

September 1984

She had never been a particularly punctual person, but even to Ida, being late by a week seemed to be stretching the bounds of good manners. She had phoned the school to explain, but it was a bad line and, although the woman on the other end had sounded friendly in between all the crackling and static, Ida doubted that her explanation about the storm and the ferries had been absorbed.

All in all, it had been a difficult journey. Though Ida eventually made the crossing, in the absence of any ferries, on her neighbor's alarmingly rusty fishing boat, her train from Oban had been delayed by heavy rain. Then at the hostel in Glasgow there was the man who said he wanted to show her a card trick but had in fact tried to show her something quite different, until the woman from Dumfries had chased him out of the room yelling, "Ya think you've got something there to write home about, do ya?"

And even now, as her train finally pulled into the station, all the way down in the south of England, Ida hit a snag. When she leaned out of the window to open the carriage door, the handle stuck so that she nearly remained trapped on the train as it departed. During those panicked moments as she wrenched at the handle, she might almost have been willing to admit that her mother and sister were right, that she was

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making a terrible mistake (this, at least, was her mother's view; Charlotte had suggested the mistake was on the part of the school).

Then, at the last moment, a man seemed to appear out of nowhere, leaping forward and yanking the door open. Ida tumbled out of the train, turning just in time to snatch out her holdall and rucksack as the train moved away, the door still gaping open. It was late afternoon, and the small rural station seemed to be entirely deserted except for Ida and her rescuer.

Ida looked at him. Middle-aged, dressed shabbily in cords and a green anorak. She wondered if this could be the teacher they said would come to meet her. She had expected a woman.

He looked back at her.

"I'm a new pupil at St. Anne's," Ida volunteered.

"Are you, love? You look a bit old to be a new pupil."

"I'm joining the Sixth Form. I'm sixteen," she added, sounding more defensive than she'd intended.

"Ah, is that right? Good for you."

There was a silence. It had dawned on Ida that this man had no affiliation with the school at all, was in fact just an unsuspecting passer-by who must think she loved to share information about herself with strangers. She gave him a polite smile, and then took her luggage over to the single bench on the platform. The man stayed where he was, scribbling something in a small notebook he carried. After a while, he wandered toward the exit and disappeared from view. Ida sat on the bench with her rucksack on her knees. Her plan was to wait a while to see if anyone did show up to collect her. In the meantime, she'd try to come up with a contingency plan. Her whole life sometimes felt like one long contingency plan.

"Are you sure you want to leave the Western Isles?" the headmistress,

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Miss Christie, had asked her during their original phone call, the one where she'd offered Ida the scholarship. "You'll be fairly safe there, at least."

"Safe from what?" Ida had said.

"The bomb. Things seem to be hotting up again at the moment. Or cooling down, perhaps I should say. You know the doomsday clock is set at three minutes to midnight?"

Ida had no idea what the doomsday clock was, and didn't dare ask. She couldn't quite tell if Miss Christie was being serious. There didn't seem to be any humor in her voice, but it was difficult to work these things out on the phone.

"I'm sure," she said.

"There's a program on the radio this evening that you should listen to," Miss Christie said. "Radio 4, seven p.m. It's about Britain's nuclear preparations. You ought to hear it before you make a final decision."

Ida had taped the program so she could listen to it back on her Walkman. She was worried there would be some kind of test on it. The information had been alarming, but it hadn't changed her mind. She was already faced with the ongoing fallout from what her mother had done; she simply didn't have the capacity to worry about what the Soviets might do.

Now, sitting on the bench at the train station, she tried for a while to enjoy the peace. At least here nobody knew who she was, nobody had heard even the faintest rumour of her mother's disgrace. No one would insult Ida, or cast aspersions (a figure of speech she had recently discovered from her friend Mrs. Kelly at the Oban public library), or piss in her bag (unfortunately not a figure of speech), or, worst of all, look at her with that cold expression that Ida initially interpreted as disappointment and later realized was contempt. Because of course they all believed she'd

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been in on it. They believed it with such conviction that some days Ida even believed it herself.

When she looked at her watch, twenty minutes had passed, and still no one had come to collect her. Ida didn't feel especially surprised to find herself abandoned again.

"All right?" The man in the green anorak had reappeared. "Thought I'd come and see if you were still here. I mentioned meeting you to the wife, and she told me to pop back to see if you'd gone."

"Do you know if there's a bus I can get to St. Anne's?" Ida said. "Or a taxi?" She knew she didn't have enough money left for a taxi, but perhaps someone at the school could lend her the money when she arrived. The question seemed to amuse him. "A bus or a taxi? Not round here, love. But listen, I can't leave you sitting here on your own. The wife was quite insistent about that. I'll drive you there. The wife suggested it. And she said to mention her a few times, so you don't think I'm an oddball."

"It's very kind of you," Ida said. She hoped he wouldn't offer to show her a card trick on the way.

"It's no trouble," he said, reaching for her holdall. "The wife's idea, as I said. 'But make sure you mention you have a wife,' she told me, 'so she knows you're not just wanting to murder her.'"

Ida felt she would have been more reassured without any mention of murder.

"Though I suppose," the man added as they left the platform, "a woman can't always be counted on."

"No, I suppose not," Ida said.

"Just look at Myra Hindley."

He led her to an elderly looking red car parked on the grass verge of the narrow road outside the station.

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As they set off: "There's also the fact that you haven't seen my wife."

"That's true," Ida said.

"She is real, though."

"I'm sure she is," Ida said. She left her seat belt off so she could open the door and roll out at short notice.

It was a scenic drive, along roads squeezed between hedgerows, and then up higher on to the cliffs so the sea stretched out below them on one side, fields on the other.

"St. Anne's, eh?" the man said after a while. "Interesting place."

"Aye, it sounds like it," Ida said.

"You see the girls in the village every now and then. At the end of term and so on." He swung the car round a particularly tight bend. "They all seem absolutely crackers. If you don't mind me saying."

This worried Ida. "Do they?"

"It's not healthy, if you ask me. Locking all those young girls up together, up there on a cliff, away from everything."

"But that's what all boarding schools are like, isn't it?" Ida said anxiously.

"There's boarding schools," the man said, "and there's boarding schools."

Ida couldn't think how to reply, and they lapsed into silence again.

"I hope you brought plenty of warm clothes," the man said eventually.

"Gets chilly round here, especially when the wind's coming in off the sea."

"I'm from Scotland," Ida said. "I only have warm clothes."

"That's good, love. I dare say you'll be fine. Well, here we are," he added, as they passed by a high stone wall and turned through the gate pillars on to a wide gravel driveway. He brought the car to a stop. There, looming, was the Victorian frontage of Ida's new school.

The location could hardly be less hospitable, set high on a cliff, whipped by cold winds coming off the English Channel. But Ida wasn't

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sure the school buildings would have been appealing in any setting. Before her was a large manor house that looked as if it had been caught in the act of falling down, and was now doing its best to hold itself together until you looked away again. The roof of the main house seemed to have lost a fair few tiles, and the buttresses that propped it up were all cracked or missing chunks. Pointed rooftop windows were set at intervals, with a turret at either end of the building. A couple of the windows were cracked, and one of them was actually broken.

"A sight for sore eyes, isn't it?" the man said.

"It looked different in the prospectus," Ida said faintly.

"There was a photo, was there?"

"It was a painting," Ida admitted.

The man gave a shout of laughter. "A painting? That was canny of them."

The watercolor on the front of the prospectus had shown a pretty country manor house bathed in golden late-afternoon light. That building had been in immaculate condition, windows uncracked, stonework complete and roof tiles in place. At the time, it hadn't occurred to Ida to wonder why they'd opted for a painting instead of a photograph; she'd assumed it was all in keeping with the general sophistication of the place.

"Used to be a convent, didn't it?" the man said.

"I didn't know that." Ida's prior research was coming to seem more inadequate by the second.

"There was some kind of scandal with the nuns, so it had to close. I can't remember the full story. Somebody died, I think. There was a fire. There's always a fire, isn't there? Anyway, the details escape me."

Ida reached for the door handle. "Thanks ever so much for the lift," she said. She was aware, now she no longer feared for her life, of how kind he had been.

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“That’s all right, love. And good luck to you!” he added, somewhat disconcertingly.

He drove off with a final cheery wave, and Ida was left standing alone in the drizzle with her rucksack and her holdall.

She smelled the salt in the air and briefly felt at home, and then, conversely, very homesick – though for what she couldn’t say. Certainly not for the island, certainly not for her mother.

She only allowed herself to hesitate for a few moments longer before climbing the steps with her bags and ringing the doorbell.