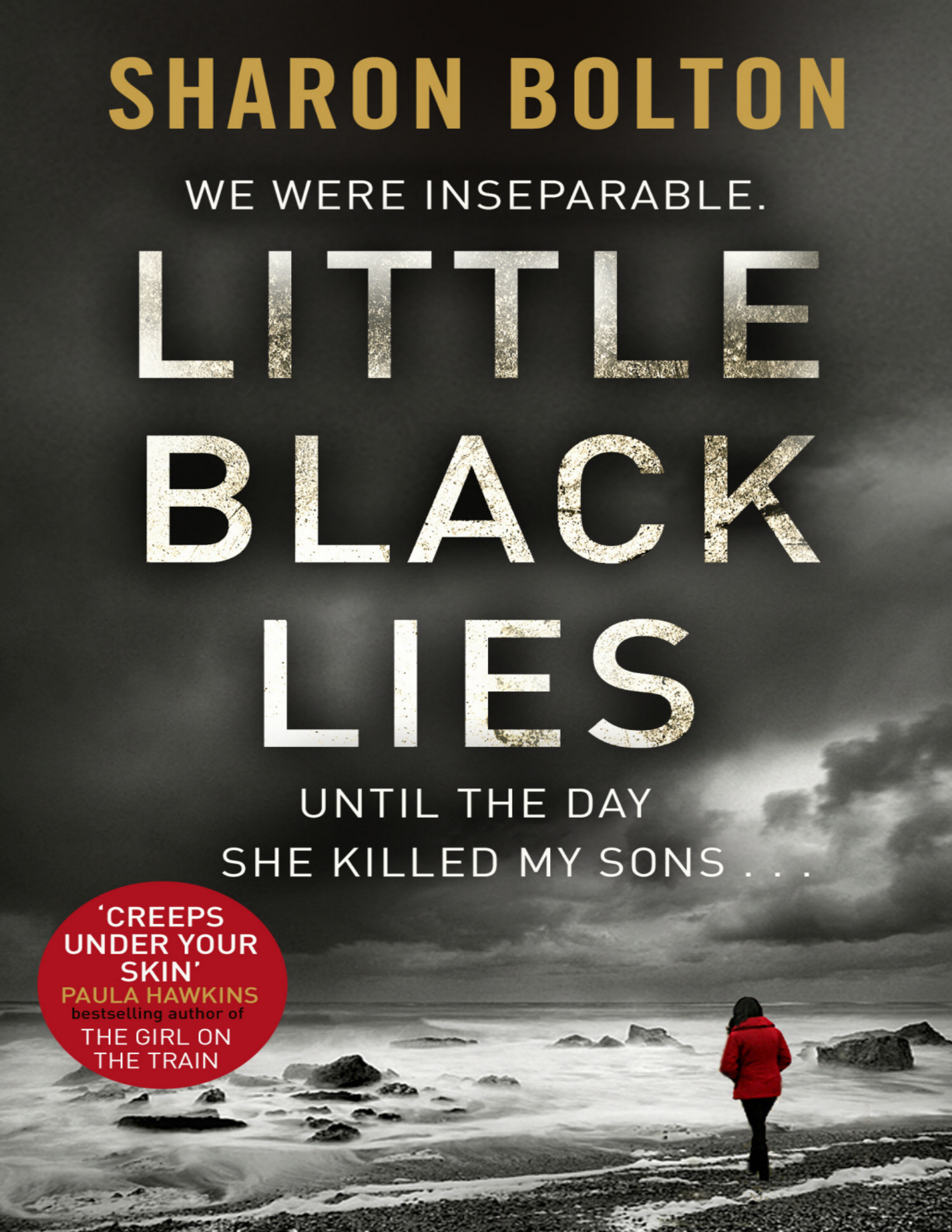
SHARON BOLTON
WE WERE INSEPARABLE.
LITTLE BLACK LIES
UNTIL THE DAY
SHE KILLED MY SONS . . .
'CREEPS UNDER YOUR SKIN'
PAULA HAWKINS
bestselling author of
THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

About the Book

What's the worst thing your best friend could do to you?

Admittedly, it wasn't murder. A moment's carelessness, a tragic accident – and two children are dead. Yours.

Living in a small island community, you can't escape the woman who destroyed your life. Each chance encounter is an agonizing reminder of what you've lost – your family, your future, your sanity.

How long before revenge becomes irresistible? With no reason to go on living, why shouldn't you turn your darkest thoughts into deeds?

So now, what's the worst thing you can do to your best friend?

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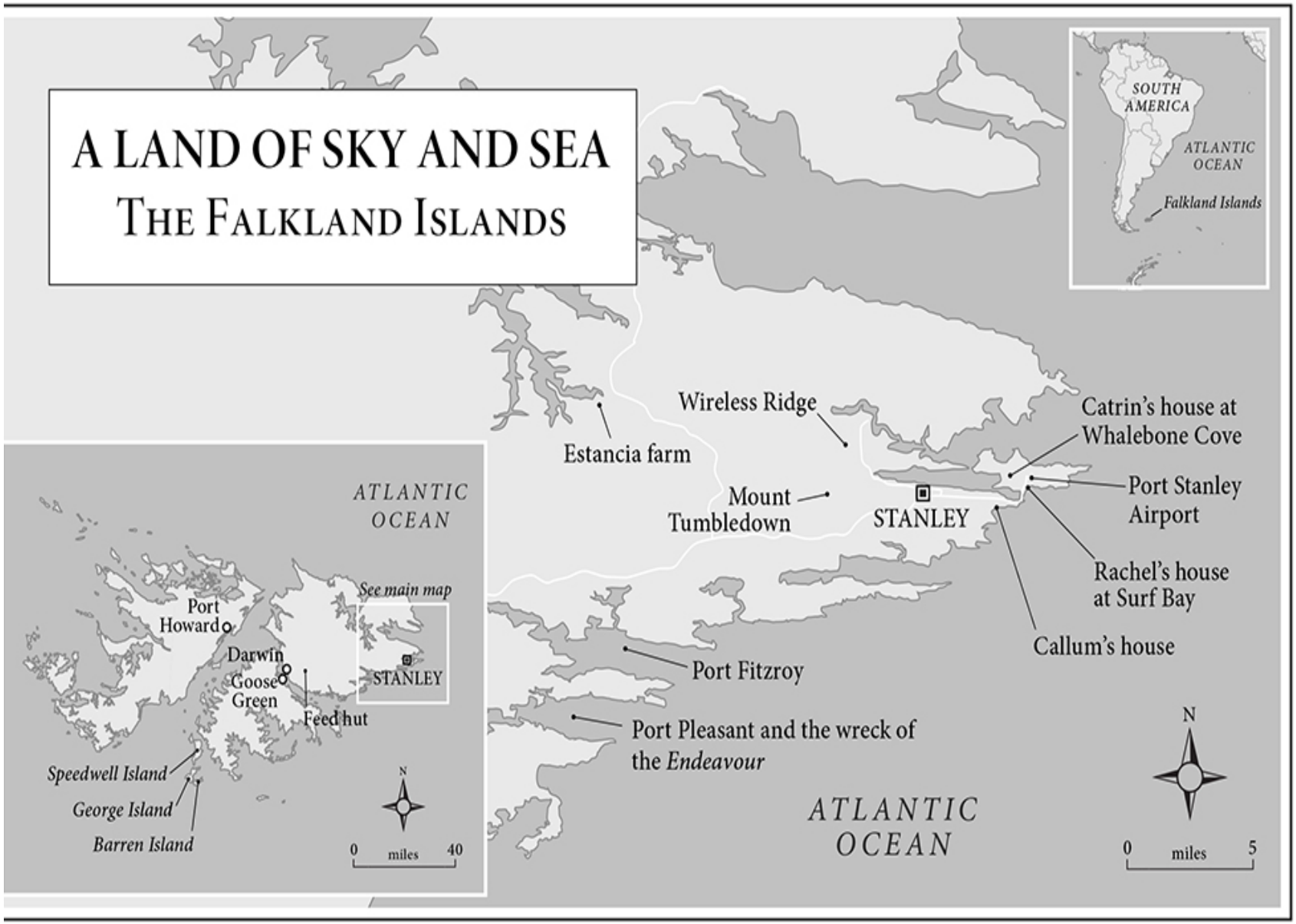
and for Sarah, who makes me do it better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Ah! well a-day! what evil looks
Had I from old and young!
Instead of the cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

PART ONE
Catrin

I’ve been wondering if I have what it takes to kill. Whether I can look a living creature in the eye and take the one irreversible action that ends a life. Asked and answered, I suppose. I have no difficulty in killing. I’m actually rather good at it.

DAY TWO
Tuesday, 1 November 1994

1

I BELIEVE JUST about anyone can kill in the right circumstances, given enough motivation. The question is, am I there yet? I think I must be. Because lately, it seems, I've been thinking of little else.

It is a minute after midnight. In two days' time it will be the third of November. Two more days. Am I there yet?

Something is moving. Not the water surrounding me, that seems frozen in time, but the reflection of a bird. I don't need to glance up to see that it's a giant petrel. Massive, prehistoric-looking beasts with their six-foot wing span and their huge curving beaks, they often follow the boat, especially when I'm out at night, keeping pace with me however far I go or how fast I drive.

I'm not driving now. I'm sitting in the cockpit, staring at a photograph of my two sons. I must have been doing so for some time because my eyes are stinging. I squeeze them shut, then force myself to look away.

In the distance, the mountains are dark against a paler night sky and the water around me has the appearance and texture of an old glass mirror. Still, flawed in places, not quite translucent. It does this at times, this ocean, assumes a character so unlike itself as to take you momentarily unawares, make you forget that it's one of the harshest, least forgiving seas in the world.

I'm anchored off the coast of the Falkland Islands, a tiny archipelago in the South Atlantic Ocean, so distant from everywhere that matters, so unimportant on the world stage, that for centuries it escaped just about everybody's

attention. And then it became the discarded bone over which two ego-driven dogs of politics picked a fight. For a few brief weeks the whole world knew about us. That was over a decade ago and the world soon forgot.

We don't forget though, and neither does Argentina. Every so often, even twelve years after it had its ass kicked, the Argentine government casts a leery eye in our direction. The Argentinians say the Islas Malvinas belong to them. We say 'up yours'.

Not that we're so very happy to be what we've become: an expensive indulgence, one of the last remaining scraps of the British Empire. We long for independence, for the income to fund our own defence. The hope is a faint one. And we never feel safe.

The photograph of my sons has faded. It's not so obvious now but in the daylight the red of Kit's jacket will be a dull pink, Ned's yellow boots a sickly cream colour.

On the water, the reflected moon is so still and perfect that it might have fallen, whole and undamaged, from the sky. It lies a little way off the stern, as slender and unsubstantial as a sliver of wood shaving. Stars are scattered around it like litter, as though someone has sprinkled them randomly over the surface of the ocean. There is no light pollution in this far corner of the South Atlantic, and every star in the sky tonight is reflected directly below me. I seem surrounded by stars. When I lived briefly in the cities of the northern hemisphere, where the stars are pinpricks of light, sometimes invisible entirely, it was easy to forget their sheer number. Back home, every time I come out upon the ocean at night, I'm reminded of the vastness of the sky.

I rouse myself, not sure how long I've been sitting here, but knowing I have another twenty minutes or so of work to do before I'm done for the night. I change the tank, check the oxygen levels, put my mask and mouthpiece in place and step off the back of the boat.

Instantly the water wraps its cold blanket around me, chilling me in spite of the protective wetsuit I'm wearing, but I never mind this. I think of it as part of the acclimatization process, the transformation I have to undergo from land crawler to sea creature.

The water isn't deep, twenty metres at most. Of course I shouldn't dive by myself. I'm breaking the first rule of safety among divers even by being on the boat alone, but there is no one alive any more with either the authority or the influence to stop me, and I have little interest in safeguarding myself.

I look down, see the dive-line descending, disappearing into the darkness, then I let air out of my jacket and sink. A few feet down, I flip and start swimming towards the kelp forest that is coming into view below me.

Kelp, what most people call seaweed, grows in abundance here. Anchored to the seabed with a root-like structure, it stretches towards the light, its fronds and tendrils kept upright by gas-filled floats.

A boat was wrecked here, long ago, and since then the entire structure has broken apart to form the majestic, submarine architecture of the ocean floor. Huge pieces of wood, colonized by sea life, soar up from the seabed like underwater cities. Above it all, like an ancient forest, only one in constant, graceful motion, towers the kelp.

I reach its tip and continue down. In daylight, in clear conditions, the sheer brilliance of the colours around me would be astonishing. At night, seen only with the aid of my torch, they are softer, more muted. The custard of the kelp, the deep, smoky blue of the water, the occasional flashes of ruby red as crabs scuttle across the sand.

I am collecting samples of sea urchin. The kelp forests are important fish spawning areas but recently they've been in decline and one possible culprit is the sea urchin that eats away at their roots. The people I work with need to know if some new, invasive species is at large, or

whether the normal population has just become a bit greedier. Potentially, selling fishing licences could be enormously lucrative for the islands' economy. The fish matter, so the kelp forests matter, so my urchins matter. Overnight, they'll be stored in refrigerated containers on the boat; in the morning I'll take them to my lab in Stanley.

A couple of metres from the ocean floor, I make my way along a path I've already committed to memory. Many divers don't like the kelp. They're repulsed by the wet plant life brushing past them; they dread the occasions when it wraps itself, tendril-like, around limbs. I like the feeling of security it gives me. I enjoy being concealed, taking other creatures by surprise, sometimes being taken by surprise myself. My scavenging missions are always more successful when I am among kelp.

Suddenly, I realize I'm not alone down here. The kelp in front of me is moving at odds with the gentle sway of the waves. Something is coming towards me. A second later a young fur seal and I are practically nose to nose. It looks into my eyes then darts away again, following a fish that is moving too fast for me to note its species. I watch them zigzag across the ocean floor, but the feeling of unease doesn't leave me.

It happens in an instant. A great shadow looms overhead, the water is pushed back against me with huge force, and a massive creature dives past after the seal. They make contact. There's a frenzied squirming and tossing of flesh. The water erupts in an explosion of bubbles, then the two creatures break apart again.

The newcomer is an elephant seal, a large male, over two metres long. It is much slower than the fur seal but exceptionally strong. They begin a frantic chase through the kelp and I am in danger.

An elephant seal wouldn't normally attack a human, it wouldn't even bother a big seal, but this one is locked into the hunt, driven by the need to kill. The water around me is

already stained with the young seal's blood. If it escapes and the elephant spots me, it may just act without thinking. I freeze, crouched low in the kelp, hoping the chase will move away.

It doesn't. The fur seal heads straight for me; it's about to dive for cover in the dense vegetation when the elephant appears from above. The hunter locks its powerful jaws around the neck of its prey and shakes violently. Within seconds, the fur seal's head is loose and limp. The elephant swims back to the surface with its kill.

And that's how it's done. Quickly, brutally, with no pause for doubt or reflection. That's how we kill. I've been thinking a lot about death tonight, as I've sat on the ocean surface, as I've dived beneath it, about death and people's ability to inflict it. About my own ability to kill.

After all, I come from a long line of murderers. My grandfather, the aptly named Bartholomew Coffin, was one of the most successful and ruthless killers this part of the world has ever known. Day after day, he and his gang went out, hunting without pause or pity, watching the ocean run red with blood. Of course, Grandpa killed whales, not people, but how different can it be, really?

When I've collected and bagged my last sample I'm ready to head up. Racing the bubbles around me, I see stars while I'm still several feet under. I break surface and for a moment can't find the boat. In the time I've been below, the spell that held the ocean captive has broken and the water has started moving again. Waves rise up around me and I feel a stab of sharp excitement. I'm alone, far out to sea. If I can't get back to the boat I will die out here. For some time now, I've had a sense of my life getting very close to its end. Is this it then? Am I to die today?

Then, there it is, not twenty metres away.

Queenie has woken up. She scampers along the side deck and yips at me until I catch hold of the ladder and pull myself up. I bend to pet her, covering her in water. She

runs and fetches me the old towel from her bed. It's covered in mud and dog hairs but I appreciate the thought.

Queenie is a Staffordshire terrier, tiny for the breed, a solid little bundle of muscle and silky-soft fur. Her nose, legs and the tip of her tail are white, but the rest of her is as black as the contents of my head. She is four years old and I swear there are times when she remembers the boys. When she grieves for them too.

I pull up the anchor, start the engine and head south towards Stanley, thinking about my grandfather again. Tonight, it seems, my thoughts are determined to stray along the shadowy path, where furtive plans creep like snaring roots across the forest floor, where the darker reaches of our minds run free.

Grandpa Coffin, my father's father, was one of the great whalers in the South Atlantic. He was the last scion of a dynasty of marine hunters, who left Nantucket in 1804 and arrived on New Island in the Falklands several months later. For the next two hundred years, they plundered the islands and their surrounding ocean. Marine and island wildlife around here is still trying to recover from the impact of Grandpa Coffin and his forebears.

He died when I was a child. A pity.

I turn into the more sheltered waters of Port William and adjust my course so that I'll steer well clear of the visiting cruise ship, the *Princess Royal*. From now to the end of the summer, we'll see a steady stream of such ships, stopping by for a few days on their way to South Georgia and the Antarctic. They're a mixed blessing, the hundreds of tourists who land on our shores on a daily basis when a ship is in harbour, and like most mixed blessings we love and curse them in equal measure. Tonight, it seems unusually awake and noisy, given the hour, but these ships can party hard, the sounds of the revelry reaching many miles inland.

Unnoticed by anyone on deck, I slip past and head for the inner harbour. It's almost one in the morning. Soon I'll be counting down in hours, not days. There are things I have to do still, promises I've made to others, but keeping busy has to be a good thing. I glance around the boat. I've been making sure the fuel and the water tanks are topped up. In a locked cabinet is the CO_2 tranquillizer dart gun for the rare occasions when I might need to sedate a large mammal, and also an old handgun of my grandfather's for when euthanasia is the only option. Both are in full working order. I'm ready.

Ready to find out just how much of the blood of the old family runs in my veins. I steer through The Narrows into the inner harbour and see immediately that my carefully laid plans may come to nothing.

The police are waiting for me.

2

IN THE SHORT time I've been at sea, something has happened here. Most people on the Falkland Islands live in Stanley, but it's still a small community. Only around two thousand people in some seven hundred houses. Three hours ago, when I motored out, the tiny lights of a hundred or more jack-o'-lanterns littered the hillside like stars, but they'll all have burned down by now. At this time of the morning Stanley should be in almost complete darkness. It isn't. I watch a police car drive along the coast road and there are more blue lights on the harbour front.

It's three years, almost to the day, since I last drove into harbour to find police waiting for me.

'There's been a car accident.' Three years later, I can still hear Ben's voice, crackling and shaky on the boat's radio. 'Ned and Kit are both on their way to hospital, but I don't know any more. Get here as soon as you can.'

He signed off quickly, leaving me to imagine the worst. Except I didn't. I couldn't let myself. I imagined them in pain. I imagined their small, perfect bodies bruised and broken, cut apart by razor-sharp metal. All the way back to Stanley, I heard their voices in my head, crying for Mummy, unable to understand why, when they needed me the most, I wasn't there. I imagined limbs torn from torsos, scars cut across their pretty faces. I never imagined them as lifeless corpses, lying side by side, in the mortuary.

In the grip of bad memories, I'm pushing the throttle too hard. I shouldn't be heading into harbour at this speed. There are rocks, more than one wreck, hidden obstacles

that can tear a boat apart. I force myself to slow the boat and wait for my breathing, my heartbeat, to do the same. Both prove less easy to control than the throttle. And yet I have to keep up the appearance of being normal, of coping. For a little while longer the human shell around me has to hold.

Someone is waiting for me at my usual mooring, one of the retired fishermen. He lives in a cottage by the harbour with two women whom most people agree are his mother and sister, but nobody is placing any bets. His name is Ralph Larken, Roadkill Ralph behind his back. As I throw him the stern line I see that he's wearing faded striped pyjamas beneath his oilskin. They're tucked into enormous black fisherman's wellingtons and in this strange half-light they give him the look of a pirate. I jump down myself with the bowline. 'What's going on?'

'Kid missing.'

I stare at him, wondering which of us will say it out loud. He does.

'Another one.' He nods towards a group on the harbour wall. I can make out police uniforms, someone in military fatigues. 'Expecting you,' he says. 'Saw your boat lights.'

Another child missing. I was still floundering in my own grief when the first vanished, a little over two years ago, but I remember people telling each other it was a terrible accident, albeit of an undisclosed nature. When the second disappeared, those same people said we'd been terribly unlucky. And now a third?

Someone has left the group by the wall and is coming towards me. It's the young policewoman, the one whom nobody can take seriously because she is so very young, and so very tall, and because she can't seem to move without knocking something over. Constable Skye McNair is one of those people whom others claim they like because they feel sorry for her and want to be considered

compassionate. I've nothing to prove so, I'll admit, I find her clumsiness annoying.

Watching her now, I think for the first time that she looks so very alive. Her hair, long, wiry, the exact shade of freshly made marmalade, is flying out around her head, and her face, pale as paper in the moonlight, tells me that she's anxious and more than a little excited. For an inch or two around her, the night doesn't seem so dark.

'Catrin, sorry.' She is way taller than I am. She stoops towards me and then sways backwards as though afraid of crowding me. 'I need to know if you saw anyone else out there tonight? Any vessels you didn't recognize?'

I tell her no. Several big, commercial fishing boats left harbour around the same time I did, but I knew all of them. A lot of the islanders night-fish, but typically in smaller boats, hugging the shore.

'Sorry, this must be so difficult.' Skye never seems to know what to do with her hands. She's flapping them right now. 'I know it's almost exactly the—'

Skye wasn't here three years ago. She was away in England at police college. And yet she knows that in two days it will be the anniversary of the day I lost my life.

'What's happened, Skye?' I glance at Ralph, who is petting Queenie. 'Something about a missing child?' I don't say *another one*. It's hardly necessary.

'One of the visiting families.' She looks back to the crowd behind us. 'Not from the cruise ship. They arrived independently, have been staying at one of the guest houses in town. They were picnicking out near Estancia at lunchtime. The kids were playing in the grass. They lost sight of the youngest.'

Estancia is a farm settlement, about twenty miles away, on the south-easterly tip of a great sea inlet.

'He's only three.' Skye looks on the verge of tears.

Three years old. The two kids who went missing previously were older, but not by much. Both were boys. A

child of three, separated from his family for hours, alone at night. He'll be cold, hungry, terrified. Isn't abandonment the worst fear of the young? On these islands, at night, he will feel abandoned by the world.

'Has there been a search?'

Skye's face gives a little quiver as she pulls herself together. 'We've had people there all day. And some men have gone back again. Callum Murray for one. He went with a few men from the barracks. We're waiting to hear.'

'Is that his family?' I find the mother without really trying, a plump, dark-haired woman in her late thirties. Her whole body is clenched inwards, as though she's afraid that if she lets go she might fall apart. I know that, when I get closer, whatever flesh she once had on her face will appear to have gone, leaving it skin over bones. Her eyes will look dead. She will look like me.

Except that where it matters she's a world apart from me. She still has hope.

'That's the family.' Skye seems to be standing on one leg now. 'The Wests. It's all getting really difficult. There are people off the cruise ship too and, well, I don't want to be unkind, but they're not exactly helping. They seem to think we should be forcibly searching properties. They want a block on all boats leaving harbour from now on. Can you imagine what the fishing vessels are going to say if we tell them they can't go out in the morning?'

'I doubt many will listen.' Authority is tolerated here, but only to a point.

'And the family are anxious enough already. The last thing they need is people putting all sorts of wild ideas in their heads.'

I'm tempted to say that, given our recent history with missing children, the wild ideas will be there already.

'It's all very unsettling.' As Skye continues talking and I pretend to listen, we walk towards my car. 'We've been called out to five incidents since nine o'clock. Chief

Superintendent Stopford is trying to get all the visitors back to the cruise ship, but they don't want to go until the little boy is found. It's going to be a bad night.'

Muttering what I know to be expected, that she should let me know if there's anything I can do, I slip away. Queenie leaps into the car and I head towards my house on the western side of Cape Pembroke peninsula, a tiny spit of land between the inner and outer harbours of Stanley and the ocean itself.

I'm not thinking about the missing child. Or rather, I am, but only insofar as how it will affect me. If boats are to be stopped leaving their moorings, if they are to be searched before they leave harbour, my plans fall apart. Two and a half days from now. Around sixty hours. The kid has to be found by then.

I don't take the shortest route home. Some nights, usually when the black fog in my head is getting the upper hand, something seems to take me out towards the Grimwood house. Always at night, when the chances of seeing the family are next to nonexistent, something pulls me to it. Tonight, I drive around the easternmost tip of Stanley's natural harbour towards the big house with the peacock-blue roof that looks east over Surf Bay. I slow down as I round the last bend and can see the whitewashed walls, the black windows, the low gorse hedge, now bursting with yellow flowers. To either side of the low wooden gate is a pumpkin lantern, and in their intricate, accurate carving I see the handiwork of the children's grandfather. He carved pumpkins for my family, too, once.

Someone is up. I can see light in an upper window. Peter's room. I have never seen Peter, the youngest Grimwood child. He has lived the last two and a half years in my head. I see him as a fair-haired boy, skinny and oval-faced like his two brothers were at that age. He will also, like them, have his mother's bright blue eyes.

I haven’t been in this house for years, not since before Peter was born, but I know Rachel’s house as well as I know my own. Peter is awake in the night and Rachel will be with him, wrapping her body around his, rocking him to sleep. She’ll be breathing in the scent of his hair, feeling him trembling against her and loving her power to soothe away his fears. I hate her so much at this moment it is all I can do to press down on the accelerator and carry on driving.

Yes, I think. Killing Rachel will be easy.

3

I PUSH OPEN the door to my house and sense, immediately, the departure from the norm. There is something – a scent, the echo of a giggle, the fractional change in the atmosphere. Tiny signs, but unmistakable. They are here again.

I close the door softly behind me and look around. No bright eyes in the darkness. No scuffling movements as tiny forms press deeper into the shadows. I make a slow circuit of the large, old-fashioned room and step out into the hallway. I'm both wary and eager. It's an odd sort of hunger, this need to see the dead.

In the three years since the boys' deaths they have haunted me. Do I mean that literally? I'm not sure. I am a scientist, more likely to believe in aliens than ghosts, but within days of the accident their presence in the house became more real, more compelling than that of my husband or any of the gaggle of well-wishers who appeared periodically.

The real people left but the boys remained, drifting in and out of my life with the reliability, if not the regularity, of the tide. Always when I least expect it, I see their shadows behind curtains, the curve of their bodies under quilts on beds I still can't bear to strip. Their voices, sometimes giggling and plotting secrets, quite often squabbling, will mingle with the sounds from the television or the radio. I'll catch a whiff of their scent. The particular musky apple smell of Kit's hair a day or so after washing. The acrid

smell of Ned’s trainers when the shoe cupboard had been left open.

They’re not sitting at the bottom of the stairs, or curled up on the sofa staring at the blank television screen. Good, I hate it when they do that. I make my way upstairs. The stair-gate that we never got round to removing is closed. Did I do that? Why would I? And yet it’s rare for me to suspect the boys of having an impact on the physical environment. The odd toy, perhaps, may have been moved. A dent on one of the beds. My dog, of course, could be responsible for either.

Queenie, as usual when the boys are here, is downstairs by the kitchen door, whining. I have no idea whether she, too, senses their presence, or whether she just hates seeing me in this mood, but their visits freak her out. It’s a shame, because she loved them too, but pets aren’t mothers I suppose.

I’m sure I’ll find them in Ned’s room, curled up together like a couple of puppies, but the shape I see as I press open the door is only a large bear lying prone on Ned’s bed. Not in Kit’s room either. I’m moving faster now, telling myself to slow down, but feeling the normal panic of a mother who can’t find her children. Even her dead ones. My bedroom is empty too. Or appears to be.

They are hiding.

I wish they wouldn’t, but hide-and-seek was one of their favourite games when they were alive and sometimes they play it with me still. I start to search the house again, this time looking properly, and all the time, the storm cloud in my head is getting thicker. I’m pulling open wardrobe doors, tugging back shower curtains, peering under the spare-room bed. If I’m honest, this game has always unnerved me, even when I knew I’d find two warm, strong bodies at the end of the search.

I’m downstairs again. They can only be outside. I open the back door and the wind races in as though it’s been

waiting to pounce.

They're not out here. I can feel them slipping away. Two sounds cut through the rushing of the wind, both moans of abject misery. One from Queenie, the other from me.

'Ned! Kit!'

They're gone. Just as I was certain of their presence earlier, I'm sure of their absence now.

There is very little light left in my head. I'm upstairs again, in the small extension to my bedroom that I use as a study. I'm kneeling by my desk, fumbling at the pull-out drawer I always keep locked. I find what I'm looking for. I keep it sharp.

Downstairs, Queenie starts to howl.

Some time later, the fog lifts. I drag myself up off the carpet and into the desk chair. My left hand is bleeding. I put the harpoon head back in its drawer. The photograph of Rachel at my feet has been cut and stabbed to a torn, ribbony mess.

Bending, I drop the pieces in the bin. I have other copies of the same photograph. For next time.

I'm so tired I can hardly think. I need to shower and sleep, but something keeps me here, nursing my injured hand, staring at the walls around me. I keep the rest of my house much as it was when the boys were alive and Ben lived here, but over the last three years this small study space has become my indulgence room.

There are photographs of Ned and Kit all over the walls, some of them framed, most simply stuck on to the paintwork with Blu Tack. Their artwork from school is here too, little certificates they won in class, even some baby clothes I kept, all hanging from the wall in a grim, memorial montage.

'Christ, Catrin,' Ben said, when he called back to collect something from the loft. 'This isn't a study, it's a shrine.'

On the wall behind me, though, is something different. Here are photographs of two other little boys; two dark-haired, dark-eyed boys who vanished – suddenly, mysteriously. The first, Fred Harper, went missing during the sports day on West Falkland, a little over two years ago, when my grief was still raw, weeping like a fresh sore. He was five years old.

I'd heard the news of his disappearance, of course. The radio had been full of it for days and Ben, who'd been on the island as part of the emergency medical team, had taken part in the search. When I saw the story in the *Penguin News*, accompanied by a large portrait photograph, my heart leapt. Fred looked so much like Kit. I'd cut it out instinctively, hiding it away, eventually pinning it to the wall along with everything else about him that appeared in the paper over the coming weeks.

Maybe I kept the coverage as a sort of test of my humanity. If Fred was found, and I was glad, it would be a sign that there was still hope for me. And then, about a year and a half ago, the islands lost a second little boy. Seven-year-old Jimmy Brown was last seen at Surf Bay where Rachel lives. I knew the Brown family reasonably well. I was friends with the mother, Gemma, whose daughter, Jimmy's little sister, was in Kit's class at school. Ben knew the father, who worked up at the hospital as a technician.

When Jimmy disappeared, when the whole town spent days and nights searching, as his family sunk deeper into a sort of frantic despair, more than one person told me that at least I had closure. I knew what had happened to my sons, I'd been able to bury them, grieve properly, a privilege denied to the families of the missing.

'Yes, thank you,' I said to one woman. 'I do appreciate how lucky I am.'

She hasn't spoken to me since.

Below the pictures of Fred and Jimmy is another cutting, not directly related to the boys but one that touched me, at the time. A couple of months after Jimmy vanished, when the searches were still taking place, albeit more contained and without any real hope, the *Penguin News*' editor-in-chief wrote about the impact of missing children upon a community, especially a small one. He talked about a collective sense of shame, about the belief that children are a shared responsibility and that harm coming to any one of them reflects upon us all.

The piece hadn't been written with my sons in mind, but I'd found some comfort in it all the same. It had made me realize that Ben and I, and our immediate circle, weren't alone in feeling the impact of the boys' deaths. That, in some small way, our pain was shared.

The writer, Rachel's father of all people, had gone on to talk about how cultures deal with children who vanish. He wrote about how the vanishings quickly slip into local folklore, appearing first of all as ghostly sightings and then later in the oral tradition of storytelling. Missing children, he argued, are behind all the tales of children stolen by fairies, or eaten by trolls and witches. We deal with our shame by externalizing it. By blaming supernatural forces.

He'd unearthed old legends about children coming to grief here on the islands, and linked them to real-life cases of unexplained deaths and disappearances. In fifty years' time, he claimed, Jimmy and Fred would have found their way into Falkland mythology.

Ned, Kit, Fred and Jimmy. My own little collection of dead boys. Was there to be a fifth now, was our collective shame to grow ever greater?

I lean across my desk and switch on the radio. The locally run radio station is broadcasting later than it would normally. The missing child is called Archie West, I learn. He is three years and two months old. A little older than Rachel's youngest.