

Prologue

Blackhurst Asylum for Unwed Mothers

Cornwall, England

January 6, 1962

The place smells of sickness and damp—of tears and misery and shame.

Alice places a hand on her belly as the familiar flutter comes again, soft beatings like an angel's wings against her insides. Her baby. Her angel. The wave of sickness comes next, as it always does after the flutterings, a clammy surge of heat and nausea that threatens to buckle her at the knees. She swallows it down, scrubs the sudden damp from her palms, and turns one last time to glance over her shoulder, praying Mam has changed her mind about leaving her in this terrible place, with its cold walls and colder faces.

She hasn't.

"This way, girl," comes a disembodied voice from the nameless black-clad nun in front of her. "There's more here than just you to tend, so be quick."

Tears threaten again, scorching lids already raw with days of crying, of begging, of pleading. Alice blinks them away, then drags a hand over her eyes for good measure. She has found no mercy at home, and she'll find none here, so what good are her tears? She won't cry again. Not for Mam, or for Sennen Cove, either, with its sweeping coast and Cornish blue sea, or even for Johnny, who is long past tears now, lost somewhere at the bottom of the sea he loved so well. And tears aren't good for the baby. Besides, her heart is too torn to think of Johnny just now, too hollowed out by the terrible words her mother has flung at her. Words meant to judge and shame. Words Alice can never forget—never forgive.

The nameless sister is moving away now. Alice has no choice but to scurry after her. The nun's feet

are invisible beneath the folds of her black habit, strangely silent on the uneven stone floor. Finally, they halt before a heavy grey door with a small pane of glass near the top.

The door is pushed open and the nun stands aside, waiting, chilly and stiff-jawed, for Alice to enter. Alice steps forward, eyeing the long room with its tall drafty windows and bare iron cots. And then there's a hand on her back and a rough shove that nearly sends her toppling.

“This is where they've put you, and we'll have no trouble. There's uniforms in the trunk there at the foot of the cot. Change out of your clothes and leave them on the bed to be collected. You'll get them back after.”

After.

Alice bristles at the word, left to dangle in the air with all its ominous meanings. After she has done her penance for her swollen belly. After she has been delivered of her *mistake*, as the Sisters of Mercy call the babies born at Blackhurst. After her child has been taken from her, and handed over to strangers.

There is a ceaseless drumming at the windows, a dull grey rain blowing in off the sea, lashing at the loose panes. Alice registers the cold then, slicing through her as she moves deeper into the room, the kind that finds its way into every patched place and seam, clinging to skin and curling damply into bone, taking root in a place—or in a soul. Instinctively, her arms curl around the small bulge of her belly, quiet now, as if the child, too, is holding its breath.

There are a handful of girls in the room, sad-eyed creatures of every age and color with bellies of every shape and size, all dressed in identical brown pinnies and white cotton blouses. They are as plain as little field sparrows, stripped of the vanity that has led them to their downfall, and to Blackhurst. None look up at her as she enters.

“You'll be given new uniforms as need arises,” comes the gruff voice again, jolting Alice from her staring. The nun's gaze slides with pointed disdain to Alice's belly. “You've a while yet, by the look of things. You're up at dawn for prayers, then breakfast, then work. Tomorrow, you'll learn where they've put you, the laundry maybe, or the kitchens, depending on what they need. And you'll do as you're told. No exceptions and no nonsense, or you'll be sternly dealt with. You're not here to make friends, but to repent

of your sins, and earn your keep while doing so. Do you understand me, girl?"

Alice doesn't answer. She wants to say that she's committed no sin, except to love a boy who loved her in return, a boy who wanted to marry her when he had saved up a few pounds. But she can't form the words. Instead, her eyes are fastened to the ponderous ring of keys at the nun's waist. So many keys. So many doors. Surely one of them—

The nun's eyes narrow, a merciless gray stare that seems to cut straight to Alice's backbone. "Don't go getting any ideas, you hear? We're careful with the doors at night, though there's been more than one girl who's ended up smashed to pieces after slipping out and losing her way in the dark. It's a straight drop off those cliffs, with nothing but rock and sea below, so you'd best take care."

Alice makes no reply as the nun turns away, slipping back out into the corridor with her silent feet and jangling keys. For a while there is only the sound of the rain, and the sudden awareness that she is alone in this terrible place. The sparrows don't count. They're alone, too. All the girls at Blackhurst are alone. Finally, she lets herself think of Johnny, cradling the little mound of her belly with both hands. A boy, she's almost certain, with brown curls and eyes the color of the sea. And they were going to take him. How would she ever bear it?

Without any awareness of her legs carrying her, she is at one of the windows, her breath fogging the rain-spattered glass. She had taken little notice of the landscape as Mam's old Hemsby coughed its way up the wooded drive, then passed through Blackhurst's heavy iron gates, but she takes notice now, rocky and spare where the woods petered out, desolate. And in the distance, the cliffs the nun had talked about—or at least the place where they fell away—and she can't help wondering if maybe a few of the girls who'd smashed themselves to bits *had* known exactly where they were going when they slipped out at night.