

Chapter One

October 1916
Morninggate Asylum,
Liverpool

She is not mad.

Annie Hebbley pokes her needle into the coarse gray linen, a soft color, like the feathers of the doves that entrap themselves in the chimneys here, fluttering and crying out, sometimes battering themselves to death in a vain effort to escape.

She is not mad.

Annie's eyes follow the needle as it runs the length of the hem, weaving in and out of fabric. In and out. In and out. Sharp and shining and so precise.

But there is something in her that is hospitable to madness.

Annie has come to understand the erratic ways of the insane—the crying fits, incoherent babblings, violent flinging of hands and feet. There is, after days and weeks and years, a kind of comforting rhythm to them. But, no, she is not one of them. Of that she is certain.

Certain as the Lord and the Blessed Virgin, her da' might once have said.

There are a dozen female patients hunched over their sewing, making the room warm and stuffy despite the meagerness of the fire. Work is thought to be palliative to nervous disorders, so many of the inmates are given jobs, particularly those who are here due more to their own poverty than any

ailment of mind or body. While most of the indigent are kept in workhouses, Annie has learned, quite a few find their way to asylums instead, if there are any empty beds to keep them. Not to mention the women of sin.

Whatever their reasons for turning up at Morninggate, most of the women here are meek enough and bend themselves to the nurses' direction. But there are a few of whom Annie is truly afraid.

She pulls in tight to herself as she works, not wanting to brush up against them, unable to shake the suspicion that madness might pass from person to person like a disease. That it festers the way a fine mold grows inside a milk bottle left too long in the sun-undetectable at first but soon sour and corrupting, until all the milk is spoiled.

Annie sits on a hard little stool in the needle room with her morning's labor puddled in her lap, but it is the letter tucked inside her pocket that brushes up against her thoughts unwillingly, a glowing ember burning through the linen of her dress. Annie recognized the handwriting before she even saw the name on the envelope. She has reread it now at least a dozen times. In the dark cover of night, when no one is looking, she kisses it like a crucifix.

As if drawn to the sin of Annie's thoughts, a nurse materializes at her shoulder. Annie wonders how long she has been standing there, studying Annie. This one is new. She doesn't know Annie yet-not well, anyway. They leave Annie to the late arrivals on staff, who haven't yet learned to be frightened of her.

"Anne, dear, Dr. Davenport would like to see you. I'm to escort you to his office."

Annie rises from her stool. None of the other women glance up from their sewing. The nurses never turn their backs to the patients of Morninggate, so Annie shuffles down the corridor, the nurse's presence like a hot poker at her back. If Annie could get a moment alone, she would get rid of the letter. Stash it behind the drapes, tuck it under the carpet runner. She mustn't let the doctor find it. Just thinking of it again sends a tingle of shame through her body.

But she is never alone at Morninggate.

In the dusty reflection of the hall windows they appear like two ghosts-Annie in her pale, dove-gray uniform, the nurse in her long cream skirt, apron, and wimple. Past a long series of closed doors, locked rooms, in which the afflicted mutter and wail.

What do they scream about? What torments them so? For some, it was gin. Others were sent here by husbands, fathers, even brothers who don't like the way their women think, don't like that they are outspoken. But Annie shies away from learning the stories of the truly mad. There's undoubtedly tragedy there, and Annie's life has had enough sadness.

The building itself is large and rambling, constructed in several stages from an old East India Company warehouse that shuttered in the 1840s. In the outdoor courtyard, where the women do their exercises in the mornings, the walls are streaked with sweat and spittle, smeared with dirty handprints and smudges of dried blood. Luckily the gaslights are kept low, for economy's sake, giving the grime a pleasantly warm hue.

They pass the men's wing; sometimes, Annie can hear their voices through the wall, but today they're quiet. The men and women are kept separate because some of the women suffer from a peculiar nervous disorder that makes their blood run hot. These women cannot abide the sight of a man, will break out in tremors, try to tear off their clothes, will chew through their own tongues and fall down convulsing.

Or so they say. Annie has never seen it happen. They like to tell stories about the patients, particularly the female ones.

But Annie is safe here, from the great big world. The world of men. And that is what matters. The small rooms, the narrow confines are not so different from the old cottage in Ballintoy, four tiny rooms, the roiling Irish Sea not twenty paces from her front door. Here, the air in the courtyard is ripe with the smell of ocean, too, though if it is close by, Annie cannot see it, has not seen it in four years.

It is both a comfort and a curse. Some days, she wakes from nightmares of black water rushing into her open mouth, freezing her lungs to stone. The ocean is deep and unforgiving. Families in Ballintoy have lost fathers and brothers, sisters and daughters to the sea for as long as she can remember.

She's seen the water of the Atlantic Ocean choked with hundreds of bodies. More bodies than are buried in all of Ballintoy's graveyard.

And yet on other days, she wakes to find plaster beneath her fingernails where she has scratched at the walls, desperate to get out, to return to it. Her blood surges through her veins with the motion of the sea. She craves it.

On the far side of the courtyard they enter the small vestibule that leads to the doctors' private rooms. The nurse indicates that Annie should step aside as she knocks and then, at a command to enter, unlocks the door to Dr. Davenport's office. He rises from behind his desk and gestures to a chair.

Nigel Davenport is a young man. Annie likes him, has always felt he has the well-being of his patients in mind. She's overheard the nurses talk about how difficult it is for the parish to get doctors to remain at the asylum. Their job is discouraging when so few patients respond to treatment. Plus, it's far more lucrative to be a family doctor, setting bones and delivering babies. He is always nice to her, if formal. Whenever he sees her, he thinks about the incident with the dove. They all do. How she was found once cradling a dead bird in her arms, cooing to it like a baby.

She knows it wasn't a baby. It was just a bird. It had fallen out of the flue, hit the hearth in a puff of loose feathers. Dirty, sooty bird, and yet beautiful in its way. She only wanted to hold it. To have something of her own to hold.

He folds his hands and rests them on the desktop. She stares at his long fingers, the way they fold into one another. She wonders if they are strong hands. It is not the first time she has wondered this. "I heard you received another letter yesterday."

Her heart trembles inside her chest.

"It is against our policy to intrude too much on our patients' privacy, Annie. We don't read patients' mail, as they do at other homes. We are not like that here." His smile is kind, but there is a slight furrow between his brows and Annie has the strangest urge to press her finger there, to smooth the soft flesh. But of course she would never. Voluntary touching is not allowed. "Here, you may show us only of your own free will. But you can see how these letters would be a matter of concern for us, don't you?"

His voice is gentle, encouraging, almost a physical caress in the stillness. Bait. She remains silent, as if to speak would be to touch him back. Perhaps if she

doesn't respond, he will stop pressing. Perhaps she will vanish into air if she is quiet enough. She used to play this game all the time in the vast fields and cliffsides of Ballintoy-the recollection returns with startling clarity: the Vanishing Game. Generally, it worked. She could go whole days drifting in the meadow behind the house, imagining stories, without ever being seen or spoken to. A living phantom.

The doctor stretches his neck against his high collar. He has a good, solid neck. Hands, too. He could easily overpower her. That is probably the point of such strength. "Perhaps you would like to show it to me, Annie? For your own peace of mind? It's not good to have secrets-secrets weigh on you, hold you down."

She shivers. She longs to share it and burns to hide it. "It's from a friend."

"The friend who used to work with you aboard the passenger ship?" He pauses. "Violet, wasn't it?"

She starts to panic. "She's working on another ship now. She says they are in dire need of help and she wonders if I would return to service." There. It's out.

His dark eyes study her. She cannot resist the weight of his expectation. She has never been good at saying no; all she has ever wanted was to please people, her father, her mother. To please all of them. To be good.

Like she once was.

My good Annie, the Lord favors good girls, said her da'.

She reaches into her pocket and hands him the letter. She can hardly stand to watch him read, feeling as though it is not the letter but her own body that has been exposed.

Then he glances up at her, and slowly his mouth forms a smile.
"Don't you see, Annie?"

She knots her hands together in her lap. "See?" She knows what he's going to say next.

"You know that you're not really sick, not like the others, don't you?" He says these words kindly, as though he is trying to spare her feelings. As though she doesn't already know it. "We debated the morality of keeping you here, but we were reluctant to discharge you because- Well, frankly, we didn't know what to do with you."

Annie had no recollection of her own past when she was admitted to Morninggate Asylum. She woke up in one of the narrow beds, her arms and legs bruised, not to mention the awful, aching wound on her head. A constable had found her unconscious behind a public house. She didn't appear to be a prostitute-she was neither dressed for it nor stinking of gin.

But no one knew who she was. At the time, Annie scarcely knew herself. She couldn't even tell them her name. The physician had no choice but to sign the court order to detain her at the asylum.

Her memory has, over time, begun to return. Not all of it, though; when she tries to recall certain things, all she gets is a blur. The night the great ship went down is, of course, cut into her memory with the prismatic perfection of solid ice. It's what came before that feels unreal. She remembers the two men, each in their turn, though sometimes she feels as though they have braided together in her mind into just one man, or all men. And then, before that: fragments of green fields and endless sermons, intoned prayer and howling northern wind. A world too unfathomably big to comprehend.

A terrible, gaping loneliness that has been her only companion for four years.

Surely it is better to be kept safe inside this place, while the world and its secrets, its wars, its false promises, are kept away, outside the thick brick walls.

Dr. Davenport looks at her with that same wavering smile. "Don't you think, Annie?" he is saying.

"Think what?"

"It would be wrong to keep you here, with the war on. Taking up a bed that could be used for someone who is truly unwell. There are soldiers suffering from shell shock. Everton Alley teems with poor and broken spirits, tormented by demons from their time on the battlefield." His eyes are dark and very steady. They linger on hers. "You must write to the White Star office and ask for your old job, as your friend suggests. It's the right thing to do under the circumstances."

She is stunned, not by his assertions but that this is all happening so quickly. She is having trouble keeping up with his words. A slow dread creeps into her chest.

"You're fine, my dear. You're just scared. It's understandable-but you'll be right as rain once you see your friend and start working again. It's about time, anyway, don't you think?"

She can't help but feel stubbornly rejected, spurned, almost. For four years, she's managed things so that she could stay. Kept her secrets. Was careful not to disrupt anything, not to do anything wrong.

She has been so good.

Now her life, her home, the only security she knows, is being ripped away from her and she is once more being forced out into the unknown.

But there is no turning back. She knows she cannot refuse him this, cannot refuse him anything. Not when he has been so kind.

He folds up the letter and holds it out to her. Her gaze lingers on his strong hands. Her fingers brush against his when she takes it back. Forbidden.

"I should be happy to sign the release papers," her doctor says.
"Congratulations, Miss Hebbley, on your return to the world."

3 October 1916

My dear Annie,

I hope this letter finds you. Yes, I am writing again even though I have not heard from you since the letter you sent via the White Star Line head office. You can understand why I continue to write. I pray your condition has not worsened. I was sorry to read of your current situation, although, from your letter, you do not sound unwell to me. Can you ever forgive me for losing track of you after that Terrible Night? I didn't know if you had lived or died. I feared I would never see you again.

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