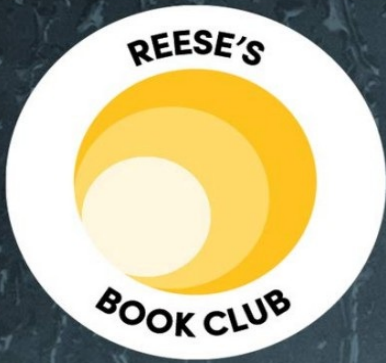


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LUCY FOLEY



THE
GUEST
LIST

YOU'D KILL TO BE ON IT

A NOVEL

THE GUEST LIST

Lucy Foley



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Dedication

For Kate and Robbie, the most supportive siblings a girl could hope for ...
Luckily nothing like the ones in this book!

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NOW

The wedding night

The lights go out.

In an instant, everything is in darkness. The band stop their playing. Inside the marquee the wedding guests squeal and clutch at one another. The light from the candles on the tables only adds to the confusion, sends shadows racing up the canvas walls. It's impossible to see where anyone is or hear what anyone is saying: above the guests' voices the wind rises in a frenzy.

Outside a storm is raging. It shrieks around them, it batters the marquee. At each assault the whole structure seems to flex and shudder with a loud groaning of metal; the guests cower in alarm. The doors have come free from their ties and flap at the entrance. The flames of the paraffin torches that illuminate the doorway snicker.

It feels personal, this storm. It feels as though it has saved all its fury for them.

This isn't the first time the electrics have shorted. But last time the lights snapped back on again within minutes. The guests returned to their dancing, their drinking, their pill-popping, their screwing, their eating, their laughing ... and forgot it ever happened.

How long has it been now? In the dark it's difficult to tell. A few minutes? Fifteen? Twenty?

They're beginning to feel afraid. This darkness feels somehow ominous, intent. As though anything could be happening beneath its cover.

Finally, the bulbs flicker back on. Whoops and cheers from the guests. They're embarrassed now about how the lights find them: crouched as though ready to fend off an attack. They laugh it off. They almost manage to convince themselves that they weren't frightened.

The scene illuminated in the marquee's three adjoining tents should be one of celebration, but it looks more like one of devastation. In the main dining section, clots of wine spatter the laminate floor, a crimson stain

spreads across white linen. Bottles of champagne cluster on every surface, testament to an evening of toasts and celebrations. A forlorn pair of silver sandals peeks from beneath a tablecloth.

The Irish band begin to play again in the dance tent – a rousing ditty to restore the spirit of celebration. Many of the guests hurry in that direction, eager for some light relief. If you were to look closely at where they step you might see the marks where one barefoot guest has trodden in broken glass and left bloody footprints across the laminate, drying to a rusty stain. No one notices.

Other guests drift and gather in the corners of the main tent, nebulous as leftover cigarette smoke. Loath to stay, but also loath to step outside the sanctuary of the marquee while the storm still rages. And no one can leave the island. Not yet. The boats can't come until the wind dies down.

In the centre of everything stands the huge cake. It has appeared whole and perfect before them for most of the day, its train of sugar foliage glittering beneath the lights. But only minutes before the lights went out the guests gathered around to watch its ceremonial disembowelling. Now the deep red sponge gapes from within.

Then from outside comes a new sound. You might almost mistake it for the wind. But it rises in pitch and volume until it is unmistakable.

The guests freeze. They stare at one another. They are suddenly afraid again. More so than they were when the lights went out. They all know what they are hearing. It is a scream of terror.

The day before

AOIFE

The Wedding Planner

Nearly all of the wedding party are here now. Things are about to crank into another gear: there's the rehearsal dinner this evening, with the chosen guests, so the wedding really begins tonight.

I've put the champagne on ice ready for the pre-dinner drinks. It's vintage Bollinger: eight bottles of it, plus the wine for dinner and a couple of crates of Guinness – all as per the bride's instructions. It is not for me to comment, but it seems rather a lot. They're all adults, though. I'm sure they know how to restrain themselves. Or maybe not. That best man seems a bit of a liability – all of the ushers do, to be honest. And the bridesmaid – the bride's half-sister – I've seen her on her solitary wanderings of the island, hunched over and walking fast like she's trying to outpace something.

You learn all the insider secrets, doing this sort of work. You see the things no one else is privileged to see. All the gossip that the guests would kill to have. As a wedding planner you can't *afford* to miss anything. You have to be alert to every detail, all the smaller eddies beneath the surface. If I didn't pay attention, one of those currents could grow into a huge riptide, destroying all my careful planning. And here's another thing I've learned – sometimes the smallest currents are the strongest.

I move through the Folly's downstairs rooms, lighting the blocks of turf in the grates, so they can get a good smoulder on for this evening. Freddy and I have started cutting and drying our own turf from the bog, as has been done for centuries past. The smoky, earthy smell of the turf fires will add to the sense of local atmosphere. The guests should like that. It may be midsummer but it gets cool at night on the island. The Folly's old stone walls keep the warmth out and aren't so good at holding it in.

Today has been surprisingly warm, at least by the standards of these parts, but the same's not looking likely for tomorrow. The end of the weather forecast I caught on the radio mentioned wind. We get the brunt of all the weather here; often the storms are much worse than they end up being on the mainland, as if they've exhausted themselves on us. It's still sunny out but this afternoon the needle on the old barometer in the hallway swung from FAIR to CHANGEABLE. I've taken it down. I don't want the bride to see it. Though I'm not sure that she is the sort to panic. More the sort to get angry and look for someone to blame. And I know just who would be in the firing line.

'Freddy,' I call into the kitchen, 'will you be starting on the dinner soon?'

'Yeah,' he calls back, 'got it all under control.'

Tonight they'll eat a fish stew based on a traditional Connemara fisherman's chowder: smoked fish, lots of cream. I ate it the first time I ever visited this place, when there were still people here. This evening's will be a more refined take on the usual recipe, as this is a refined group we have staying. Or at least I suppose they like to *think* of themselves as such. We'll see what happens when the drink hits them.

'Then we'll be needing to start prepping the canapés for tomorrow,' I call, running through the list in my head.

'I'm on it.'

'And the cake: we'll be wanting to assemble that in good time.'

The cake is quite something to behold. It should be. I know how much it cost. The bride didn't bat an eyelid at the expense. I believe she's used to having the best of everything. Four tiers of deep red velvet sponge, encased in immaculate white icing and strewn with sugar greenery, to match the foliage in the chapel and the marquee. Extremely fragile and made according to the bride's exact specifications, it travelled all the way here from a very exclusive cake-makers in Dublin: it was no small effort getting it across the water in one piece. Tomorrow, of course, it will be destroyed. But it's all about the moment, a wedding. All about the day. It's not really about the marriage at all, in spite of what everyone says.

See, mine is a profession in which you orchestrate happiness. It is why I became a wedding planner. Life is messy. We all know this. Terrible things happen, I learned that while I was still a child. But no matter what happens, life is only a series of days. You can't control more than a single day. But you can control *one* of them. Twenty-four hours can be curated. A wedding day is a neat little parcel of time in which I can create

something whole and perfect to be cherished for a lifetime, a pearl from a broken necklace.

Freddy emerges from the kitchen in his stained butcher's apron. 'How are you feeling?'

I shrug. 'A little nervous, to be honest.'

'You've got this, love. Think how many times you've done this.'

'But this is different. Because of who it is—' It was a real coup, getting Will Slater and Julia Keegan to hold their wedding here. I worked as an event planner in Dublin, before. Setting up here was all my idea, restoring the island's crumbling, half-ruined folly into an elegant ten-bedroom property with a dining room, drawing room and kitchen. Freddy and I live here permanently but use only a tiny fraction of the space when it's just the two of us.

'Shush.' Freddy steps forward and enfolds me in a hug. I feel myself stiffening at first. I'm so focused on my to-do list that it feels like a diversion we don't have time for. Then I allow myself to relax into the embrace, to appreciate his comforting, familiar warmth. Freddy is a good hugger. He's what you might call 'cuddly'. He likes his food – it's his job. He ran a restaurant in Dublin before we moved here.

'It's all going to work out fine,' he says. 'I promise. It will all be perfect.' He kisses the top of my head. I've had a great deal of experience in this business. But then I've never worked on an event I've been so invested in. And the bride is very particular – which, to be fair to her, probably goes with the territory of what she does, running her own magazine. Someone else might have been run a little ragged by her requests. But I've enjoyed it. I like a challenge.

Anyway. That's enough about me. This weekend is about the happy couple, after all. The bride and groom haven't been together for very long, by all accounts. Seeing as our bedroom is in the Folly too, with all the others, we could hear them last night. 'Jesus,' Freddy said as we lay in bed. 'I can't listen to this.' I knew what he meant. Strange how when someone is in the throes of pleasure it can sound like pain. They seem very much in love, but a cynic might say that's *why* they can't seem to keep their hands off each other. Very much in lust might be a more accurate description.

Freddy and I have been together for the best part of two decades and even now there are things I keep from him and, I'm sure, vice versa. Makes you wonder how much they know about each other, those two.

Whether they really know all of each other's dark secrets.

HANNAH

The Plus-One

The waves rise in front of us, white-capped. On land it's a beautiful summer's day, but it's pretty rough out here. A few minutes ago we left the safety of the mainland harbour and as we did the water seemed to darken in colour and the waves grew by several feet.

It's the evening before the wedding and we're on our way to the island. As 'special guests', we're staying there tonight. I'm looking forward to it. At least – I *think* I am. I need a bit of a distraction at the moment, anyway.

'Hold on!' A shout from the captain's cabin, behind us. Mattie, the man's called. Before we have time to think the little boat launches off one wave and straight into the crest of another. Water sprays up over us in a huge arc.

'Christ!' Charlie shouts and I see that he's got soaked on one side. Miraculously I'm only a little damp.

'Would you be a bit wet up there?' Mattie calls.

I'm laughing but I'm having to force it a bit because it was pretty frightening. The boat's motion, somehow back and forth and side to side all at once, has my stomach turning somersaults.

'Oof,' I say, feeling the nausea sinking through me. The thought of the cream tea we ate before we got on the boat suddenly makes me want to hurl.

Charlie looks at me, puts a hand on my knee and gives a squeeze. 'Oh God. It's started already?' I always get terrible motion sickness. Anything sickness really; when I was pregnant it was the worst.

'Mm hmm. I've taken a couple of pills, but they've hardly taken the edge off.'

'Look,' Charlie says quickly, 'I'll read about the place, take your mind off it.' He scrolls through his phone. He's got a guidebook downloaded; ever the teacher, my husband. The boat lurches again and the iPhone nearly jumps out of his grasp. He swears, grips it with both hands; we can't afford to replace it.

‘There’s not that much here,’ he says, a bit apologetically, once he’s managed to load the page. ‘Loads on Connemara, yeah, but on the island itself – I suppose it’s so small ...’ He stares at the screen as though willing it to deliver. ‘Oh, here, I’ve found a bit.’ He clears his throat, then starts to read in what I think is probably the voice he uses in his lessons. ‘Inis an Amplóra, or Cormorant Island, in the English translation, is two miles from one end to the other, longer than it is wide. The island is formed of a lump of granite emerging *majestically* from the Atlantic, several miles off the Connemara coastline. A large bog comprised of peat, or “turf” as it is called locally, covers much of its surface. The best, indeed the only, way to see the island is from a private boat. The channel between the mainland and the island can get particularly choppy—’

‘They’re right about that,’ I mutter, clutching the side as we seesaw over another wave and slam down again. My stomach turns over again.

‘I can tell you more than all that,’ Mattie calls from his cabin. I hadn’t realised he could overhear us from there. ‘You won’t be getting much about Inis an Amplóra from a guidebook.’

Charlie and I shuffle nearer to the cabin so we can hear. He’s got a lovely rich accent, does Mattie. ‘First people that settled the place,’ he tells us, ‘far as it’s known, were a religious sect, persecuted by some on the mainland.’

‘Oh yes,’ Charlie says, looking at his guide. ‘I think I saw a bit about that—’

‘You can’t get everything from that thing,’ Mattie says, frowning and clearly unimpressed by the interruption. ‘I’ve lived here all my life, see – and my people have been here for centuries. I can tell you more than your man on the internet.’

‘Sorry,’ Charlie says, flushing.

‘Anyway,’ Mattie says. ‘Twenty years or so ago the archaeologists found them. All together in the turf bog they were, side by side, packed in tight.’ Something tells me that he is enjoying himself. ‘Perfectly preserved, it’s said, because there’s no air down in there. It was a massacre. They’d all been hacked to death.’

‘Oh,’ Charlie says, with a glance at me, ‘I’m not sure—’

It’s too late, the idea is in my head now: long-buried corpses emerging from black earth. I try not to think about it but the image keeps reasserting itself like a glitch in a video. The swoop of nausea that comes as we ride over the next wave is almost a relief, requiring all my focus.

‘And there’s no one living there now?’ Charlie asks brightly, trying for a change of conversation. ‘Other than the new owners?’

‘No,’ Mattie says. ‘Nothing but ghosts.’

Charlie taps his screen. ‘It says here the island was inhabited until the nineties, when the last few people decided to return to the mainland in favour of running water, electricity and modern life.’

‘Oh that’s what it says there, is it?’ Mattie sounds amused.

‘Why?’ I ask, managing to find my voice. ‘Was there some other reason they left?’

Mattie seems to be about to speak. Then his face changes. ‘Look out for yourselves!’ he roars. Charlie and I manage to grab the rail seconds before the bottom seems to drop out of everything and we are sent plunging down the side of one wave, then smashed into the side of another. Jesus.

You’re meant to find a fixed point with motion-sickness. I train my gaze on the island. It has been in view the whole way from the mainland, a bluish smudge on the horizon, shaped like a flattened anvil. Jules wouldn’t pick anywhere less than stunning, but I can’t help feeling that the dark shape of it seems to hunch and glower, in contrast to the bright day.

‘Pretty stunning, isn’t it?’ Charlie says.

‘Mm,’ I say noncommittally. ‘Well, let’s hope there’s running water and electricity there these days. I’m going to need a nice bath after this.’

Charlie grins. ‘Knowing Jules, if they hadn’t plumbed and wired the place before, they’ll have done so by now. You know what she’s like. She’s so efficient.’

I’m sure Charlie didn’t mean it, but it feels like a comparison. I’m *not* the world’s most efficient. I can’t seem to enter a room without making a mess and since we’ve had the kids our house is a permanent tip. When we – rarely – have people round I end up throwing stuff in cupboards and cramming them closed, so that it feels like the whole place is holding its breath, trying not to explode. When we first went round for dinner at Jules’s elegant Victorian house in Islington it was like something out of a magazine; like something out of *her* magazine – an online one called *The Download*. I kept thinking she might try and tidy me away somewhere, aware of how I stuck out like a sore thumb with my inch of dark roots and high street clothes. I found myself trying to smooth out my accent even, soften my Mancunian vowels.

We couldn’t be more different, Jules and I. The two most important women in my husband’s life. I lean over the rail, taking deep breaths of the sea air.

‘I read a good bit in that article,’ Charlie says, ‘about the island. Apparently it’s got white sand beaches, which are famous in this part of

Ireland. And the colour of the sand means the water in the coves turns a beautiful turquoise colour.'

'Oh,' I say. 'Well that sounds better than a peat bog.'

'Yep,' Charlie says. 'Maybe we'll have a chance to go swimming.' He smiles at me.

I look at the water, which is more of a chilly slate green than turquoise, and shiver. But I swim off the beach in Brighton, and that's the English Channel, isn't it? Still. There it feels so much tamer than this wild, brutal sea.

'This weekend will be a good distraction, won't it?' Charlie says.

'Yeah,' I say. 'I hope so.' This will be the closest we'll have had to a holiday for a long time. And I really need one right now. 'I can't work out why Jules would choose a random island off the coast of Ireland,' I add. It seems particularly *her* to choose somewhere so exclusive that her guests might actually drown trying to get there. 'It's not like she couldn't have afforded to hold it anywhere she wanted.'

Charlie frowns. He doesn't like to talk about money, it embarrasses him. It's one of the reasons I love him. Except sometimes, just sometimes, I can't help wondering what it would be like to have a tiny bit more. We agonised over the gift list and had a bit of an argument about it. Our max is normally fifty quid, but Charlie insisted that we had to do more, because he and Jules go back so far. As everything listed was from Liberty's, the £150 we finally agreed to only bought us a rather ordinary-looking ceramic bowl. There was a *scented candle* on there for £200.

'You know Jules,' Charlie says now, as the boat makes another swoop downwards before hitting something that feels much harder than mere water, bouncing up again with a few sideways spasms for good measure. 'She likes to do things differently. And it could be to do with her dad being Irish.'

'But I thought she doesn't get on with her dad?'

'It's more complicated than that. He was never really around and he's a bit of a dick, but I think she's always kind of idolised him. That's why she wanted me to give her sailing lessons all those years ago. He had this yacht, and she wanted him to be proud of her.'

It's difficult to imagine Jules in the inferior position of wanting to make someone proud. I know her dad's a big deal property developer, a self-made man. As the daughter of a train driver and a nurse who grew up constantly strapped for cash, I'm fascinated by – and a little bit suspicious of – people who have made loads of money. To me they're like another species altogether, a breed of sleek and dangerous big cats.

‘Or maybe Will chose it,’ I say. ‘It seems very him, very outward bound.’ I feel a little leap of excitement in my stomach at the thought of meeting someone so famous. It’s hard to think of Jules’s fiancé as a completely real person.

I’ve been catching up on the show in secret. It’s pretty good, though it’s hard to be objective. I’ve been fascinated by the idea of Jules being with this man ... touching him, kissing him, sleeping with him. About to get *married* to him.

The basic premise of the show, *Survive the Night*, is that Will gets left somewhere, tied up and blindfolded, in the middle of the night. A forest, say, or the middle of an Arctic tundra, with nothing but the clothes he’s wearing and maybe a knife in his belt. He then has to free himself and make his way to a rendezvous point using his wits and navigational skills alone. There’s lots of high drama: in one episode he has to cross a waterfall in the dark; in another he’s stalked by wolves. At times you’ll suddenly remember that the camera crew is there watching him, filming him. If it were really all that bad, surely they’d step in to help? But they certainly do a good job of making you feel the danger.

At my mention of Will, Charlie’s face has darkened. ‘I still don’t get why she’s marrying him after such a short time,’ he says. ‘I suppose that’s what Jules is like. When she’s made up her mind, she acts quickly. But you mark my words, Han: he’s hiding something. I don’t think he’s everything he pretends to be.’

This is why I’ve been so secretive about watching the show. I know Charlie wouldn’t like it. At times I can’t help feeling that his dislike of Will seems a little like jealousy. I really hope it’s *not* jealousy. Because what would that mean?

It could also be to do with Will’s stag do. Charlie went, which seemed all wrong, as he’s Jules’s friend. He came home from the weekend in Sweden a bit out of sorts. Every time I even alluded to it he’d go all weird and stiff. So I shrugged it off. He came back in one piece, didn’t he?

The sea seems to have got even rougher. The old fishing boat is pitching and rolling now in all directions at once, like one of those rodeo-bull machines, like it’s trying to throw us overboard. ‘Is it really safe to keep going?’ I call to Mattie.

‘Yep!’ he calls back, over the crash of the spray, the shriek of the wind. ‘This is a good day, as they go. Not far to Inis an Amplóra now.’

I can feel wet hanks of hair stuck to my forehead, while the rest of it seems to have lifted into a huge tangled cloud around my head. I can only

imagine how I'll look to Jules and Will and the rest of them, when we finally arrive.

'Cormorant!' Charlie shouts, pointing. He's trying to distract me from my nausea, I know. I feel like one of the children being taken to the doctor's for an injection. But I follow his finger to a sleek dark head, emerging from the waves like the periscope of a miniature submarine. Then it swoops down beneath the surface, a swift black streak. Imagine feeling so at home in such hostile conditions.

'I saw something in the article specifically about cormorants,' Charlie says. He picks up his phone again. 'Ah, here. They're particularly common along this stretch of coast, apparently.' He puts on his schoolteacher voice: "the cormorant is a bird much maligned in local folklore." Oh dear. "Historically, the bird has been represented as a symbol of greed, bad luck and evil." We both watch as the cormorant emerges from the water again. There's a tiny fish in its sharp beak, a brief flash of silver, before the bird opens its gullet and swallows the thing whole.

My stomach flips. I feel as though it's me that has swallowed the fish, quick and slippery, swimming about in my belly. And as the boat begins to list in the other direction, I lurch to the side and throw up my cream tea.

JULES

The Bride

I'm standing in front of the mirror in our room, the biggest and most elegant of the Folly's ten bedrooms, naturally. From here I only need to turn my head a fraction to look out through the windows towards the sea. The weather today is perfect, the sun shimmering off the waves so brightly you can hardly look at it. It bloody well better stay like this for tomorrow.

Our room is on the western side of the building and this is the westernmost island off this part of the coast, so there is nothing, and no one, for thousands of miles between me and the Americas. I like the drama of that. The Folly itself is a beautifully restored fifteenth-century building, treading the line between luxury and timelessness, grandeur and comfort: antique rugs on the flagstone floors, claw-footed baths, fireplaces lit with smouldering peat. It's large enough to fit all our guests, yet small enough to feel intimate. It's perfect. Everything is going to be perfect.

Don't think about the note, Jules.

I will *not* think about the note.

Fuck. *Fuck*. I don't know why it's got to me so much. I have never been a worrier, the sort of person who wakes up at three in the morning, fretting. Not until recently anyway.

The note was delivered through our letter box three weeks ago. It told me not to marry Will. To call it off.

Somehow the idea of it has gained this dark power over me. Whenever I think about it, it gives me a sour feeling in the pit of my stomach. A feeling like dread.

Which is ridiculous. I wouldn't normally give a second thought to this sort of thing.

I look back at the mirror. I'm currently wearing the dress. *The* dress. I thought it important to try it on one last time, the eve of my wedding, to double-check. I had a fitting last week but I never leave anything to chance. As expected, it's perfect. Heavy cream silk that looks as though it has been poured over me, the corsetry within creating the quintessential