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J. Courtney Sullivan

New York Times best-selling author of MAINE

The Cliffs

A NOVEL



ALSO BY J. COURTNEY SULLIVAN

Friends and Strangers

Saints for All Occasions

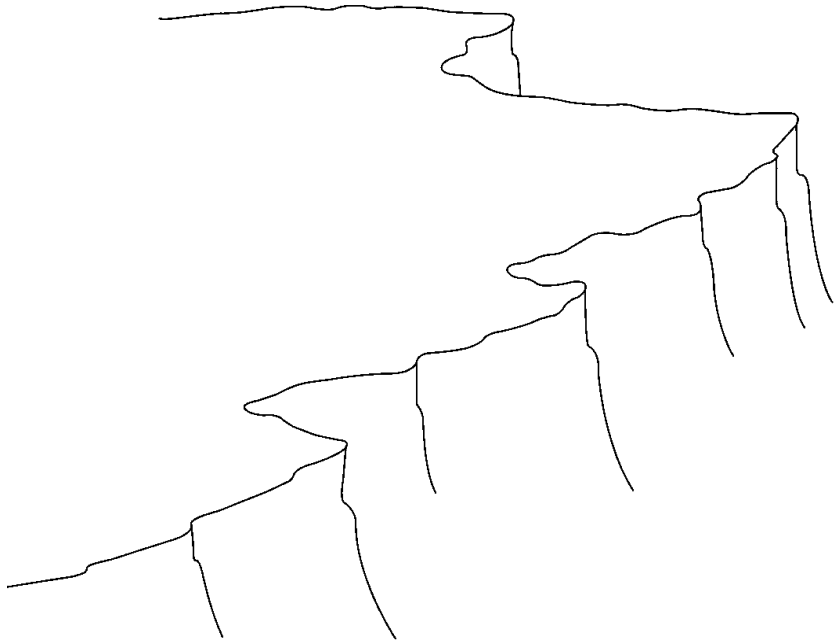
The Engagements

Maine

Commencement

THE CLIFFS

J. Courtney Sullivan



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A Note About the Author

147434561

For DONNA LORING, with gratitude and admiration

And in memory of DEANNE TORBERT DUNNING

Prologue

THE HOUSE, long abandoned, had stories to tell. The house was a contradiction. Clearly well-loved at one time, but left to rot.

Jane first saw it from the water. She was seventeen, narrating a sunset cocktail cruise aboard Abe Adams's lobster boat.

Three months earlier, on a Friday in late April, she got called to the principal's office for the first time in her life. Heart pounding, she walked the empty halls. Her shoes echoed against the linoleum no matter how softly she stepped, mortifying her. Jane was in the habit then of taking up as little space as possible. Her cheeks grew hot as she tried to imagine what she had done wrong.

The receptionist, plump and frizzy-haired under fluorescent lights, was grinning from behind her desk when Jane entered the room. She gestured toward the open office door with enthusiasm, and Jane wondered if she took some sadistic pleasure in hearing teenagers receive their comeuppance through the flimsy wall.

Across from the principal sat Jane's English and social studies teachers. All three of them were grinning too. They had summoned her, they said, with excellent news. Jane was one of twenty-five honors students in the state of Maine selected to be part of a summer program at Bates College. Very prestigious, they said. An incredible opportunity. It would set her apart on her applications next year. She would get to take a seminar for college credit, immersing herself in a topic of her choosing at a level not possible in even her most rigorous AP classes. That day or the next, they said, her mother would receive a letter with more details. But they couldn't wait to tell Jane in person.

Jane's first thought was that she wished she could tell her grandmother. Instead, she went home and waited for her mother to bring it up.

Five days passed without a word on the subject. Jane sifted through the already-opened mail on the kitchen counter when she got home from school each afternoon, but found no trace of the letter. She had visions of her mother hiding it, burning it, throwing it away.

When Jane couldn't wait any longer, she asked her mother flat out if she had gotten the letter.

"Yeah," her mother said, all casual. "I don't know, Jane. It sounds expensive. It sounds like a scam."

Jane explained that the program was free, the books and everything, even transportation.

"Nothing's ever really free," her mother said. "They're using you."

"For what?" Jane said, indignant.

"You'd still have to have a summer job," her mother said. "You can't skip out on that."

"When have *I* ever skipped out on anything?" Jane said. Under her breath she added, "I cannot wait to get out of this house."

"Where do you want to go?" her mother said. "Grab me a pen. I'll draw you a map."

Jane went to the room she shared with her older sister and slammed the door. Holly was in there, reading a magazine in bed. She didn't look up.

—

JANE'S BEST FRIEND, Allison, baked her congratulatory brownies and bought her a set of her favorite rollerball pens at CVS. Allison's friendship was proof that much of life came down to luck. She would have had no reason to speak to Jane had they not been assigned a shared locker freshman year, the year Jane's grandmother died and Jane moved with her mother and sister into her grandmother's house in Awadapquit.

Before that, they had been living in a rented apartment in Worcester, Massachusetts, with her mother's ex-boyfriend. An awkward arrangement.

They had broken up months earlier, but neither one wanted to move out. Jane and Holly had to tiptoe around him on the sofa, where he seemed to be twenty-four hours a day. Their mother was relieved to escape that situation, but even so, she seemed to resent the house. A gift she couldn't refuse that nevertheless held her hostage in her hometown when she had meant to be gone for good.

Jane didn't know what possessed Allison to draw her out, to ask her so many questions, to invite her over. Everyone at school had known one another since birth, it seemed, and everyone wanted to be Allison's best friend. But for some reason, she chose Jane, the nerd, the new girl, the one who read novels at the bus stop before school because she liked reading novels, but also because she hoped it might disguise the fact of how alone she was.

Allison's parents ran an inn. They sat on every local council and committee. They called Tuesday night bingo at the fire station and volunteered at pancake breakfasts in the school gym in winter. Her dad coached baseball and hockey. They were busy. But they always acted happy to see Jane. They asked her about herself, especially Allison's mom, Betty, who seemed proud of Jane in a way her own mother was not.

In the three years they had known one another, Jane had eaten more dinners at Allison's house than she had at her own. They never spent time at Jane's house, an unspoken understanding for which Jane was deeply grateful.

Jane's mother always claimed to be overwhelmed, though by what, Jane had no idea. She seemed unable to deal with the details of life that other adults just handled. Whenever anyone asked what her mother did for work, Jane lied. She would say her mom was a bookkeeper, which she had been once, years ago, a time before memory. She still talked about that job sometimes, as if she might be headed back any day.

Her actual job, if you could call it that, was going to yard sales and reselling what she bought later for slightly more than she had paid. She shopped on Saturdays and Sundays. On Mondays, she brought her finds to various local consignment stores and individuals and tried to make a profit. The rest of her hours at home were spent talking on the cordless phone to

whichever guy she happened to be dating, while drinking a beer, and circling addresses and times for upcoming yard sales in the newspaper. Or else sifting through junk at the kitchen table.

All the worst stuff, the stuff she couldn't sell, remained in their kitchen and living room, cluttering every available bit of space. The countertops were crowded with bowls full of old campaign buttons, clip-on earrings, baseball cards, batteries, and power cords that didn't correspond to any known device. On the front lawn, blue plastic tarps covered three-legged coffee tables and bicycles with no chains and God only knew what else.

—

ALLISON RODE THE BUS to Bates with her the first day, because Jane was so nervous. After that, every weekday in July, she made the ninety-minute trip alone to the stately campus, all redbrick buildings and leafy green trees. Jane read the whole way there and back, pride radiating from within so intensely that she sometimes worried strangers could sense it on her like a smell.

The seminar she chose was called Early Women Writers. The professor, a sixtyish woman with bobbed hair, wrote on the board during the first class meeting: *Most Lives Will Be Lost to Time*. She spoke the names of women from as far back as the sixteenth century who wrote down their life stories when no one thought it appropriate for women to write at all. By doing so, they endured. Jane's brain lit up at the idea. She devoured the poems of Lucy Cavendish and the detailed diaries of Anne Clifford.

On the Wednesday night of her fourth week of class, there was a massive thunderstorm. Jane loved thunder and lightning. She was under the blankets in her bed, reading until midnight, listening to the rain. Happy. Twice, the power went out, but popped back on a moment later.

On her way to the bus stop the next morning, she saw several fallen tree limbs, evidence of the weather. But the sky was a blazing blue, like the storm had never happened.

She got to Bates early that day. As she approached the classroom, Jane overheard the professor talking to someone.

“This one girl, Jane, she’s smarter and more curious than most of my sophomores and juniors,” the professor said. “I’m really impressed by all the kids in the program. I’m glad I signed on to do it. The whole thing is about giving some early college exposure to high-achieving, at-risk kids, so that hopefully they’ll be the first in their families to finish college. Break the cycle, you know.”

No one had said anything to Jane about that. She wanted to challenge the statement, to tell her she was wrong, to demand to know in exactly what way she qualified as at-risk. But she knew. She had a single mother with a drinking problem and no money. An older sister who had landed on the evening news for getting wasted and stealing a boat with a group of guys, an incident Holly swore she did not remember when she woke up in a jail cell the next morning.

Jane had thought this summer program was evidence that she had successfully set herself apart from them. Now she realized the opposite was true. The family she came from defined her and always would.

She didn’t read on the bus that afternoon, just stared out the window. The worst part of it hit her then: her mother knew why Jane had been chosen. That was why she hadn’t mentioned the letter. Jane felt guilty for putting her mother in the position of having her failings pointed out to her like that. And furious at her mother for being such a failure in the first place.

She went home and cried in the shower until the water ran cold. Then she changed into her work uniform—khakis and a white button-down shirt. As usual, she showed up at the dock five minutes early for the seven o’clock cocktail cruise and greeted her boss, Abe, with a smile.

The previous two summers, Jane worked days, welcoming parents balancing strollers and sunblock and coffee to-go as they and their excited offspring climbed aboard. Jane spoke cheerily into a scratchy corded microphone, spouting the same set of facts four times daily, receiving near identical responses from every group.

Jane would say: *Awadapquit's pedestrian drawbridge is the only one of its kind in the United States.* The passengers would nod at others in their party—hmm, interesting.

She would say: *Lobster was once so plentiful in Maine that they fed it to prisoners for every meal. Reformers railed against the practice, calling it cruel. To this day, by law, prisoners in Maine can only be fed lobster twice a week.* At this, the passengers would chuckle, since they themselves had, within the last day or so, doled out almost twenty dollars for a boiled one and a quarter-pound hard-shell.

When the boat got far enough offshore, Abe pulled up one of his traps and Jane plucked the most impressive lobster out for all to see. She waved the slippery creature, legs and antennae writhing, in the faces of children aboard. They in turn either grabbed the lobster eagerly or shrieked and hid in their mothers' shirts. There was no other possible reaction.

That summer, because Jane had class during the day, Abe offered her the coveted evening tour, on which the tips were better and neither lobsters nor children were present. Instead, couples sipped weak vodka-cranberries out of clear plastic cups and Abe hewed close to the rocky coastline so they could ogle the area's grandest oceanfront properties, the ones set far back from the road, hidden behind tall trees and long, winding driveways, visible only by boat.

That night, fifteen minutes into the trip, the sky turned an astonishing shade of orange, and Jane obsessed over what the professor had said about her.

Outwardly, she went through the motions.

As she did every night, she directed the crowd's attention to a tiny island, maybe a quarter mile from the cliffs, where harbor seals rested on the rocks. Technically it was named Saint George's, but Jane had never heard anyone call it that. The island didn't seem big enough for a name. In a bad storm, the whole thing disappeared beneath the waves.

"The island to your left was christened Saint George's by the British explorer Archibald Pembroke when he discovered this part of the world in 1605," she said.

Jane wasn't sure this was true. At some point she had seen a map of Pembroke's journey, and his final destination appeared to be a spot some three hundred miles south. She had brought this up with Abe, who said Pembroke had possibly landed in several different places. Jane suspected Abe didn't want to probe further, as doing so might require changing the script.

Whether or not Pembroke had actually set foot there, in 1930 the local antiquarian society had erected a small stone monument on the island to commemorate the three hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of his voyage.

The monument still stood. From this distance, it was nearly indistinguishable from the natural rocks on either side, but for the fact that it alone was plagued by a barrage of seagull droppings, which rained down upon it like so much white paint, obscuring the inscription on its face.

As Jane mentioned the monument to the passengers now, a woman in the front row nudged her husband and pointed in the other direction, up toward the cliffs.

"That one gives me the creeps," she said.

Her voice was loud enough that Jane stopped speaking and turned to see what she was pointing at. Jane's eyes anticipated what she was used to seeing across from the island—a spot where two giant pine trees stood, right where the land jutted out into the sea, with overgrown hedges running along the cliffs on either side.

One of the trees had fallen in the storm. She could see its roots reaching up toward the sky like long, grasping fingers. It had left a gap, through which Jane glimpsed a house, pale purple, very old, with turrets and elaborate trim painted green in some spots and blue in others. One upstairs shutter dangled precariously. The window beside it had been smashed. A white curtain billowed out from within.

The woman was right. The house was creepy. Jane had the strongest urge to go there and explore. She was drawn to deserted places. Those patches of the world where you could feel the life that had been lived there and was no more. New England was full of them. Boarded-up factories and state mental hospitals. An abandoned amusement park, where she and her sister once climbed the rungs of the flume ride, all the way to the top.

Jane considered herself law-abiding in the extreme. She would never shoplift or run a red light. She had never had a sip of beer. But to her, trespassing in such places didn't feel like a crime. It felt like honoring whatever came before.

—

THE NEXT MORNING, as Jane got ready for class, she thought of the purple house, and how nobody would know or care if just that once she didn't go to Bates.

In the living room, her mother was asleep on the couch, the TV still on from the night before, four empty Bud Light cans on the table. Jane had heard her come in late.

She watched her for a moment. She was beautiful, but not, Jane thought, in the way a woman her age ought to be. She wore the same low-cut tops and push-up bras as the twenty-two-year-olds who bartended at Charlie's Chowder House. She used too much eyeliner and pink lipstick, and she smoked, which gave her skin a crepey quality.

Not for the first time, Jane imagined some sort of Freaky Friday scenario, in which her mother switched places with Betty Crowley, Allison's mom. That one morning Jane might wake to find her flipping fried eggs in a tasteful sundress and Dr. Scholl's sandals.

Her mother stirred.

Jane got her backpack and her bike and was off.

She coasted down Shore Road, sneaking up each private drive until she spotted some sign of life—a station wagon or a woman crouching in her garden—and then rode quickly back the way she came. There was no way the purple house was occupied.

She found it after forty minutes of searching. She had missed the turnoff at first. A rusty mailbox at the corner of Shore Road was the only indication that there was a house there at all. Jane followed a long dirt path beneath a canopy of trees that blocked out the daylight, until she emerged onto a large plot of land, right on the cliff, overlooking the ocean. There was the purple house,

and a barn painted to match. The lawn had been allowed to turn wild. The rhododendrons in front of the house covered everything, up to the second-story windows.

Jane had the wonderful childlike sensation that at any moment, someone might pop out from behind a tree. A fear that electrified her, even as she knew there was no real danger.

She walked onto the front porch, careful to avoid the rotten boards. There was a historical plaque beside the door, printed with the name of the original owner, dating the house to 1846. Jane peered through a window into a living room. Abstract paintings hung on almost every available bit of wall. There was a portrait of two sour-looking young women above the fireplace. A pair of green velvet couches atop a fancy rug. A child's dollhouse in the corner.

Through a window on the other side of the front door, she saw a dining table and chairs, a crystal chandelier. She could make out the entryway too. The upstairs banister had fallen down into it, looking like a railroad track across the floor. A floor-to-ceiling mural of a sunset over the ocean had been painted directly onto the wall.

Jane walked the grounds awhile. In a grove of pine trees to the side of the house, at the far edge of the property, she discovered a small cemetery, just a handful of graves, old and crumbling.

Later, she sat with her back against the fallen pine on the grassy promontory that jutted out over the water like a fat thumb and took in the view of the island, St. George's, directly across. So close she could swim there if she wanted. She ran her hands over the universe of roots. She thought there was something sacred and sad about such a tree falling. Imagine what this tree had seen in its lifetime.

Jane pulled a book from her backpack and started the reading assignment for the next day's class. She stayed all afternoon. In the weeks that followed, she read every title on the syllabus that way, sitting in the grass at the purple house until it was time for work. She never went back to Bates.

BY THE TIME Jane brought Allison to see the house, she had discovered that the back door was unlocked. Emboldened by her friend's company, she dared to go inside for the first time.

"I've been dying to see the upstairs," Jane said. "But I was afraid I might fall through the ceiling and break my legs."

"And my being here makes that less likely...how?" Allison said.

"It doesn't," Jane said. "But at least you could run for help."

"This may be your worst idea ever," Allison said.

But she followed Jane inside and together they started opening kitchen cabinets. Dishes were neatly stacked. There was food that had expired in 1968, twenty-five years earlier. Animals had chewed through boxes of cereal and rice and tins of coffee and cookies. The cupboards were littered with droppings and shredded paper and crumbs.

In a pantry off the kitchen, the shelves were full of crystal and glass objects in every imaginable shape and size—bowls and goblets and platters and salt shakers.

"This place is spooky," Allison said. "Let's go back outside."

"Please, let's go upstairs first," Jane said, whispering for some reason.

"What happens if we *both* fall through the ceiling and break our legs?" Allison said as they walked into the entryway, where the wooden banister lay on the floor.

Jane hadn't thought about that. They went upstairs anyway. All that remained of the banister there were the bottoms of the spindles, cracked and splintered. There were marbles everywhere in the hall, and shattered shards of glass.

"What in the hell," Allison said.

They entered a bedroom. The bed was unmade. Clothes hung in the closets. A hardcover book lay folded open on the nightstand and a pile of *Life* magazines sat on the floor.

The owner must have died suddenly. But why had no one come along since? Her professor's words echoed in Jane's mind: *Most Lives Will Be Lost to Time*.

“I can’t believe you’ve been coming here alone,” Allison said. “There is some kind of weird energy here, don’t you feel it?”

Jane didn’t. She felt at peace there in a way she hadn’t since her grandmother was alive. Watched over, somehow.

As with most differences between her and Allison, Jane chalked this up to a deficiency in herself. Maybe it didn’t feel weird to her because the alternative was her own house—loud and cramped and unpredictable. The absolute opposite of this place.

The size of Jane’s house forced her into an unwanted sense of intimacy with her mother and sister. From any spot in any room, you could hear the TV, the buzz of the refrigerator, phone conversations, and whatever was going on in the bathroom. If her mother cooked bacon, the smoky scent of it clung to Jane’s clothes for days.

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SHE MADE THE MISTAKE of bringing her sister to the purple house only once. They sat together on the bluff and Holly kept saying how cool it was that you could see all of town from this distance, but no one could see you. It occurred to Jane then that that’s how she always felt in Awadapquit.

Holly mentioned the house at home later that night, and their mother snapped, “Do not ever let me catch you going out there again, do you hear me?”

She made a face like Jane had gone specifically to hurt her.

“Why not?” Holly said.

“Just don’t.”

Jane didn’t believe she had a reason. That was just how her mother was. She could manage to find fault with anything Jane did. Or maybe she was picturing wild parties, the sort of thing she herself would get up to in a house like that.

Jane ignored her. She went back, all through fall and spring of senior year, and in the summer that followed. Sometimes with Allison, to talk where no one could hear them. But Allison had started dating Chris by then. More

often, Jane went by herself. She went to read in peace, to escape whatever drama was unfolding at home, to watch the ocean. She knew of course that the place did not belong to her, but felt all the same that it did.

Jane left Maine for college the following September. For many years, she forgot about the purple house. Even when she went home for a visit, she never thought to go. It wasn't until she met David that she remembered and wondered if anyone had ever bought the house, if it was still standing.

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JANE WENT TO Wesleyan in Connecticut for undergrad, where her eyes were opened to the realities of inherited wealth; where she read George Eliot and Virginia Woolf and Shakespeare; where she developed a taste for bourbon and red wine and started drinking every night. Though not in the way her mother did, because unlike her mother, Jane knew how to stop before things got messy. Most of the time, anyway.

After college, she got her master's and PhD at Yale. She worked as an assistant at Emily Dickinson's homestead in Amherst, Massachusetts, and later, as a junior archivist at the special collections at Wellesley College. At twenty-eight, she landed her dream job, at the Schlesinger Library at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute in Cambridge.

Jane had friends, she socialized, but she was a very independent person, as she always had been. She preferred to live in a tiny studio, rather than have roommates. She went out to eat alone all the time, sitting at the bar, bringing a book, even on a Saturday night. ("I could never," Allison said when Jane told her this.) When she had finally saved enough money to travel through France and Spain, Jane went by herself, and felt lucky not to have to worry about what anyone else wanted to do or see.

Throughout her twenties, she occasionally went on dates, most of them bad and made bearable only by copious amounts of alcohol. A few times, she woke up in some stranger's bed, unsure how she had gotten there. Such behavior was slightly worrisome, she realized. But she was young. Unencumbered. Most young people she knew were like that. Jane never

missed a single day of work or even arrived late. She was never so hungover that she couldn't run three miles the next morning. This was how she knew that she had everything under control.

She had one serious relationship, at twenty-seven, with a chef named Andre. He was sexy and fun, but when she was with him, Jane found herself behaving exactly as her mother would. This alarmed her. This was her greatest fear. Some people took *What Would Jesus Do?* as their guiding principle. Hers was *What Would My Mother Not Do?* And yet she and Andre developed a false sense of closeness fast, over too many tequila shots and late nights out in bars. Jane moved in with him six months after they met, even though they fought constantly. Three months later, she moved out. An explosive drunken goodbye scene ended with Andre sobbing as Jane threatened to set his childhood teddy bear on fire.

After they broke up, she felt devastated. It was a feeling she had never experienced before, and yet it was familiar. Romance had always caused her mother harm in the end, setting her life back. Jane decided then that the safest thing, the smartest thing, was to be alone. To never dip her toe into those waters to begin with. She liked herself best when she was controlled, composed, invulnerable. That was the woman she wanted to be.

Jane hadn't been expecting David.

They met a few months before her thirtieth birthday. Her boss at the Schlesinger, Melissa, set them up. Jane looked up to her, and so this meant the world. David was a good friend of Melissa's. An economics professor, four years Jane's senior.

"He is such a catch," Melissa told Jane before the first date. "If I were straight, he's one of about three men on the planet I'd consider dating. He's kind and funny. He runs marathons. He loves kids. Jane, he *bakes* to relieve stress. Seriously, David is like the male version of Pearl."

Pearl was Melissa's wife, a social worker who was dedicated and hardworking and yet knew how to enjoy life in a way most people didn't. Every year the two of them threw a big Christmas party at their house in Jamaica Plain. Jane marveled at how appealing the house was. Not at all