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PROLOGUE

The birds are making their battle cry. Miranda can see a group of gulls wheeling in her direction. White feathers. Glinting beaks. Mad eyes. She has enough experience with their capacity for violence to recognize their intent. They are moving into attack formation, circling her like bomber jets homing in on a target.

Miranda is on her way to meet the ferry. She picks up the pace, striding up the hill, her backpack swinging on her shoulders. The boat is late, which is no surprise. The ferry is always late. It is one of the few constants of the islands.

The lap of waves fills the air. The archipelago is shrouded in mist today. In the summer months, the fog is often present. There are no balmy, golden afternoons here, no sunbathing. The horizon is obscured, the sun a damp pinwheel. Miranda slips and skids on a crumbling patch of stone. Despite her eagerness to be gone, she must step carefully, consciously. Her progress is impeded by nests and baby chicks. The gulls have covered the ground like snowfall, making use of every inch of grass and granite. In their midst, Miranda is incongruous, a lone pine tree in a field of white.

The birds are not a silent presence. Their wings rustle. The chicks squawk to be fed. The parents shriek back indignantly.

Every now and then, there will be an explosion, a dispute over territory—feathers flapping, a spatter of blood. Miranda herself is not immune to their possessive, fanatical angst. A few gulls have been tracking her progress since she left the safety of the house. Any minute now, they will strike. Their wings are splayed, eyes glittering. Closer and closer.

But Miranda has come prepared. She is wearing thick leather gloves, exposing less flesh for the gulls to bite. Around each ankle, she sports a flea collar to keep the bird lice from crawling onto her skin. She wears a mask over her mouth to deal with the powerful stench of ammonia from the guano. A hard hat sits awkwardly on her head, and beneath it she wears a stocking cap, an additional measure of cushioning. Miranda is swaddled in a poncho, too, already streaked with slimy droppings, which the gulls have aimed and flung like weapons. When the ferry comes, she will shed all these items. She will remove her gear like a spy changing out of a costume, peeling off her wig and false teeth, unstrapping her gun, and fleeing the scene—becoming, in a moment, unexceptional, a face in the crowd.

Her knapsack is packed, such as it is. She does not have many possessions left. A collection of shells. A lucky puffin feather. A shark tooth, small and serrated. It is strange, after all this time, to make her exit from this place carrying nothing more than a backpack. But things do not endure here. The jeans Miranda brought with her so long ago have been reduced to rags. Her books have succumbed to mildew. Her ergonomic pillow is full of mouse droppings. The only items she has retained—at considerable effort,

requiring the use of watertight containers and all her cleverness and vigilance—are three digital cameras, one large-format instrument, and several cartons of undeveloped film. These are her treasures. She has photographed the islands in all their moods, from the crystalline sunshine of winter to the wild autumn storms. There are more than a dozen isles. Miranda has recorded each one. Chocolate Chip Islet silhouetted against the glitter of the ocean. Sugarloaf, a puffy mound. The Drunk Uncle's Islets poking their bald heads out of the surf. And the people here. The few who are left. She has photos of them, too.

The impact comes without warning. A gull slams against Miranda's temple, knocking her off balance. She cries out, her hard hat tilting across her eyes. Wings thunder around her shoulders. The gull does not escape unscathed either; it crumples to the ground, visibly disoriented. Miranda does not stop. Shaken and disheveled, she continues toward the water. She knows better than to pause out here, in the open. She mounts the cliff, breathing hard, finally reaching the crest.

Forty feet from shore, there is a solid wall of fog. The ocean is coated with coils of mist like smoking embers. Miranda readjusts her hard hat. The birds are keeping their distance now, regrouping, reconsidering. They shriek threats and warnings. They swivel and dive in her peripheral vision, menacing shadows.

Then the rumble of an engine echoes across the water. It is barely audible over the clamor of the gulls. As Miranda watches, the prow of the ferry noses through the band of fog. There is something audacious about its appearance, like an act in a magic show.