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CLEAR



a novel

CARYS DAVIES

AUTHOR OF *WEST* AND *THE MISSION HOUSE*

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CLEAR

a novel

CARYS DAVIES

SCRIBNER

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

for Michael

1



He wished he could swim—the swimming belt felt like a flimsy thing and it had been no comfort to be told not to worry, the men couldn't swim either.

Each time they rose he glimpsed the rocky shore, the cliffs, the absence of any kind of landing; each time they descended, the rocks vanished and were replaced by a liquid wall of gray.

He closed his eyes.

Thump.

Dear God.

He clung to the gunwale as they began to climb again and he saw, above the cliffs, a thousand birds soaring and wheeling. When the little boat tipped, and plunged into the hollow trough on the other side, he knew it would be for the last time.

But after an hour on what one of the men described later as “an uppity sea,” John Ferguson found himself safely deposited, along with his satchel and his box, on the narrow strip of sandy beach that turned out, in spite of appearances, to exist in the shadow of the monstrous cliffs.

Oh the relief of feeling solid ground beneath the soles of his soaking shoes!

Oh the relief of watching the water pour off his coat onto the hard-packed sand, and seeing, in the distance—as Strachan said he would—the Baillie house, pale and almost luminous in the silvery murk of the afternoon.

With freezing fingers he unbuckled the swimming belt and tossed it cheerfully into the boat. He loosened his neckcloth and wrung it out and put it back on again. He squeezed the sea, as best he could, out of the sleeves and pockets of his coat and jumped up and down a few times in his sodden footwear in an effort to warm up. He thanked God for his deliverance.

All that remained now, before the men pushed off back across the boisterous water to the *Lily Rose*, was for one of them to carry his box while he followed with his satchel, picking his way over the rocks like a tall, slightly undernourished wading bird, thin black hair blowing vertically in the persisting wind, silently talking to his absent wife:

“You see, Mary, it is all right. I am here. I have arrived. I am safe. You have no need to worry. I will do what I have come to do and before you know it, I will be home.”

2



The weather was calm and it rained softly.

Ivar worked hard all morning, laying new turf and straw in the places where the bad weather had torn up the roof, tying it all down with his gnarly weighted ropes. It gave him a good calm feeling to do the work—climbing up onto the roof and down again, trudging back and forth over the boggy soil and every so often pausing to sharpen his knife.

When evening came, he squatted close to the fire to cook his dinner, boiling the milk for a long time until it acquired the dark color and acrid taste he liked. When he finished eating he scraped the inside of the pot clean and wiped off the layer of soot on its underside, and after that he sat in his great chair with the cleaned pot in his lap because it was the time of year when the days are long and the nights are short and Ivar hardly ever bothered to lie down to sleep.

Outside, beyond the thick stone walls of his house, the island's contours retreated briefly into darkness but without ever really disappearing, and soon, through the opening in the roof above the hearth, light began to fall in a slowly turning, glittering column of chaff and fish scales and wisps of floating wool.

It fell on the trodden clay floor and the edge of the low table and the pot in Ivar's lap and on Ivar's sleeping face, illuminating it and separating it from the surrounding gloom the way some paintings do—a lined and weatherworn face, heavy, with a kind of hewn quality; not an old face, but not a young one either.

His hair was the color of dirty straw, his beard darker, browner, full and perhaps unclean, with a patch of gray over his jaw on the left-hand side that stood out from the rest like a child's handprint. Having no mirror, he had no clear picture in his mind of his own appearance beyond the uncertain reflections he sometimes saw in the island's pools and puddles, though obviously he was conscious of himself in relation to his surroundings—that he was tall enough to have to stoop when he moved about inside the small, low-roofed house; that he was wide enough to fill the doorway when he ducked through it; that he was strong enough, in spite of his illness last winter, to accomplish all the tasks he needed to accomplish.

When it was fully dawn, he stepped outside.

The brook below the house had widened in the rain and everywhere the ground was sloppy. At the spring the mud lapped his feet.

He gave the old cow a drink of water and checked the knot on her tether, and then he went to find Pegi in the outfield and stayed talking to her for a while, patting her coarse and straggly mane with the flat of his hand. He called her an old cabbage and a silly, odd-looking person, and a host of other pet names he had for her in his language. In the early light her coat looked dusty and dull, a dirty-gray with a bluish-yellow tinge.

“*Prus!*” he said eventually, which was the word he used to tell her they had work to do and it was time they got going.

3



In the Baillie house, having unlocked the door and let himself in, John Ferguson emptied his satchel onto the narrow bed: his spare shirt and his second set of underwear; his comb and his soap; the blue ledger and his papers; his writing accoutrements and Mary's picture in its tooled leather frame; the pistol, the powder, the ammunition.

It was not so snug as Strachan had led him to believe—if it had been comfortable once, it wasn't anymore.

The narrow iron bed had no blanket, and the only other furniture was a low three-legged table and a single stool. He wondered if he might do better in the church, but when he walked down under a clearing sky to investigate, he found the little gray building was full of hay, and a good part of the roof had fallen in.

Well.

At least there was a cooking pot in the hearth, and on a ledge behind the house he found a small supply of peat. He also had his box, with Mary's fruitcake and his other foodstuffs inside. All of these things were blessings, and for each one he mouthed a silent prayer of thanks.

He also reminded himself that he had survived a long and horrible journey and was, praise be, no longer seasick. He gave thanks for that, too, and as he sank down onto the little stool, he reminded himself, also, that he was being paid.

So.

He would make a fire in the hearth and dry out his clothes and cook himself something to eat and try and get a good night's sleep, and in the morning he would have a little look around the island, spend the day getting his bearings, and after that he would go and find the man.