead frogs floating in the pool—not with the critical gaze she had come to assume on recent visits, but instead with a wistfulness, as if viewing photographs of a place she remembered that had burned down long ago. Rather than shabby and lacking, she found the stained carpet and the single shelf of porcelain knick-knacks heartbreakingly innocent. After lunch she and Gemma looked out at the retention pond behind the house, sharing a cigarette and scanning the glassy surface for signs of the gator her mother said had taken up residence, but all they saw was a heron, watching them with its fierce unblinking eyes from the reeds on the far side.

Graham offered her a cigarette now and Katrina took it, needing something to focus on. After he lit it, she asked what he was doing for the summer, and as he went on about his travel plans—a scuba trip to the Great Barrier Reef—she tried to steady herself, to push the dark memories from her mind. She needed to call Beck, she realized. She needed grounding. To remind herself how far she had come, how far she had yet to go.

When the dinner bell rang she excused herself, saying she'd forgotten something inside, and slipped back to the house, where she dialed from the landline in her bedroom. It was early afternoon in Boston, but the phone went straight to voicemail; perhaps Beck was caught up at work, or had turned her phone off to meditate, something she did a couple of times a day. Katrina dialed once more, listened to Beck's voice again, trying to summon support from the sound of it, if not the words she spoke—*Hey, I'm not available, but if you leave your name and number*—then hung up to head back to the party. At the top of the main stair she paused—a moment of solitude, the great house quiet and empty. She stared out the window on the landing at the people congregated on the field below and tried to imagine them in togas, like the Romans who had walked these hillsides long ago.

“Why don't you just marry him,” Gemma shouted later, too close to her ear. Euro pop was blaring through the speakers. Graham was on the far side of the parquet dance floor, but Katrina still hit her friend's arm in an effort to silence her.

“Come on!” Gemma persisted, laughing. “Do it for me, Kat. I want you closer. Boston's so far away.”

“All right,” Katrina shouted back. “If you say so.” Gemma beamed at this, and twirled her into the disco ball's motes of light. Gemma was the sort of person who could decide such a thing—that she would marry Graham—and through some magical combination of charm and influence end up making it happen. Whereas Katrina was a mere mortal: even if she'd wanted him, it was inevitable that Graham would soon become disinterested in her, or else reveal a mental affliction or addiction of some sort, as her previous boyfriends all had.

“I need a drink,” Gemma said, flinging an arm around her. At the bar she insisted, even after Katrina demurred, that she should have one, too. “This is me, Kat. It’s *me*. I’m getting married tomorrow. Fucking married! I love you to pieces. I want your blessing.” She leaned in close, looking in her eyes. “Listen: you’re safe. Nothing can happen to you, here.”

You don’t know me, Katrina thought. The realization both startled and saddened her, though earlier that evening, as she’d watched Gemma laughing and dancing with her other friends, she’d understood this was the closest she would ever get to her. From now on, the distance between them would only grow.

“Come on, like old times!” Gemma said, offering Katrina a glass—vodka tonic, their drink of choice together back in Boston—and raising it up, in a toast to her self and to their friendship. “To dreams coming true,” she said.

Katrina was reminded of a game she used to play on long car rides with her brother when they were children. “Wake up,” she would tease, as she tickled or pinched him in the back seat. “You’re having a bad dream! Wake up!”

Wake up, she told herself now, taking the glass. *You’ve been dreaming. Here is where your life begins.* Here, on the shores of this ancient lake, where the Romans once held sacred rituals, dancing and drinking until dawn’s light streaked the sky. *You’re safe. Nothing can happen to you here.*

Her eyes opened to light flooding the room—her own room; this was a good sign. She glanced around: half-empty glass on the nightstand, cigarette floating in the bottom. The sound of water running—the bathroom sink. She listened: no other sounds, no sniffles or cabinet doors

closing. Her window was open a crack, and a breeze came in, inflating the white curtains. She lay atop the covers, her clothes still on (another good sign). Lying there, coming back to herself, watching the curtains billow and collapse, billow and collapse, she tried, but could not remember, how she'd come to be in her room. She recalled the spinning lights of the dance floor, and running across wet grass. The final image in her mind, singular as a photograph, was of Graham's bleary face, close to hers in a bright room, the sounds of revelry all around them.

She felt a surge of nausea and rose from the bed, staggering to the bathroom, where she shut off the tap, glancing at herself in the mirror as she did. Makeup smudged, hair matted; she looked feral, haggard—like a witch, some mythical creature from the highlands out the window. The old familiar grief surged within her—the sad fact of her failure, of the misery she had brought upon herself—and she hunched over the toilet, retching. After a while when nothing came up she stumbled back to bed. The nightstand clock read ten. She was supposed to be with the other girls now, having her hair and makeup done. She was already late. She thought about calling Beck—what she should do, of course: tell the truth, or what she knew of it, which was only that she'd lapsed. Acknowledge, once again, her powerlessness against the disease that was always, according to the AA rulebook, threatening to overtake her. But rising from the bed seemed physically impossible. She could only lie there and watch the curtains, oddly soothing as they inflated and deflated. She couldn't bear the thought of Beck's sad, wobbly voice right now, either; Beck's voice was always sad and wobbly, no matter her mood, or what they discussed. This, Katrina had decided, was because Beck was a broken person. Beck viewed her alcoholism as brokenness, and she incorporated this brokenness into every aspect of her being. Katrina couldn't—she wouldn't—accept this as the only way, to live life in a state of perpetual

mourning, constantly reminding herself of her own failures. She preferred to fight, as long as she was alive; if the battles got ugly occasionally, so be it.

She willed herself up again and into the shower, where she stood under the hot stream for as long as she could, scalding herself clean. Upon emerging she glanced at the mirror again—hair in wet tangles, flesh splotchy from the heat. The Lady of the Loch. She looked away. Let the makeup artist do what she could to transform her. This day wasn't about her, anyway. No one here cared if she was sober or drunk, sick or healthy; no one cared, really, where she came from, or where she would go when she left this place. Today was about Gemma, and the least she could do was play her part.

The bridal suite was bustling when she arrived, servants arranging platters of pastries on low tables, undergarments and shoes and cosmetics strewn across the floor, the other girls dancing before full-length mirrors. Katrina slipped in and occupied herself at once with serving up a plate of sliced fruit, grateful for the chaos that allowed her to enter relatively unnoticed.

When everyone was ready, they stood assembled before Lady Agnes, who crowed over them each in turn. When she came to Katrina, she remembered the necklace and retrieved it from a black velvet case on the bureau, bringing it over to fasten herself, then turning Katrina around to admire it. "Gorgeous," she said, leaning closer. "Wait. What is..." Then she recoiled—glancing at Katrina's face once before turning abruptly to the vanity, where she began sweeping loose hairpins into her palm.

"What is it?" Katrina asked. The displeasure on Lady Agnes's face had been obvious.

"I don't quite—it seems there's—just a small mark..." Lady Agnes was flustered and wouldn't meet her gaze, so Katrina walked to the mirror and saw then the blemish she was referring to: a purple bruise on the middle of her neck. A hickey, a love bite—a remnant of

whatever had happened with Graham the night before. So something had happened, after all; she had been foolish to think otherwise.

“Oh God,” she said.

The other girls swarmed and, upon realizing the reason for her dismay, gasped and giggled, hands pressed to their mouths.

Katrina turned to Gemma.

“You can hardly see it,” she offered, with an unconvincing smile.

“Shit.” Katrina began to fumble through the cosmetics on the bureau. “I’ll cover it up.”

“Help her,” Lady Agnes commanded the makeup artist. The woman obeyed, procuring a tube of concealer from the mess of bottles and brushes and telling Katrina to sit.

“Ladies, it’s time,” the wedding coordinator announced from the doorway. “We need to get downstairs.”

“I’ll catch up,” Katrina told Gemma, eager to be rid of them. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

The other girls filed out and the artist got to work, dabbing and blotting at the purple mark. Katrina stared at her reflection. The stranger looking back was powdered and perfumed almost beyond recognition, her hair sprayed into stiff, snake-like coils and pinned tightly to her head. She closed her eyes, trying to calm herself, to absorb the sudden stillness of the room.

After a few minutes, the woman leaned back with a soft sigh. “I’m afraid that’s the best I can do.”

Katrina opened her eyes. The bruise was now a beige splotch against the paler skin of her neck. She thought of Lady Agnes again—her delicate fingers fastening the necklace, then her look of shock and embarrassment upon seeing the mark. Katrina’s own mother, on the night of her senior prom, had fastened a string of pearls around her neck—the most valuable thing she

owned, a past gift from Katrina's father. That night would be Katrina's first blackout; she would throw up outside the motel room her friends rented for an after-party, later pass out in the suite where they would roll her onto her side so she didn't choke on her own sickness and go on partying around her. The entire night was hazy—they'd begun drinking as soon as she got in her date's car—but she remembered those moments beforehand, her mother fastening the necklace.

She had come home the next morning, her eyes bloodshot from retching and the necklace lost. Her mother was crestfallen; the fact that she and Katrina's father split years before seemed to have only increased its sentimental value. Though she had no idea what happened to it, Katrina told her the necklace had slipped off while she was dancing. "When they turned on the lights, we crawled around the dance floor, looking for it," she lied. At the news her mother had gone quiet, but said nothing more. She was accustomed to loss, at that point; it was what she expected.

Katrina wondered now how much Lady Agnes's necklace was worth. As much as the Nick Boyd painting? Surely not—but enough for a young, single woman to live on for a while? Perhaps. In all her times with Gemma, she had never once entertained the idea of taking her friend's possessions; she had no need to, as they were all at her disposal, more or less. But she saw now—in Lady Agnes's revulsion, in the titters of the other girls, in the way that Gemma talked and joked with them, differently than she did with Katrina: she was not of this world.

She let herself entertain the idea for a moment more. Stealing the necklace wouldn't be hard: the MacDougalls would be caught up in the aftermath of the wedding—the farewell luncheon, the inevitable tying up of loose ends, seeing off the last guests—and wouldn't think to look for it, or ask for it back, amidst all the other goings-on. They had no reason to mistrust her.

By the time Lady Agnes did realize it was gone, Katrina would be far away. When asked, she could say she'd left it on the bureau in Gemma's bedroom the morning after the ceremony.

How far could it take her, this necklace? She could get out of her lease in Boston, perhaps; sell her own meager possessions, spend a year traveling. She thought of the pawnshops off Route 75, not far from her father's place: *We buy gold!* She had never set foot inside. Surely such a valuable item would arouse suspicion. She had no idea how such transactions were carried out, but there must be a way. The prospect excited her, ridiculous as it was: international jewel thief was a fate she had never envisioned for herself. She felt poised on the verge of some discovery, an adventure of her own making.

She spent the rest of the night on the periphery, watching the festivities from a place outside herself.

After the ceremony they took posed photographs. Then there was a seated dinner, more speeches, dancing on the west lawn. It was easy to blend in dressed as she was, identically to the other bridesmaids, and with all the focus on radiant Gemma—a glittering princess who laughed loudly, swirling amongst her admirers in a froth of silk and tulle. They watched as Gemma danced with Ewan, who in contrast was stocky and dark and gave Katrina the impression of a bear on its hind legs, lurching left to right in his kilt, hairy exposed legs as squat as tree trunks. The other guests gathered, rapt, in a ring around them, under a white tent lit by a thousand tiny lights.

The dancing went on for hours, punctuated by more speeches and dinner courses. Katrina spotted Graham occasionally; he scanned the crowd, perhaps looking for her. She had managed

to avoid him most of the evening, the one time he did approach making clear that whatever had happened between them was a mistake she didn't want to repeat.

When the last song was announced she moved away, out of the tent onto the cold grass. People were gathered in outcroppings across the lawn. Some danced. A few smoked cigars. A drunk in a kilt was doing cartwheels, exposing his flapping genitals with every upside-down turn, to the cheers of onlookers. "You need at least six weeks to do the Greek isles properly," someone said as Katrina passed. She was at the last clutch of revelers on her way to the house, when she heard Sir Roderick: "Why, it's Kat! It's the American! Come here, love. Come here!"

Up close he reeked of whiskey. Even his yellow eyes looked soaked in the stuff, glistening and red-rimmed. He extended an arm, and as soon as she placed her hand in the crook of his elbow took off, leading her toward the water. As they walked, he spoke confidentially, leaning down—something about a recent trip to the States, a stop at Las Vegas after which he had visited the Grand Canyon. "Quite an astounding thing to see," he said. He was shocked when she told him she had never been, that she had yet to experience the American West. She agreed: there was so much of her homeland she still needed to see. Europeans never seemed to understand how vast her country was, how varied. "You're young," Sir Roderick interrupted, when she started to comment on this. "You have your whole life..." As he went on, she thought perhaps when she got back she would make plans to go west. She had no car, but she could take buses, or stop to visit far-flung friends along the way, perhaps recruit a traveling companion with transportation. Perhaps she could trade the necklace for a car of her own.

He was saying something now about the travesty of last September—the need for a place of refuge. "If the world really goes to hell, if we need to escape for a while, we can always come

here, to Balbridie, and be safe. No one would attack us here. I mean you, too, Katrina, of course...”

He was drunker than she'd realized. Still, she let herself picture the scenario he described: the MacDougalls sending a private jet to pluck her from the ravaged remains of Boston and whisk her away to a retreat where she could gaze at their priceless paintings while the wars raged on someplace else.

They arrived at the dock, where Sir Roderick stopped abruptly in the shadows a few feet from a hanging lantern. He stood with his arm around her shoulders. She shifted slightly, his whiskey breath stinging her nose, but he didn't loosen his grip. Beyond them a few guests had jumped off the boat launch and were now shrieking and whooping in the water, electrified with cold.

“Have you enjoyed yourself?” he asked in a quiet voice, so close that his mouth almost brushed her hair.

“Yes,” Katrina replied. “So much.”

“Will you come to see us again?”

“If I'm invited.”

“Of course you are. You are always welcome here.”

“Roddy!” Despite the darkness, someone had spotted him from the water. “Join us! The water's fine!”

“No, thank you,” he called back, to a chorus of boos.

Katrina slipped out from under his arm, then reached to take his hand. “Come on. Let's have a swim.”

He leaned back, searching her face. “I don't think you realize how cold that water is.”

“I’ll get used to it.”

She slipped off her heels and moved toward the edge of the launch, pulling him behind her, ignoring his mild protests. *No one will attack us here.* You’re wrong, she thought—remembering the kelpies, the boy who had cut off his own finger to save his life. He’d had to watch then as his friends drowned all around him.

At the edge of the pier she glanced back at Sir Roderick and then stepped off the edge. In an instant the water closed over her, a thousand freezing fists pounding at her temples, chest, and legs. Then her feet touched bottom and she popped up again, emerging at the surface to cheers from the others. One began a joking chant: “U.S.A! U.S.A!” A moment later, Sir Roderick plunged in with an enormous splash, and then surged up, spluttering, to more shouts and cheers.

The other swimmers stayed close to shore in the radius of lantern light, splashing and laughing, but Katrina moved away from them into the shadows. Breathless, exhilarated, she kicked onto her back to face the sky. Remembering the necklace, she reached around to feel where it was fastened behind her neck; if the clasp came undone it would be lost, disappearing forever beneath the black water. She pictured it settling into the murk at the bottom, where not even a moonbeam would reach; where surely those weird water horses were lurking now, in some hidden chasm, biding their endless time.

Sir Roderick came splashing towards her. “You’re a wild one,” he said. His voice was fierce and strange. Beyond him the tent glowed. Gemma was somewhere inside it, in that circle of warmth and light. Whatever happened, Katrina thought, she would go west—to a land she’d never traveled through, swathes of desert and prairie rolling like an ocean as far as you could see. The flatness of the plains, comforting in their sameness, stretching on to the horizon.

The stones of the necklace were cold against her skin, the dress ballooning around her. Its skirts tangled in her legs as she kicked, but when she stopped they sank, tugging her down towards the muck below, that deep and unyielding darkness. She regained her footing as Sir Roderick reached her. *Wake up*, she told herself, as his hands found her beneath the water: *You've been dreaming. Wake up, wake up, wake up.*