



W A T E R,
S T O N E,
H E A R T

A N O V E L *by* W I L L N O R T H

ALSO BY WILL NORTH

The Long Walk Home

WILL NORTH



a novel



Shaye Arheart Books
New York

*To Hazel,
“me dear old mum,”
for a lifetime of love and encouragement*

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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

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

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“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 into foam and mist on the jagged rocks at the base of the cliff when he'd heard the sheep. There was a scuff 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 all sure how he'd get *himself* back up, either. He approached the skittish animal once more and

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 stupidest sweepstakes all sheep seemed equally qualified. He resolved to tell the manager at the Visitor Center 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 of 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, who lived at Bottreau Farm on a hill above Boscastle, a small village in a steep-sided, V-shaped valley on Cornwall's storm-battered 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.

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 overnourished 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—though 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 up and 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?"

He'd had no idea who she was.

"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 Lilly was simply running away from his grief. That, and what he was sure were the unvoiced theories of his 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 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 Bonne 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 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 bluebells, 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 in 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 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 thick 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 boots.”

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 relative rare in the UK, flash floods do occur, often with devastating consequences.

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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. A 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 crates and 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; the 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 that 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 padlocks 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 cookie-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, then 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 emptying into the sea. The estate ranged for several hundred acres and 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. From her time in Italy, Nicola recognized the gracious, almost mathematical symmetry of the building's facade as influenced by Andrea Palladio, the great Italian Renaissance architect. The interior of the house, though, was saved from being 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 each room.

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, fragrant 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 henges, 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 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 work 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 DeLuca 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 from 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 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

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 "Come on, 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 of 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 sign in the window. She punched the number into her cell phone and discovered there was no sign 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 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.

was more a rumble. It came from somewhere deep within him, somewhere rich and sonorous. It was 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?”

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