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THE UNKNOWN

RILEY SAGER



HODDER &
STOUGHTON

June 15, 1926—9 p.m.

Night has fallen, and I'm scared.

So very scared.

Just beyond these thin walls, a storm rages and wails. But it's not the bad weather that has me so frightened. What's hiding within it is more terrifying than any storm.

The Darkness.

Its presence can be felt all over this island.

And now it's waiting for us, the only two people who remain. The Darkness has already claimed the others. I worry I will suffer the same fate.

Likely soon.

Possibly tonight.

For days, I had assumed this was all my fault. That the Darkness was here because I had accidentally summoned it. Now we are about to attempt to banish it from this place. My fear is that it will end in failure. Because I now believe that the Darkness—this seething, vile, evil force—was here long before any of us came to this island.

And that it will remain here long after we're gone.

ONE

The island sits in the middle of the lake, a black smudge on the horizon. Although I can see it when the car pulls up to the dock, its details remain elusive, out of reach. Less an island than the suggestion of one.

It doesn't help that I don't know the island's name. Or its size. Or even what awaits me there. The only concrete knowledge I have about the place is that it will be my home for the next five days.

Loretta is waiting for me on the dock, her ensemble as dark as the distant island behind her. Black slacks. Black blazer. Black Wayfarers. Her presence is unexpected. One, she's the producer and, presumably, has better things to do. Two, I didn't even know she was going to be here. And, three, I was supposed to be dropped off an hour ago.

Even though the delay was caused by a snarl of traffic near Albany and my driver's fickle GPS, it's never good to be late for your first day on the job. Especially one like this. That's why I spring from the car before it comes to a complete stop, apologies at the ready.

"I'm so sorry! You wouldn't believe the number of cars on the road at this hour."

The corners of Loretta's mouth twitch into a smile that might be sincere or might exist solely to mask her annoyance. "It's totally fine," she says. "I'm just thrilled you're finally here."

She pulls me into a half hug, finishing with air-kisses to both cheeks. An act that surprised me the first time she did it. I'd always thought that was a Hollywood cliché. And maybe it is. Maybe Loretta Zeveryn herself is the cliché, acting the role of high-powered producer because she thinks it'll help her further climb the ladder.

Fake it till you make it.

Something I have yet to master.

Right now, I actively avoid looking at the people who've clocked the black sedan with tinted windows that brought me here and are gathering across the street from the dock. Clearly, word has gotten out that Hollywood has come to town. They clutch their phones, eager to snap a picture of a movie star.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see one woman start to raise her phone. She stops halfway, a strange look on her face that I assume is disappointment because I'm not someone famous.

Yet she continues to watch.

Long enough that I feel compelled to face her full-on.

She's pretty, in an unassuming way. Twenties, slight build, brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. Her most striking feature is her eyes. Large and round, they remain fixed on me in a way that no longer registers as disappointment.

It's envy.

Maybe she also harbors dreams of being in the movies. I suspect I looked just like her a few days ago, when I stopped near the stage door of a Broadway theater on my way to work, angling for a glimpse of the blockbuster actress starring in a play I can't afford to see. On her way into the theater, the actress locked eyes with me, smiled, gave me a little wave.

I do the same thing now, trying it on for size. My finger-waggle at the

girl across the street feels forced and fake, especially once she looks away mid-wave. I turn back to the car, embarrassed.

"Ronan and the others have already been taken to the island," Loretta tells me as we collect my bags from the car. "They can't wait to meet you. We're all so excited."

That's another thing I've noticed about people who make movies. They're always so excited! About everything!

"Me, too!" I exclaim, feigning enthusiasm, when in truth I'm tired and slightly carsick from the hours-long ride to Vermont.

And nervous.

So nervous it makes my legs heavy as we head to a waiting powerboat. Weighed down by anxiety and my suitcase, I shuffle across the dock, trying in vain to keep up with Loretta's long, confident strides. I feel like a child heading to her first day of school. Will I like it here? Will I make friends? Will I *belong*? Raising the stakes is the fact that this isn't school but a movie that's about to be made. Failure is not an option.

"Everything okay?" Loretta calls over her shoulder.

"Just great!" I say, the words obnoxiously loud in the early-afternoon quiet. There's not another boat on the water, making the lake as smooth as glass. The rest of the dock is also empty save for a man waiting by the boat. He's a cliché in his own right. An old salt plucked from central casting. Weathered face, gray beard, years of peering at the sun-brightened water giving him a perpetual squint.

"I'm Pete," he says while taking the suitcase from my hands and hoisting it into the boat. "Welcome aboard."

"I'm Marin," I say. "Sorry about forcing you to make another trip."

Pete sniffs. "Don't you worry about that. Had to make two trips anyway to get the earlier crew over there. This ain't no trouble at all. You another one of them actresses?"

"Yes," I say, and for the first time in my life, it doesn't feel like a lie. I am an actress.

Who, as of three days ago, was still working as a waitress. A profession

I'll likely have to return to six weeks from now, once filming wraps. How this all came to pass remains a blur in my anxiety-riddled, sleep-deprived memory. It happened so fast that it still feels like a fever dream.

Exactly one week ago, my agent, Veronica, sent me a casting notice for a movie that called for a woman in her late twenties with a "period look." Director-speak for a specific type: not ugly, but not conventionally beautiful, either.

Someone plain is what they were looking for. Lucky for me, I fit the bill.

Still, I couldn't help but think it was all some kind of mistake.

"You want me to audition for a *movie*?" I said when I called Veronica on my break.

"It'll be good experience for you," she said, indicating that even she had no illusions I could actually book the part.

"This is, like, some indie thing, right? No budget. Shot on an iPhone."

"It's a studio picture, actually. The budget *is* on the low side, but then again, what isn't these days? But a theatrical release is planned. None of this straight-to-streaming bullshit."

"What kind of movie is it?"

"Horror," Veronica said, quickly adding, "*Elevated* horror. Whatever that means. I assume it's respectable since Ronan Peters is directing and Violet Wright has agreed to star."

I gulped down my shock. *The* Ronan Peters directing *the* Violet Wright? In a horror movie, no less? An unexpected pairing like that would definitely get people talking. This was indeed a real movie. A potentially huge one.

"Why do they want to see me?" I asked, knowing that there were literally a million actresses who would sell their souls to work with Ronan Peters and Violet Wright. And ninety-nine percent of them had more experience than I did.

"They're willing to see anyone," Veronica said.

Ouch.

"I was told it's a casting emergency. The original actress just dropped out, leaving them in the lurch two weeks before production starts."

My heart did a backflip in my chest. "Two weeks?"

"Yes," Veronica said. "They're desperate."

Again, ouch.

"Because of the . . . situation, they've decided to go with an unknown."

That definitely describes me. No one knows who I am unless we went to high school together or they were unlucky enough to catch the three plays I've done off-off-Broadway. If I look familiar to anyone, it's because I appeared in a commercial for an eczema drug in which I played a bridesmaid shoved to the back of the wedding photos because of the severe rash on my arm.

With those illustrious credits, it's no surprise that I have never been in a movie. I've never even read for one. And although, like Veronica, I was certain I wouldn't book the role, the prospect of auditioning for a film had me spinning like a Disney princess around the restaurant's break room.

Because the role's description wasn't exactly a boost to an actress's ego, I opted to lean into it. Minimal makeup. My brown hair plain and straight. Shapeless tan dress that made me look like an extra from *Little House on the Prairie* or someone in a Netflix cult documentary. That was apparently a good thing. When I entered the audition room, the casting director perked up in her folding chair and all but purred, "Who do we have here?"

"Marin Keane," I said, peeling my headshot from my sweaty palm. I handed it to the casting director, who gestured for me to stand in front of a camcorder mounted on a tripod.

"I don't know what role I'm reading for," I said. "I wasn't given any sides, so . . ."

I let the sentence trail off into silence, making it abundantly clear I had no business being there.

"Is this your first audition for a film?"

The question came from a man quietly seated behind the camcorder. I'd been so laser focused on the casting director that I hadn't noticed him. But now that he had my attention, I realized the man wasn't just some random assistant.

It was Ronan Peters.

The Ronan Peters.

His first film, a low-budget thriller called *Mercy*, was an indie success that got raves at Sundance and earned him an Oscar nomination for Best Director. His second movie, an adaptation of the Broadway play *Shred of Doubt*, was a slicker affair that evoked the mid-century work of Alfred Hitchcock. An apt comparison, because, like Hitchcock, Ronan had become a celebrity in his own right, recognizable to anyone who paid even the slightest attention to movies. He appeared on talk shows, graced the covers of magazines, even cameoed in a Super Bowl commercial for Uber Eats.

It helped, of course, that he was gorgeous. One of those rare directors more handsome than most movie stars. James Dean hair, Monty Clift smile, eyes a cool Paul Newman blue that he pretended to downplay by wearing glasses with thick black frames. Like always, he was dressed in his standard uniform of khakis, crisp white oxford shirt, and neckerchief the same color as his eyes. A pretentious look, to be sure, but on him, it worked.

As did his style of directing, which involved totally immersing his actors in the world of the movie they were making. "Method directing," he called it. And while one or two actors had complained about the intensity of a Ronan Peters shoot, even they conceded that their performances were better because of it.

"Yes," I said, surprised I could summon even a single word in his presence.

"You're nervous."

Even though it was a statement and not a question, I found myself answering with a nod. No point in denying the obvious.

"Don't be," Ronan said. "The reason you weren't given any pages is to eliminate the potential for script leaks. Call me paranoid, but I don't want anyone knowing any details about this movie until I'm ready to reveal them."

"Is that why you're looking for an unknown?"

Ronan arched a brow, seemingly impressed by the question.

"It's one reason, yes. Another is because movie stars come with expectations. Audiences see them and immediately assume what kind of character they're playing, if they're a hero or a villain, if they'll die or live happily ever after. With this role, I don't want any of that. I want someone new. A discovery."

He smiled then. A warm, patient smile that created butterflies in my chest.

"I'm sure you've heard that my way of working is unorthodox," he said. "So don't even think of this as an audition. I'd like it to be more of a conversation. Just you and me getting to know each other. Does that sound good to you, Marin?"

"It does," I said, although I have never felt comfortable in my own skin. That's one of the reasons I've always wanted to be an actress. So I could be someone other than my plain, boring self, if only for a little while.

Still, Ronan looked at me like I was the world's most interesting woman. Leaning forward, he switched on the camcorder and said, "Where did you grow up?"

"Pennsylvania."

"What was your childhood like?" Ronan's voice was gentle to the point of soothing. Within seconds, my nerves were gone, making me feel comfortable enough to provide an honest answer.

"Lonely."