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LUCY CLARKE

THE CASTAWAYS

Lucy Clarke



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Dedication

For James, Tommy, and Darcy

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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 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 then the advert had popped up. Ten nights on a remote, barefoot 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 uniform advanced along the walkway. He wore a navy peaked cap, beneath which his eyes were heavily pouched and bloodshot. *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 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.'

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.

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?'

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?

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 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 sublet 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.

'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.