

# MURDER AT GULLS NEST



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# MURDER AT GULLS NEST

NORA BREEN INVESTIGATES

JESS KIDD

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*For Claire Martin*

# PROLOGUE

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Wait for your eyes to adjust. You are in a tunnel, no, a pit. The walls are patterned, smooth raised bumps, waves and whorls. There's light, cool-toned, so, it must be moonlight. Moonlight through an opening to the sky above. You are alone but for a slumped figure. Need you ask: a woman. If she were alive her hands would be cold. She would hate the chill of this place. The dank walls glisten. She would mind that dripping sound. That scuffle of rats, near and nearer. If she were alive, she would look up to the light. She would shout out. Only her eyes are unseeing, a veil has passed over them. Her mouth is slack. Face bruised, lips blue, one of her hands resting palm upwards. It's dim, not too dim to see that she has gone. Can't you see that she has gone? It's in the angle of her neck, the odd twist of her head. Her hand is held out as if in supplication. Above, a cloud covers the moon, a shadow crosses her face, like a frown. When the dawn comes, it will find no reflection in her dull eyes.

# CHAPTER I

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The woman climbs the hill, a favorable wind behind her. Favorable only in that it's going in the same direction, otherwise bitter, with a rough lick of salt, coming in, as it does, off the wide cold gray sea. The woman and the wind make their way along a snake of a promenade, with an incline at the tail. The beachside proceedings have dwindled now. The deck chairs for hire and saucy postcard stands, the donkey rides and Gipsy Roselee Fortune-Teller to Quality, have gone, now that the summer season is over. Along the front, signs have been taken in and hatches boarded shut. Some vendors struggle on, supplying stewed tea and buckets and spades to brave day-trippers out from London for a lungful of bracing October air. At the end of the promenade grand villas hold forth above a grassy bank. The woman takes the steep path and crosses the bank towards them. The villas set their faces to the weather as best they can, some more senile than others, with pitted stone façades, blank windows, dank gardens, and roof tiles like bockety old teeth.

The woman is hatless. Nora Breen is hatless. The hat Nora has been given, a yellow beret affair, is tucked into the suitcase that she has also been given. The hat is not fetching; it gives her an air of a rakish middle-aged schoolgirl. Not that Nora is vain, but she would rather be without the hat, for she's relishing the feel of the wind in her hair, harsh as it is. It chafes her ears and stings her eyes, but she can hear the song in it and tears are not always terrible. Nora has missed the sea all these landlocked years. She is also starting to relish the lightness of her head and the novelty of all-round vision, without the wimple and veil. She reminds herself of the remarkable human ability to adapt. Transplant a person into different soil and although their roots may recoil in shock, gradually they'll stretch out again. She expects this is due to evolution and feels herself very forward-thinking for the notion. But then, as Nora knows, adapting is one thing; flourishing is another matter entirely.

On the first day of leaving the sisters, Nora felt that she might just float away, with her unrestricted vision and her light and airy head. She had thought of St. Joseph of Cupertino levitating in ecstasy around his friary, which was no mean feat for a portly Franciscan. Swooping about the flower beds. Gliding past the bell tower. His brothers below looking up at him with envy and awe. On this second day after leaving the order, Nora has developed a trick. She looks down at the shoes on her feet and tells them to hang on to her as best they can. Heavy and square and of an ugly auld style, the shoes are a grand bit of ballast. They are not her shoes; neither are the clothes on her back. She entered the High Dallow Carmelite monastery thirty years ago, so her own few bits would be long gone. These are the worldly belongings of another woman, discarded in favor of the habit and the veil. Nora can't, for the life of her, imagine which sister in her former order owned the coat she is currently wearing. Puce is a color you could certainly part company with.

Another second-day trick Nora has developed is keeping custody of her eyes. This way she can take in a snippet of this and that, small details, so as not to get drunk on the world. Little everyday things others might not notice: a clubfooted pigeon, a cracked chimney pot, light through a cloud, a child sitting on a doorstep holding a cat too tight and the look on that cat's face. Nora tells herself that the world may seem confusing but it is just the sum of its parts. Take it piece by piece until you can work out the whole.

She keeps custody of her eyes all the way up the hill. Not least because of the alarming nature of the puce horror she is wearing. The flap of the coat's hem or the swing of her arm is enough to draw her eye. For three decades Nora has experienced a muted palette. The colors she has lived with are calming to the eye and to the mind: pastel roses in the gardens, corridors of dark wood and whitewash, brown and black serge and snowy cotton. Apart from dawn and dusk the richest colors were the subtle golden thread of the altar cloth and the gentle gleam of a polished chalice. Adapt, that's what she'll do, to this riot of painted signs, lipstick, and puce coats.

Below, the seaside town falls away. Above, a milkman pushes a handcart downhill, late on his rounds, whistling. He gives her a lazy wink and nod. Nora winks back. A rupture in his whistle, he quickly looks away. Nora smiles to herself and is a girl again, alarming the fellas. It had always amused her.

Nora reaches the house at the tip of the tail of the promenade. Just above the house there is a small squat church with a cozy vicarage and overgrown graveyard. It looks to be peeking over its grander neighbor's shoulder. Farther on still there is scrubland and a jumble of vegetable plots, started during the war no doubt, doing reasonably well despite their proximity to the sea. A narrow path leads on to the uninhabited headlands and dwindles long before it reaches the cliffs.

Nora heads towards the last house. It is quite the aging beauty. Four stories, generous bay windows, a sprinkling of porthole windows, a tower of sorts. There is an undulating quality about the roof tiles that suggest either subsidence or fanciful notions. There are two gates and a half-moon drive that would amply allow for the turning of a carriage. Gloomy huddles of yew trees lend a funereal aspect. It would have been a grand place in its day. Now it survives as a boardinghouse. Nora notices with surprise the herd of rabbits grazing on a scrappy lawn; they are too tame to be wild and too muscular to be domesticated. They have winter-ready fur and a sharp look in their eyes. A few are lop-eared, some are downright fancy.

Nora climbs mossy stone steps and rings the bell, next to which is placed a discreet sign:

## **GULLS NEST**

**Accommodating Discerning Ladies and Gentlemen**

**Breakfast, Half or Full Board**

**Hot Baths and Housekeeping Available**

**Welcomes long-term residents**

## **VACANCIES**

A stout, wide woman opens the door. The rabbits immediately scatter. Nora sees that the woman is sturdy with the chapped and waterlogged hands of a lifelong charlady.



There's sweat on her brow and the pepper-salt hair that escapes from her headscarf is wet too. Her apron is none too clean and on her feet are clogs of the kind worn by slatterns back in the day. A doughy red face is garnished with curranty eyes. The narrowing of these eyes serves as a greeting.

Nora Breen states her name, only it feels strange in her mouth. It's a name she hasn't used for thirty years, the name she gladly dropped to become Sister Agnes of Christ. When she last used this name, her hair was bright auburn and her skin smooth. The coat on her back was her own and the shoes on her feet weren't lined with newspaper.

Nora is shown into the parlor, where she waits. Divested of the puce coat, she feels calmer, more at ease. The secondhand dress she wears is high-necked, a nice charcoal color, although loose on the bust, for she hasn't one. Nora in middle age is boyish in shape, of a type considered sporty. She entered the order before curves and left without them. In the interim years, who knows? As Sister Agnes her body was negligible, swathed in serge. Her body rose at dawn and daily observed the Hours. It knelt or mopped with equal devotion. It conveyed her to chapel or about her work in the infirmary. It was washed in cold water, fed on bland foods, kept largely in silence, and laid down on a narrow bed nightly. Consequently, Nora is of robust health, suffering from none of the vices her contemporaries at large in the world have enjoyed. Slim-limbed, smooth-skinned, tallish, with the long quiet hands of a saint. A glance in the mirror above the mantel there would tell her what she already knows. She has a face that looks severe unless it's smiling, with a strong jaw, wide mouth, straight nose, clear gray eyes. There's a gap in her front teeth that was adorable in youth and will be endearing in old age. Her brown hair, salted with white strands around the temple, was cropped for the veil. Now it is growing back, pelt-like, a short fringe framing her face, like a middle-aged Joan of Arc.

Nora sits straight-backed on an easy chair. She is not given to lolling. Neither is she given to fidgeting. She rests her hands on her lap, divested of tunic, scapular, and the rest now that she is no longer a bride of Christ. She wonders what relation she is to Him at all. A woman unattached, unbound, out in the world. She looks down at her shoes and bids them: *hang on to me*. A rising panic sets her doubting her decisions of the past few months. That insidious thought needles her again: what kind of fool throws up thirty years of dedication to solve a puzzle, albeit a troubling one?

Nora tries to smooth this snagging thought. Leaving the order was both simple and complicated, impulsive and the product of decades of deliberation. At some point she might well unravel this knotty decision, but right now she'll roll it to a dusty corner of her mind and concentrate on the job at hand.

She steadies herself in her waiting while the housekeeper fetches the landlady. The parlor is dusty and the fire unlit. The furnishings are solid, in the dark wood of a different era. The wallpaper is ancient too: flock with a sinister pattern, moths perhaps, or urns. Somewhere in the house there is the sound of receding footsteps and then the slamming of doors. A clock ticks solemnly on the mantelpiece, two china dogs slight one another from opposite ends. Outside, the sky is brightening, which is of no concern to the room, daylight being dissuaded by heavy velvet drapes and the somber yews that crowd about the window. The drapes move. Nora notices. The movement increases to a gentle sway.

The curtain twists open to reveal a child cocooned in its folds. The girl—Nora estimates her to be around eight years old—is clad in a cast-off cocktail dress and tatty elbow-length opera gloves. She hangs upside down, a few feet above the ground, her limbs tangled in the frayed curtain lining. She shifts her position to upright with the practiced ease of an aerial acrobat. A face pale enough to be luminous, a small, pointed chin, and large blue eyes, all in a nest of unruly red hair. There is a fox-like quality to the child, a watchful, untamed intelligence. She fixes her eyes on Nora and nods with grave formality.

Nora returns the greeting.

Two generals appraising one another across the battlefield of a dingy hearth rug.

At the sound of the door opening, the curtain twists again and the girl is concealed, the material left swaying only very slightly.

A woman enters, fair-haired and in her thirties, what dressmakers might term petite but proportioned. Despite her best efforts at plain dressing—a simple black dress and court shoes—she has a polish to her, a gleam. Like an actress playing a funeral scene.

She walks over to Nora. “Please, don’t get up. I’m Helena Wells. You made the early train? Wonderful.” Turning to the housekeeper, who has followed her into room, she cautiously asks, “Irene, could we possibly find some tea for Miss Breen?”

Irene exhales sharply and turns on her heel.

Mrs. Wells perches on a nearby chair and gestures towards the curtain with a questioning air.

Nora nods.

Mrs. Wells lowers her voice. "It's best to let Dinah come to you. My daughter doesn't talk, please don't expect her to. She rather inhabits a world of her own." She smiles as if to indicate that this is no bad thing.

Nora smiles too. "Thank you for accommodating me, Mrs. Wells, at such short notice."

"Helena, please. Not at all; as I said, a room has unexpectedly become available. Its previous occupant was due to stay until spring but left with no notice at the end of August. Fortunate for you, less so for me."

"Such a sudden departure?" Nora attempts to sound indifferent.

From Helena, a measured response: "It was no fault of the room, I can assure you. It's lovely, quite the best view in the house."

The curtain begins to sway again. Helena seems at pains to ignore it.

"The previous occupant was a lady?" asks Nora smoothly.

"Yes. Is that important?"

Some impulse prevented Nora from disclosing her true reason for visiting Gulls Nest when she wrote to Helena Wells, and she feels that same impulse now.

Nora smiles, ignoring the question. "And she left unexpectedly? How curious."

"Guests come and go. I can't help that." Helena looks carefully at Nora, her eyes pale, clear. "Where do you hail from, Miss Breen?"

The curtain flaps wildly.

"Nora, please."

Helena smiles and nods.

"The north of England," Nora says kindly but with finality. "You're not originally from Kent, are you?"

"No, London. I came here in the last year of the war, just after Dinah was born. Eight years ago." She frowns, as if the impact of her decision has just caught up. "How time goes."

"What brought you here, Helena?"

A shadow seems to cross Helena's face. "The fresh air, I suppose."

The curtain settles and stills, as if listening.

“Gulls Nest was a guesthouse when I got here,” Helena continues. “Already carved up into rooms; flatlets, they call them now. One old boarder even came with the fixtures and fittings. Irene thought it best to continue.” She flushes.

With embarrassment, Nora wonders, for her change of position, socialite to seaside landlady? Helena is clearly too grand for such shabby surroundings, with her high-class accent and glossy poise. Or perhaps something else is troubling Helena? Nora detects something fearful in her demeanor, a shrinking, a nervousness—she even looks afraid of her own charwoman.

“The war changed everything,” Nora offers. “We are none of us where we expected to be. Did Irene come with the fixtures and fittings too? What’s that saying... an old broom knows the corners?”

Helena laughs; the tension in the room dissolves. “I knew Irene in London; she was of help to me there. You will find us rather a curious assortment, Nora.” She smiles, as if to indicate that this is no good thing.

The clock ticks. The door opens abruptly and Irene, with a mutinous glint in her eyes, sets down the tea tray with a clatter, slamming the door as she exits.

Helena breathes out. She pours tea and dispenses milk and sugar graciously and rather with the air of someone who has just remembered their stage directions.

“Forgive me for not joining you, Nora. It’s not very English, I know, but I never drink tea.”

Nora takes up her cup.

“Irene will come and help you with your luggage.” The merest glance at Nora’s suitcase, secondhand, tied about with parcel string. “I do hope the room will be to your liking.”

“Thank you.”

“Irene will fill you in about the rules. She is a stickler for the rules; I suppose they contribute to the efficient running of the place. Supper is served at six p.m. sharp. Today is Thursday, so braised liver is on the menu.”

A groan comes from the direction of the curtains.

The women look at one another and smile.

Helena arranges her hands on her lap. She appears lost in thought, save for occasional glances at her new guest. The landlady has something to say, Nora thinks. She finishes her

tea and reaches to put her empty cup back on the tray. Helena leans forward and touches her arm. Nora catches the sudden scent of peppermint and something underneath that she can't quite place.

"Please don't mind the stories," Helena whispers urgently.

"Stories?"

"The people round here like to tell stories. The last guest simply left. There is no mystery, whatever they say."

Nora keeps her voice level. "What do they say?"

Helena shakes her head and stands up. "One ought never to repeat gossip." Her smile is forced, her eyes are blank. "You must be tired after your journey. I'll leave you to settle in, Nora."

Nora, carrying her own suitcase, is conducted up the main staircase by Irene, who has changed her apron for a housecoat. The thick gravy-brown paint and threadbare carpet, the smell of stale kippers rising and the dust motes falling, cannot detract from the elegant sweep of the staircase. The wallpaper is faded red with brighter scarlet patches marking the positions of paintings long gone. In these squares the pattern is clearer, garlands of chrysanthemums. Handwritten signs decorate most of the walls. Tacked to the back of the front door:

*NO ADMITTANCE AFTER 9 P.M.*

Passing through the hallway Nora reads:

*LAUNDRY*

*For BAGWASH leave laundry at kitchen door MONDAYS*

*Unless you request IRONING your linens will be returned DAMP*

*NO DAMP LAUNDRY TO BE AIRED IN ROOMS*

Pasted on a door on the first-floor landing:

## BATHROOM

*For the use of GENTLEMEN Monday, Wednesday, and Friday*

*For the use of LADIES Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday*

*Sunday by arrangement*

Along the corridor a small white dog wearing a red and blue striped ruff sits, still as a statue, on its hind legs. Nora discerns a low growl as Irene approaches, but the dog holds its position, guarding the door behind it.

“First-floor back,” Irene huffs in the dog’s direction. “Professor Poppy.”

“Professor? A learned man, then?”

Irene is all scorn. “A *showman*. Punch and Judy.” She nods towards the dog. “Before you ask: pets ain’t allowed. The old man has dispensation to keep that thing for his work. Although there’s precious little of that as I see.”

The dog fixes Irene with a cool glare. Irene looks away.

She opens a door across the corridor. “First-floor front.”

Nora follows the char into a room that’s all sea. Faded green on the walls, worn blue on the floor, and the ocean filling all the windowpanes. Nora sets her suitcase down inside the door and walks to the window. She sees a break in the clouds and a mackerel streak of light on the water.

“How beautiful,” she murmurs.

“No visitors,” says Irene. “No burning of coal what isn’t supplied by myself, at three shillings a bucket. There are no electrical fires for your convenience at Gulls Nest, so don’t ask. No livestock of any kind is permitted in the house either on foot or upon your person. No cooking in the room except to boil the kettle what’s provided. You may draw the water from the bathroom but only on your designated days. All meals are served in the dining room and you are expected to be prompt. The times are noted on the dining room door. No refreshments are offered outside these times. Luncheon is not available, so don’t ask. Boarders are not served meals in their rooms on a tray, not even if they are infirm. Housekeeping is weekly, on a day of my choosing. Boarders must vacate your

room weekdays between nine a.m. and two p.m. The parlor is for guest use between three p.m. and ten p.m. and all day Sunday. You'll find the privy in the garden, behind the rhododendrons. House shoes are recommended to preserve the floors. Rent is a week in advance, unless you have prior arrangements with Mrs. Wells." She stops, sniffs. "Miss Breen, do you have a prior arrangement with Mrs. Wells?"

Nora turns away from the window, smiling. "I've no prior arrangement with Mrs. Wells."

Irene waits, unsmiling.

Nora nods, finds her purse, counts out coins.

Irene pockets the money. "Coal?"

Nora shakes her head. "I prefer a cold room."

Irene casts her a look that approaches approbation. "Your latchkey is on the table. Don't encourage the child. Miss Wells is not to mix with the boarders."

Nora turns back to the window, opens it. Almost immediately a gull descends and walks along the windowsill.

Nora laughs. "How tame he is!"

Irene pushes past her and slams the window closed. The bird flutters away. "We do not encourage the gulls either. Feeding of birds is prohibited. Should Miss Wells come into your room—"

"I must shoo her out as I would a gull."

Irene snorts and bustles from the room.

"Thank you, Irene."

"Mrs. Rawlings, *if you please*."

Nora pulls a face at the closing door. Then, by force of habit, offers up a prayer for patience and humility. She stops, reconsiders. Controlling her temper was her greatest trial at High Dallow. But this wasn't the worst of her shortcomings. Her inquisitive nature was judged to be disrespectful. Her cleverness the sin of pride. These were traits that found her scrubbing a far greater share of bathtubs than any other postulant. Now, out in the world, she can exercise these unfavorable traits. This thought fills Nora with a strange mix of relief and alarm.

She looks around the room. Large windows, high ceiling, with dusty cornices picked out in gold paint. An airy room, worn but still lovely. Not a nun's cell. Nor, she was

thankful to see, like the room she slept in last night, which was in a hotel in Paddington and quite the den.

The clock on the mantelpiece tells the wrong time, twelve o'clock, when the day is clearly between None and Vespers. Without the structure of prayer, yesterday, her first day back in the world, had been flabby and endless until midmorning, then it galloped past. A worldly day must be marked in other ways, she remembered: the morning paper, luncheon, a glass of sherry, and a walk. Nora reminds herself about the whole adapting thing as she considers her surroundings. Instead of her cell's hard cot there's an overstuffed single divan. In place of viciously laundered sheets, a pile of old silk counterpanes. A lacquered modesty screen is set around the bed. Four panels depict a flock of herons over a river. Looking closer Nora realizes the herons are far from companionable; they are fighting over one fish, a great fat salmon arching upwards out of the water. Looking past the elegant arcs of wing and feather, she notices spatters of blood and beak-ripped gashes, blinded eyes and drifts of plucked plumage. Nora shudders and pushes the screen closed. She crosses over a frayed rug in the palest of blues to a vast mahogany wardrobe you could set sail in. Upon opening the door, Nora discovers a powerful smell of mothballs and one lonely hanger. A sturdy chair stands next to a spindly table. On the table lies a key attached to a fob the size of a bed knob. On the washstand there is a large pitcher and a very small bowl. There is something unsettling about the objects in this room, washed-up and unmatched. Like living in a doll's house furnished by a child who cares little for scale. Nora lifts her case onto the divan and opens it. She takes out a tissue-paper-wrapped parcel. Handling it as gently as a relic, she places it in the drawer of the nightstand.

Deciding against the mothballs, she hangs her other dress behind the door; the puce coat she hooks over it. She throws a tangle of modern undergarments in the dresser drawer and arranges a brush and comb on top. Then she pulls the chair to the window and because the table looks stranded without the chair, she moves that too. She opens the window wide in case the gull decides to return.

The darkening sky makes the sea look cold and the great swath of sand uninviting. Nora sees figures farther down the beach. They draw closer, a man and a woman, a young couple. Him tall, her slender, their coats fluttering in the breeze off the sea. A young couple in love perhaps, only that they are walking at incompatible speeds. At this distance



Nora cannot read their faces, so she reads their bodies. The man, holding his hat on his head, strides. The woman, holding the man's arm, lags. The man, impatient, is pulling away. The woman, pleading, is holding him back. He wrenches his arm free and storms forward alone. His trilby is taken by the wind, but he keeps walking. The hat, blown on, skips over the hard sand. The woman hesitates, watching the hat waltz away, then sets off after the man. The hat dances on with newfound freedom. Nora watches and ponders, for a moment, the mystery of human relationships. A lovers' squall, a misunderstanding, which will hopefully be as quickly forgotten as that hat.

The couple, the man ahead, the woman behind, cross the beach and turn up through the grassy bank and head towards Gulls Nest. Nearer now, Nora can see the expressions on their faces—the man's bitter, the woman's weary—before she loses sight of them as they pass behind the front wall heading towards the front gate.

Now Nora's eye is drawn to a third figure, who has stepped out from a hut farther along the promenade. A small man clad, almost comically, in a too-big army greatcoat with a camera slung over his shoulder. He stalks onto the beach and moves into the path of the freewheeling hat, to catch it, surely.

Instead, he stamps on it. The hat momentarily flutters and is dead. He lifts his foot to inspect, yes, the hat is crushed into the sand.

Malignant little shite, thinks Nora.

Tying the belt tighter on his coat, he follows in the direction of the young couple, tailing off before he reaches the uphill path. Nora loses sight of him to some cut-through unknown to her yet.

And now the beach is empty.

Somewhere in the north a religious community prepares for Vespers. Here on the southeast coast, Nora prepares for braised liver and a dining room full of strangers. Although the light is failing, she leaves the curtains open in her room, for she would not block this view for anything. The one bulb high in the airy ceiling and the lamp by the bedside do little to light this space; there are telling nubs of half-spent candles in the drawer. The water in the pitcher is cold but, sure, isn't that only what she's used to? Faintly, she hears a noise at the door. Drying her hands, she crosses the room to listen. She hears it again, at the gap beneath the door; a faint snuffling.

Nora opens the door. The landing is empty. The door opposite is closed and presently unguarded by the white terrier. She steps out onto the landing and peers down the stairs to the ground floor. The stairs and the hallway below are empty too. The rising odor of burnt onions confirms that supper is imminent. Nora climbs the flight of stairs to the next floor. The doors here, to rooms at the front and back of the house, are closed. There's a further flight of stairs, steep and narrow between wallpapered walls. Nora takes these. The wallpaper is that of a nursery, ducklings, gouged and scratched, perhaps by the hauled suitcases of guests over the years. At the top of the stairs a door stands open into a curious room.

An attic, all slopes and beams and sky. Into the roof a constellation of windows has been installed. Nora can only imagine how lovely a clear night sky would be through these windows, or a bright dawn, for that matter. Even on a gray day it is impressive. The room is immaculately tidy. A shelf holds a modest library of cheap paperbacks and larger reference books along with a few box cameras. The bed is no more than a mattress on the floor, but it is carefully made up. At the end of the bed lies a battered trunk. A pile of clothes is arranged on a nearby chair with military neatness, a pair of old but polished boots placed below. Nora's eye is drawn to the far wall, where orderly rows of photographs are pinned. She draws forward; the images are black and white and oddly engrossing. Blurry scenes, sometimes low-lit, with subjects barely framed within the picture: a faceless passerby, a bird in flight, an endless line of deck chairs. Among the monochrome photographs several images in startling blue stand out. Nora wonders at the shapes of flowers and leaves, abstract compositions, delicate silhouettes against a deep blue background. That the resident of this room is strangely talented she has no doubt. Taking up much of the corner of the large space is a sizable wooden framework draped at the entrance with black cloth: a darkroom.

Hearing footsteps on the stairs, Nora turns. "Dinah!"

The child has added a bedraggled fox stole and a cloche hat to her outfit. She takes a deliberate step right up to the threshold of the doorway and then halts. She lifts the fox's head so that it regards Nora with two glass eyes. Her own eyes she makes round and startled.

"What is it, Dinah?"

She glances behind her, then stretches her other hand out to Nora. There is a theatricality about her actions, each movement exaggerated. She's scared of me being in this room, thinks Nora. Dinah, harkening to something with a cupped ear, hugs the fox stole and takes flight back down the stairs. Nora follows. Leaving the room, she catches sight of an army greatcoat hung behind the door.

## CHAPTER 2

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In the center of the dining room is a round table. In the center of the table is a lidded tureen. There are six chairs, three of them taken; two by the couple from the beach, the third by an older man. All seem absorbed in their own musings. As Nora enters the room, the young woman looks up first.

“The new guest!” She gestures to the seat next to her. “Please, join us, we are waiting on the others.”

The men half stand from their chairs. Nora waves them to be seated.

The young woman smiles; it goes some way to offset the dark circles around her eyes. She holds out her hand. “I’m Stella Atkins and this is my husband, Teddy.”

Teddy’s nod is cool, barely polite.

The couple are handsome. Stella is in her midtwenties, brown-haired and freckled, her face rounded with youth, her eyes hazel and kind. Teddy looks a little older, fair-haired and unshaven. His suit has seen better days; it is crumpled and wearing thin. Nora notices that the fingers that play with the cigarette package on the table are stained yellow. Teddy suffers with his nerves, she thinks.

The older man holds out his hand. “Mr. Bill Carter.”

“Miss Nora Breen.” She returns his firm handshake.

Bill is balding and impeccably smart, with a gold tiepin and matching cuff links. His nails are filed and his mustache beautifully trimmed. In contrast to the slouched figure of Teddy he looks upright, if a little rigid. But when Bill speaks his voice, with its rounded Kent accent, is casual and warm.

“Irene has deposited the main event.” He gestures at the tureen. “She’s gone to fetch the *peripherals*.”

“Heaven help us!” Stella turns, laughing, to Nora. “You’ve come to Gulls Nest on just about the worst day, I’m afraid, Miss Breen. Braised liver. Teddy will eat just about