

THE CASTAWAYS

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Also by Lucy Clarke

The Sea Sisters

A Single Breath

No Escape (previously published as *The Blue*)

Last Seen

You Let Me In

THE
CASTAWAYS
LUCY CLARKE



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For James, Tommy, and Darcy

THEN | LORI

Lori wheeled her suitcase along the humid airport walkway. Loose strands of hair were pasted to the back of her neck. Seeing her gate number ahead, she paused, then glanced back over her shoulder.

Still no sign of her sister.

She slipped her mobile from her pocket, the screen eyeing her blankly. No messages. No missed calls. Her heart kicked hard between her ribs: it was only minutes until they were due to board.

A snatch of their argument arrowed into her thoughts. *I don't recognise you any more . . .*

Lori worked her teeth over the insides of her cheek, finding the smooth flesh, pressing down until she tasted blood.

She tried to picture herself leaving without Erin – taking this inter-island flight to the remote southeastern reaches of the Fijian archipelago. She reminded herself that she'd already

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done the hardest leg of the journey yesterday – the long-haul flight from London to Fiji. No diazepam needed. But she'd had Erin beside her then, who'd come armed with snacks, music, books, and was so busy colluding about what drinks they'd order once airborne, that Lori had barely noticed the take-off. On arrival last night, they'd checked into a beach-side hotel, planning to grab dinner and some sleep before this morning's short flight to their resort.

Only now here she was, without Erin.

She dragged her suitcase into the toilets. Leaning over the sinks, she eyed herself in the mirror. Her fingertips explored her puffy eyelids, circling to the deep shadows beneath them.

She'd waited up last night, half hoping to hear shambling footsteps along the hotel corridor, a knock at the door, her sister's voice, whisper-shouting to let her in. She'd imagined Erin, gin-drunk, a slur of apologies tumbling out. Maybe she would've let her in, shuffled over in the wide hotel bed to make space. Told Erin to breathe the other way and warned her not to snore. Maybe she would've done that. Or maybe she would only have opened the door a crack, just enough to tell her to leave.

But Lori didn't know how she'd have felt, because Erin hadn't returned.

She took out her make-up bag to give her hands something to do. Her skin had a winter pallor that spoke of too many hours indoors. It had been months since she'd felt the kiss of sunshine. God, blue skies. Swimming in a warm sea. Fresh air. A good book. She deserved this holiday. Needed it.

But what if the whole thing was a mistake? She'd booked it on a moment's impulse. Three in the morning. Her sheets twisted from another wakeful night. She'd taken out her laptop to watch a film – something to lock her thoughts to – and

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then the advert had popped up. Ten nights on a remote, bare-foot island in Fiji, the dates spanning her twenty-eighth birthday. She'd opened a new tab and checked the joint bank account and seen there was still two thousand pounds left. *Fuck you, Pete*, she'd thought as she'd pressed *Confirm booking*.

At first light, she'd crept into Erin's bedroom, proffering a mug of steaming tea as she'd slipped her legs beneath the duvet.

'I'm asleep,' Erin murmured.

'I've got news,' Lori announced. 'Light coming on.' She'd reached across and flicked on the bedside lamp. 'I've booked us a trip. To Fiji. The second week in January. You said you had annual leave to use up. It's my treat.'

Erin had lifted her head a fraction, opening one eye.

Lori could guess what her sister would be thinking – *But Lori's terrified of flying. She never travels. A holiday is just a plaster across a much deeper wound* – so without giving her the chance to speak, Lori continued, her voice low, certain, 'I need to get away. And the only person I want to do that with is you.' Then a loaded pause. 'Together.'

Together. The history and weight of that word pulsed between them.

There was a beat of a pause, no more than a breath of hesitation. 'Okay, then.'

Yet now it was just Lori waiting in an airport. Alone.

She zipped up her make-up bag, grabbed her case and left the toilets.

The walkway was still deserted. She reached again for her mobile, turning it through her hands, deciding. It should be Erin who made the call . . . and yet, she just needed to hear her voice, check she was okay.

She dialled.

Listening to it ring, she watched as a pilot in a crisp white

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uniform advanced along the walkway. He wore a navy peaked cap, beneath which his eyes were heavily pouched and blood-shot. *The pilot of my plane?* He crouched down, searching for something within his carry-on case, his expression clouded with confusion. He dragged a hand down over his face, pulling the loose skin towards his jowls. After a few moments, he gave up on whatever he was looking for. He took a deep breath, then moved on, eyes lowered.

The sudden click of voicemail snapped her gaze away. ‘It’s Erin. Keep it short,’ then the tone so quickly afterwards it was like you’d been tripped up.

Lori hesitated, a pregnant pause stretching out, her silence recorded.

Her thoughts swam back two decades. Lying beneath a star-flecked duvet, breath warm in the cotton-dark, their mother only dead a week. Lori had squeezed her sister’s hand, whispering, *You don’t need to be scared, Erin. I’m your big sister. I’ll look after you now.*

But what about when Lori needed her? Like right now. What then?

‘I’m at the airport,’ Lori hissed, lips close to the phone. ‘Where the hell are you?’

NOW | ERIN

The landing outside my flat is pitch black. The bulb blew last month and I haven't got around to replacing it.

I slide my hand up the door, feeling for the lock. I can smell the leather of my jacket, damp with rain. Behind me there's the man I brought back from the bar. Faded aftershave, the yeasty tang of beer on his breath. *Mark? Matt?*

'I've got a torch on my phone,' he says, just as I manage to press the key into the lock, pushing the door open with a smack.

I pick my way over the day's post, then sling down the keys and kick off my boots.

He follows me into the lounge, his gaze sliding over the flat. I see it afresh, through his eyes: mismatched underwear dried stiff on the radiator; the smell of overcooked food lingering in the carpets; the burnt-out stubs of candles in pools of hardened wax; the coffee mug and cereal bowl left

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on the windowsill where I sit each morning, the window cracked open, neck strained to try and glimpse a patch of sky beyond the buildings.

I peel off my jacket. Sling it over the back of a chair piled with books.

The alcohol buzz is fading too quickly. I should have put the lamp on, not the glaring downlights that are bathing us in a harsh white blaze. Christ, I wonder if he's regretting this as much as I am. There was a gallery launch and they needed a journo to attend, and I got the nudge. There wasn't time to eat. There was a free bar. We jostled from the gallery to another bar, and then another. I lost my colleagues several hours ago, but found myself in a dark corner of a club with this guy. Somehow he's now in my flat, staring at me with a wolfish twist to his mouth. I realise that we're no longer buffeted by a crowd of smiling twenty-somethings. The door to my flat is shut. We're alone.

I hear my sister's voice. *Erin, you've got to think.*

I close my eyes for a moment, sink deeper into the timbre of her voice.

If you don't want him here, just ask him to leave.

'Want a drink?' I say, running my hand through the short hair at the nape of my neck, feeling the brush of it against my thumb. He follows me into the galley kitchen. A cereal box and trail of cornflakes dust the side, leading to an open pack of painkillers and bottle of vodka. Hansel and Gretel for grown-ups.

I open a cupboard, and gesture to the wine, spirits, and half-drunk mixers. 'Take your pick.'

He chooses rum and pours it neat into two tumblers he grabs from the draining board. 'Got any Coke? Lime?'

'Neither.'

'Hostess with the mostest.'

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I shrug.

He passes me my glass, we clink them together, knock them back.

He pours us another and we carry these through to the lounge, bringing the bottle with us. I move aside a blanket and sit on the sofa. He stands. 'So, you own this place?'

'Rented.'

'Any flatmates?'

'Not at the moment,' I answer, my gaze finding the painting hanging above my sofa. It's the only thing that adorns the otherwise bare walls. It's an acrylic of the river that ran along the bottom of our childhood garden in Bath. Lori painted it for me using her touchstone palette of rich blues and vivid, earthy greens. She loved to paint in thick swathes of colour. It was a gift to me when I took my first job in London. On the back of the canvas she has written, *So you can have a place to come home to in the city.*

I follow the raised whorls of the acrylic paint, the thick layers she cut through with a palette knife to give texture to the trees on the riverbank. I can see Lori, blonde hair tied back, an oversized shirt of Pete's splattered with paint, music crooning. She never fitted the bohemian image of an artist. She was neat jeans and brushed hair; she was organisation and efficiency; she was painted nails and shaped eyebrows. She wasn't tormented by her creativity – she bathed in its light.

I turn my attention back to the man. He's older than I thought, with facial hair that looks as if it requires a lot of management, too-neat lines and blunt sideburns, the skin beneath his jaw disconcertingly smooth, as if it's never seen air. I'm not even attracted to him. I shouldn't have let him in.

Why did you, Erin? my sister's voice pipes up again.

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*Because it's a Wednesday night. Because I've been drinking.
Because I hate walking into this flat alone, okay?*

He moves around the lounge scanning the bookcase, pausing at the fireplace. It's one of those typical London ones – Edwardian with a blocked chimney breast, so now it houses a glass vase filled with fairy lights. Lori's touch.

'Your birthday?'

The question throws me. I follow his gaze to the mantelpiece where there is a single birthday card propped between two slumping candles. The number thirty glitters on the front.

'Yes,' I say eventually. Easier to lie than to explain.

'Wouldn't have had you down as thirty.'

No, because I'm twenty-fucking-seven, I think, but can't say.

I finish my rum, heat sliding through my chest, then open Spotify on my phone. I select a chill-hop playlist then, remembering the mother who lives in the flat below, turn it down. I helped haul her pram up the two flights of stairs yesterday – the lift is broken again – and the baby watched me warily, a mushed rice cake disintegrating in his grip. When the mother thanked me, her voice sounded on the edge of tears. I wondered if I should invite them in, check she was okay, but I didn't have it in me.

The man is looking at me, brows dipped, like he's trying to work something out. 'So, talk me through your hair.'

'My hair?' I raise an eyebrow. *Seriously?* 'It's an undercut,' I say, pointing to the shaved arc above my right ear. It confuses people, the lack of symmetry. My hair is black, short. 'Pixie cut' is the term, with a flash of an undercut on one side. It wasn't an edgy fashion choice. I was at the hairdresser's on a student training night. The apprentice, a teenager with a freshly inked tattoo on his wrist, skin still pink and raised, suggested it. I shrugged and said, 'Why not?'

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Feels like my response to most things.

Shall I come back to your flat?

Why not?

I should probably be ringing my eyes with kohl, doing something dramatic with my eyebrows, but I can't quite muster the enthusiasm.

'I like it,' he declares. Then he moves off. For a moment I think he's going to join me on the sofa and I tense. Instead, he crosses the lounge, saying, 'Just going to pay a visit.'

Pay a visit. It's like I've invited someone's dad back.

It takes me a moment before I realise he's headed towards the wrong door. I'm on my feet, rushing forwards as his fingers reach for the handle.

'No—' I begin, but the door to the spare room opens, the light switch is flicked.

He freezes.

His back is to me, but I know what he's seeing. His eyes will be stretched wide, gaze pinned to the walls.

I've not been inside that room in weeks – but I know exactly what is in there.

His voice is a notch higher. 'What the hell?'

A pause between songs drops us into silence. The moment draws out, long, contorted, his question stabbing the air.

'The bathroom is the next room,' I say eventually.

'What is all this stuff?'

The walls of the spare room are covered with newspaper cuttings, maps, photos – all connected by pieces of coloured string, and peppered with Post-it notes and handwritten questions. Dead-eyed faces stare back at us, and headlines scream: 'Vanished!' 'No trace of plane.'

I know how it makes me look.

I know, okay?

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At the centre is a newspaper clipping of a small white plane with a red stripe cutting through its middle. Below are the photos of the two crew and seven passengers.

When I don't answer, he turns and looks at me. 'It's that flight, isn't it? The one that went missing.'

Reluctantly, I nod.

'Is it . . . is this . . . for work?' I catch the note of hope.

'Yes,' I lie.

Relief softens his brows. 'Journalist, you said, didn't you? I remember reading about the flight. Going to Fiji, wasn't it? Plane just disappeared. Went off the radar. No trace. No sighting. No transmissions. No wreck found. Seriously weird, if you ask me.'

My mouth refuses to work.

'It was a while back now, wasn't it? Last year?'

'Two years ago.' *Two years and six days.*

'There were all those theories. You know, that maybe there was a terrorist on board, or the pilot was on a suicide mission. Is that what you're looking into?'

'Mm,' I say noncommittally.

Now he's looking at me warily. 'You often bring your work home? Is this your office or something?'

Another long pause. 'Something.'

His expression shifts, as if he is beginning to realise that something isn't quite right. He looks at the wall, the photos, the cuttings, some of them browned at the edges, Sellotape yellowing – then back to me. I can see he's trying desperately to work it out, to connect to the sense of unease he's feeling.

Maybe it's the alcohol, or maybe he's just a quitter, but he gives up with little fight, saying, 'Bathroom.' He ducks inside and I hear the lock slide.

I stand in the hallway, looking through the open doorway into the spare room. Lori's old room. It's been months since

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I've seen these walls. No one in London can afford an empty spare room, me included, but I can't take this stuff down because it'd mean it's over. I'm giving up. I'm letting her go.

But I know I need to.

I take a breath. This weekend. It's got to come down. All of it. Enough.

Or maybe I could just put some of it away, do it in phases. I could start with clearing Lori's bed, which is hidden beneath a spread of books, articles, open files. I should've subtlet this room months ago – God knows, my bank account would be grateful – but the idea of a flatmate makes me shudder, someone to hear me pacing at four a.m., or to notice the weird times of day that I eat, or the social life I don't have.

I hear the toilet flush, the cistern refilling. I listen for the sound of the taps turning on, water sluicing into the sink – but instead, the door opens, and there he is once again. Unwashed hands shoved into pockets, eyes sliding away. 'I've got an early start. So . . .'

'Sure.'

He grabs his coat, not even pausing to put it on. 'Cheers, then,' he says from the doorway.

I follow, holding open the door as he steps into the hallway. If I shut the door now, it'll close out the light, leaving him in complete darkness. I should at least wait till he's made it down the stairs, reached the exit.

But fuck it.

I shut the door. Bolt it.

I grab the bottle of rum from the lounge, silver rings clinking against the bottle neck. I traipse into Lori's room, push aside a book about the history of plane crashes, and sink onto the edge of the bed. The air smells musty, untouched, cooler than the rest of the flat.

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‘Happy thirtieth,’ I say, raising the bottle of rum towards my sister’s image on the wall.

Use a glass, I hear Lori say. I picture her rolling her eyes, feigned exasperation.

I swig straight from the bottle. Grin.

As the rum slides hotly down my throat, I study the photo of Lori slotted amongst the other passengers of flight FJ209. *Passenger Three*, the press branded her. They pulled the photo from her Instagram account, the last picture that was taken before she climbed aboard that fated plane. Her hair had been recently highlighted with warm tones of honey and caramel, and she’s smiling, her lips glossy, but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

I was sitting right next to her when the photo was taken. They cropped me out, of course. All you can see now are my fingers around her waist. It was shot the night before the flight – before all the mistakes I’d yet to make – but it’s as if it’s all there in that photo. Lori with a blank-eyed stare, alone – and me reaching out. Trying to hold on.

NOW | ERIN

It's gone two in the morning and I'm still sitting in the spare room. I've got to be up for work in a few hours. I should be drinking a big glass of water, setting out two aspirin by my bed and getting some sleep.

I take another swig of rum, teeth knocking against the bottle, as I study the image of the plane. Two years ago that plane was due to travel from Nadi airport in Fiji, to Limaji, a tiny island at the southeastern edge of the archipelago. Only the plane – and the nine people on board – never arrived.

Disappeared without trace. That's what the press said.

I look at the list of facts bullet-pointed on index cards on the wall. Captain Mike Brass last communicated with air-traffic control twenty-two minutes after take-off. The transmission reported that everything was fine. Yet, eight minutes later, the aircraft disappeared from radar screens – and never arrived at its destination. A huge, multi-agency search was

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launched covering a 300-square-mile radius. It turned up nothing. No plane wreck. Not a shred of debris. No bodies.

Nothing.

I narrow my eyes, squinting to find something different amid the gaps in the information.

When the plane disappeared, I wanted to gather every shred of evidence. I hounded the police, the British consul, CAAF – the Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji. I demanded to know the search areas they'd covered, ticking them off on my own chart of the Fijian archipelago that is tacked to the wall behind me. I located some of the relatives of the passengers, rallying them to keep pressure on the authorities. I read every book I could find on plane crashes, or survival stories against the odds. I wrote press releases to keep the plane's disappearance on the media's radar.

'It's becoming an obsession,' one of my oldest friends, Sarah, told me during a Skype call from Berlin.

'You've got to forgive yourself,' Ben had chimed in from the background, while pouring white wine into large glasses on a gleaming counter. The sight of the two of them together was still like a fist in my stomach. At school, Ben once said the three of us were like the sides of an equilateral triangle: every side linked, equal, our matching angles making perfect symmetry. Huh. Funny how that shape got flattened when they announced they'd fallen in love and were moving to Berlin together.

There's nothing new to discover sitting in Lori's old room, drunk. But still, I can't help looking. I stretch across the bed, sliding a file towards me. It contains all the correspondence I made in the weeks and months following the plane's disappearance. I started the file because I needed to *do* something. Waiting was dangerous territory. Too much space for my mind to screech and holler, point and blame.

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I open the file at random and scan the page, reading an email from a member of CAAF, confirming that although they were no longer actively searching, the incident would remain open indefinitely.

Open indefinitely. How do you live with that?

I know the story doesn't have a happy ending. A plane doesn't just disappear because it's landed at the wrong resort and all the passengers are merrily sipping cocktails and swinging their hips in hula skirts. A plane disappears because there is a big fucking problem. I need to know what that problem was. I need to know what went on after that last transmission from the pilot. I need to know what happened to my sister. I need to know who the hell I can blame because, right now, the only person I've got is the one who didn't turn up at the airport like she was supposed to; who didn't get on that plane; who is still here, sitting in the fucking spare room where her sister should be!

I grab the file and fling it across the room. It slams into the wall, the ring binder wrenching open, sending pages and photos fluttering to the floor like broken wings.

Another good reason for not subletting: *propensity to outbursts of aggression.*

In the spill of articles, my gaze lands on one of the passengers: Felix Tyler, age 27 at the time of the flight. In the photo he's wearing a beanie pulled low to his brows, dark hair spilling towards his chin. Peat-brown eyes staring out from beneath heavy lashes. Attractive in a wrong-side-of-the-tracks kind of way. I read everything I could about him – and all the passengers – because I wanted to know exactly who each person was on that flight; why they were flying; what they would have been like in a crisis; who my sister would have been with in that moment of descent.

But Felix, he's the one who made me wonder. He bought

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his ticket to Fiji forty-eight hours before flying. I spoke to the resort owner on the island where the plane was bound, who told me Felix was due to head up their water-sports operation for a few weeks to cover for their normal guy. I managed to get hold of a copy of his CV and PADI certificate, but when I looked into it, his references didn't check out and his diving qualification was forged. Felix Tyler was a free-climber, not a diver. A climber who, eighteen months before the flight, had fallen fifty foot onto granite, without a harness or helmet, breaking fourteen bones in his body. He hadn't climbed since.

Something like that must change a person.

I tried contacting his family, but his father died three months after the plane disappearance, and his stepmother refused to talk. Felix's climbing core were impossible to track – a cluster of off-grid types chasing remote peaks and ridges. I emailed everything I'd found out to the British consul and the police – but apparently a forged PADI certificate and fake references don't add much to an investigation into a plane disappearance.

But what I was thinking – what still circles my mind in the middle of the night when I can't sleep – is, *Why? Why did he lie? What else did he lie about?*

THEN | LORI

In the boarding lounge, Lori stood at the window rotating the bangle on her wrist. Still no sign of Erin.

The plane waited on the sun-struck tarmac, a red line slicing through the belly of it, as if it had been marked for an incision. Small planes were the worst, she thought, her pulse audible in her ears. Too insubstantial. Every bump or jolt of turbulence, every buffeting of wind and weather – she'd feel it all. She counted the windows on the near side. Eight. Pictured herself climbing the steps, the clang of metal, the sun on the back of her neck. It was just an hour-long flight. She could manage that.

Out on the runway, a man in blue overalls approached the plane, peering at something beneath it. The engine? The fuel store? She'd no idea what went where. He angled his head, looking more closely. A second man approached, dressed in a high-vis orange jacket. They seemed to be

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debating something, arms gesturing towards the plane, then back towards the airport hangar. After a few more moments, the man in the high-vis jacket strode off, leaving the other man crouched down, brow still furrowed. Eventually, he, too, got to his feet, shrugged, and walked away.

What's with the shrug? What've you seen? Is there something wrong with the plane? God, being a nervous flier was exhausting.

She made herself turn from the window. Further along stood a man dressed in chinos and a polo shirt, an expensive leather holdall at his feet. Business traveller, she decided. He glanced towards the gate entrance, a mobile pressed to his ear. 'It's Daniel. I wanted to make sure we've got everything . . . straight,' he said, his voice low, moneyed. There was a pause. He shifted his weight from foot to foot. 'I know,' he said, nodding vigorously. 'I owe you.' He jangled the change in his pockets. 'Second thoughts?' His hand slid free of his pocket, moving to the back of his neck, gaze searching out the plane. There was a sheen of sweat on his brow. 'Maybe.'

Her book. She should read. That would quieten her mind. She made herself take a seat and went through the motions of getting out her book, opening it, setting her gaze on the page. She re-read the same sentence three times, failing to take in the story. Her legs felt restless, twitchy.

She glanced up to see a dark-haired man crossing the boarding lounge. He shrugged a large backpack to the ground, then slumped into a plastic chair at the end of a row. He clamped headphones over his ears, lowered his chin to his chest, folded his arms and closed his eyes. She watched as his shoulders visibly relaxed, fingertips drumming to the secret beat in his ears.

Her gaze travelled to his face. A mess of dark hair hung forwards, meeting the thick stubble that cloaked his jaw. His

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clothes – slim grey jeans and a T-shirt – looked tired, slept in, matching the shadows beneath his eyes.

She wondered what sort of customer the resort would draw. *Ecologically minded, yet with details of luxury*, it had said on the website.

The man's eyes snapped open and he suddenly drew his phone from his pocket, reading something on screen. His whole body tightened. The edges of his nostrils flared. He sat rigidly still, not moving, not blinking. A glassy sheen swam across his eyes. He pressed his forefinger and thumb hard against his eye sockets. The skin across his right knuckles was flayed, raw cuts yet to fully knit.

Focus on your book, she told herself, gaze returning fleetingly to the page – before darting back to this man.

He'd begun typing something into his phone, stabbing at the screen. He paused, reading whatever he'd just typed. He tapped the screen once. Lori watched, surprised when he snapped off the phone case and yanked open the back, digging a fingernail beneath the SIM card to release it. He took a coin from his pocket and scraped it roughly against the matt metal surface.

When it was done, he strode across the room, and tossed both the SIM and his phone into the bin.

As the man turned, his gaze met Lori's. He stopped. Stared right at her.

Heat rose in her cheeks as if he'd caught her spying.

His glare was fierce, defensive. A challenge in it.

She shifted in her seat.

His gaze bore into her, like a wolf's, hackles raised.

Lori wondered if she had time to go to the toilet again. Could you leave the boarding lounge when you'd already shown your ticket? She pressed discreetly against her bladder. Maybe she could hold it. Just nerves.

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An American couple were pulling matching wheeled luggage behind them. 'We're celebrating our fortieth wedding anniversary,' the man was telling a young amber-haired woman beside them.

The young woman nodded in a distracted way, something wary or worn in her expression. Her hand was cupped around her front, where a newborn was nestled in a sling against her chest. Lori glimpsed the baby's round head, a pale spray of fine hair. She hadn't expected there to be children flying to the resort. In fact, the remoteness of it, the lack of family-friendly facilities, was part of the appeal.

A baby boy, she saw now, as the mother turned. He must only be a few months old, a similar age to Pete's daughter. Bessy, he'd called the little girl. She'd wanted to hate the name but didn't.

Pete.

Always Pete.

What was it Erin had said last night? That Lori had always put him on a pedestal. 'He let you down, Lori. He cheated, he left.'

He left.

She didn't need reminding. She'd lived it.

She pressed her lips together, looked up at the panelled ceiling.

Not now. No tears. If she was going to get herself on that plane, she needed to hold it together.

'Miss? Excuse me, Miss? We're calling all passengers now for boarding.'

She looked up, startled. The airline steward was gesturing towards the walkway, where other passengers were beginning to move down a long corridor. Her gaze searched for Erin, looking for the short, quick strides, the shock of dark hair, the backpack as large as her.

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Lori would forgive her. She would. If Erin came now, apologised.

A flush of hot-cold panic washed through her. ‘My sister,’ she began. ‘She’s meant to be on this flight. I’m waiting for her. She’ll be on her way.’ She was aware that her voice sounded thin, near breaking.

‘I’m so sorry,’ the air stewardess said gently, ‘but the gate is closed now. I’m afraid she’s too late.’

NOW | ERIN

I feed my hands into the pockets of my too-thin coat, lifting my shoulders towards my ears. The jostle of commuters tightens, everyone eager to get home. I plant my feet wide, hold my ground.

My hangover – earlier a flaming heat in my head – has dulled to a baseline note at the back of my skull. I give an involuntary shudder thinking about that guy I brought back last night, his bewildered expression as he stared at the newspaper clippings in the spare room. At least I didn't sleep with him. I'll take that as a win.

The air underground is stale, the faint tang of urine and cooked food drawing through on the body-warmed breeze. I wish I'd ridden my bike to work. I knew I'd regret it, but this morning I slept through my alarm, then woke late in one of my weird-inward-hangover moods, and couldn't muster the enthusiasm for rain-slicked tarmac or the clammy pinch of waterproofs.

The Castaways

The tunnel seems to inhale with the approach of a Tube, the crowd being sucked towards the platform edge. Nothing more enticing than a ready-meal lasagne and a bottle of wine swings in the plastic bag hooked over my wrist, but still I'm eager to get home, stand under a hot shower, wash the day from my skin. I've spent the afternoon traipsing across London interviewing three karaoke singers who've formed a band that's had a Top Forty hit.

You would've probably loved them, Lori. I smile into my scarf, thinking about the car-radio wars we used to have as teenagers, me leaning across the backseat trying to eject her pop mix-tape, complaining that my ears were bleeding; Lori ramming the passenger seat as far back as it would go to stop me; Dad threatening to put on Radio 4 if we didn't pipe down.

When the Tube draws in, it is already full. I squeeze my way inside and stand for seven stops, grateful to be in trainers rather than the black patent heels worn by the woman next to me, who is kneading her knuckles into her lower back. Eventually the crowd thins and, by Kennington, I finally get a seat. I pull off my woollen hat and stuff it in my pocket, then roughly scratch my head.

Rotating the black stud in the cartilage of my ear, I glance absently across the carriage. A woman opposite reads an evening paper, her forehead shiny and pink, puffy pouches settled beneath her eyes. Is she going to be opening a front door onto the smell of home-cooked food? Or will she be feeding an electricity meter, hearing the ping of the microwave, sitting under a duvet scrolling the Netflix menu, too?

The woman turns the paper and, as she does so, the front page is exposed.

My skin tightens. My breath halts.

It's him!

Lucy Clarke

I stare at a photo of a middle-aged man wearing a white pilot's uniform, with a three-barred gold logo on his left shoulder. His hair is cut short, grey peppering the steel-dark. It's the same photo that's pinned to the wall of my spare room.

Mike Brass, the captain of flight FJ209.

Two years ago, this photo was in the press day after day as speculation slammed into the nation. As days turned into weeks and no new details emerged, the story gradually slid from page one to the middle section of the newspapers, until it was just a footnote, a fading memory in the public's attention. But his face has stayed in my thoughts, burning bright. I've studied this photo, looking for clues in the crinkle of those icy blue eyes, the lips that turn into a slow smile. Now, here he is once again, on the front page.

Why now? I'm wondering, pulse flickering in my throat. It's not the anniversary of the plane's disappearance. There's been no new information for months. The story is dead in the water.

I must see the headline. I'm out of my seat, stepping across the carriage. 'I need to . . .' I say as my fingers reach out.

The woman gasps, drawing the paper towards her chest and – in that moment – I see it, the full stretch of the headline, stamped in black capitals.

'DEAD' PILOT SPOTTED ALIVE IN FIJI

The carriage retracts. My vision narrows.

My whole body begins to tremble: fingers, legs, teeth.

The Tube lurches to a stop and I stumble into the woman clasping the paper. She cries out and everyone turns to look. She gets to her feet, dusting herself off as I mumble an apology. She tosses the paper into her vacated seat and makes for the doors, head shaking.

I snatch up the paper. I'm aware of the rush of blood in

The Castaways

my ears, the inky smell of damp print. The Tube doors close and we rattle on, wheezing underground.

The paper feels sticky in my sweating palms. I'm blinking too quickly, breathing too hard. I begin to read.

Captain Mike Brass, pilot of flight FJ209, which disappeared somewhere in the South Pacific two years ago, has been found alive. In the early hours of this morning, he was admitted to a Fijian hospital by his employer, after he collapsed. He was recognised by a member of the nursing team, who contacted the local police.

It is believed that he has been living on Fiji's main island, Viti Levu, under a false identity since the disappearance of flight FJ209. He has been using the alias Charlie Floyd, while working as a handyman at a resort in the interior of the island.

His wife, Anne Brass, who lives in Perth, has been interviewed by the police and claims she had no idea that her husband was alive. 'He hasn't tried to contact me.' Anne and Mike Brass have a son, Nathan Brass, who also lives in Perth.

My thoughts are screaming.

The pilot survived.

Breathe. Breathe.

I scan the rest of the article, which reframes the original details of the plane disappearance. It ends with a final paragraph, reading: *A spokesperson from the Fijian government commented, 'Captain Mike Brass is currently in the care of a team of doctors. We are hoping his condition will stabilise so he can help us with our investigation into the disappearance of flight FJ209.'*

The pilot has been alive this whole time.

Lucy Clarke

I look up, catching myself in the reflection of the darkened Tube window. My face is leached of colour, brows knitted, lips pulled tight. Saliva pools in the back of my throat, the tang of bile chasing it.

It's impossible, isn't it?

I've imagined it, hypothesised about it, dreamt about it. I've been desperate to believe that there could be some explanation, some reason that defied logic to mean the passengers could walk out of the wreckage alive.

Everyone told me to let it go.

Let my sister go.

There was so little information to go on – no black box recording, no plane wreck, no sightings – that it was as if the plane simply disappeared into thin air. All manner of theories were raised in the media and conspiracy forums: hijackers; thermostatic conditions causing spontaneous combustion; an act of God; pilot suicide.

No word. No clue. Not for two years. Nothing. Not even a trace.

Until now.

Now there is a pilot.