

Prologue

Friday 13 February 1959

My darling Elvira,

I do not know where to begin.

You are just a little girl, and it is so hard to explain in words that you will understand why I am choosing to leave this life, and you, behind. You are my daughter, if not by blood then in my heart, and it breaks to know that what I am about to do will be adding to the mountain of hurt and pain you have had to endure in the eight long years of your short life.

Ivy paused, trying to compose herself so that the pen in her hand would stop shaking enough for her to write. She looked around the large drying room where she had hidden herself. From the ceiling hung huge racks crammed with sheets and towels meticulously washed by the cracked and swollen hands of the pregnant girls in St Margaret's laundry, now ready to go down to the ironing room and out to the oblivious waiting world. She looked back down to the crumpled piece of paper on the floor in front of her.

Were it not for you, Elvira, I would have given up the fight to stay in this world much sooner. Ever since they took Rose away from me, I can find no joy in living. A mother cannot forget

her baby any more than a baby can forget her mother. And I can tell you that if your mother were alive, she would be thinking of you every minute of every day.

When you escape from this place – and you will, my darling – you must look for her. In the sunsets, and the flowers, and in anything that makes you smile that beautiful smile of yours. For she is in the very air you breathe, filling your lungs, giving your body what it needs to survive, to grow strong and to live life to the full. You were loved, Elvi, every minute of every day that you were growing inside your mother’s tummy. You must believe that, and take it with you.

She tensed and stopped momentarily as footsteps clattered above her. She was aware that her breathing had quickened with her heart rate, and underneath her brown overalls she could feel a film of sweat forming all over her body. She knew she didn’t have long before Sister Angelica returned, slamming shut the only window in her day when she wasn’t being watched. She looked down at her scrawled letter, Elvira’s beautiful face flashing into her mind’s eye, and fought back the tears as she pictured her reading it, her dark brown eyes wide, her pale fingers trembling as she struggled to take the words in.

By now, you will have in your hands the key I enclose with this letter. It is the key to the tunnels and your freedom. I will distract Sister Faith as best I can, but you don’t have long. As soon as the house alarm goes off, Sister Faith will leave the ironing room and you must go. Immediately. Unlock the door to the tunnel at the end of the room, go down the steps, turn right and out through the graveyard. Run to the outhouse and don’t look back.

She underlined the words so hard that her pen pierced a hole in the paper.

I'm so sorry I couldn't tell you face to face, but I feared you would be upset and would give us away. When I came to you last night, I thought they were letting me go home, but they are not, they have other plans for me, so I am using my wings to leave St Margaret's another way, and this will be your chance to escape. You must hide until Sunday morning, the day after tomorrow, so try and take a blanket with you if you can. Stay out of sight.

Ivy bit down hard on her lip until the metallic taste of blood filled her mouth. The memory of breaking into Mother Carlin's office at dawn was still raw, the anticipation of finding her baby's file turning to shock as she discovered no trace of Rose's whereabouts. Instead, the file contained six letters. One was to a local psychiatric unit, the word copy stamped in the corner, recommending she be admitted immediately; the other five had been written by Ivy herself, begging Alistair to come to St Margaret's and fetch her and their baby. A rubber band was wrapped tightly around these letters, *Return to sender* written in Alistair's scrawl across every one.

She had walked over to the tiny window of the dark, hellish room where she had suffered so much pain and watched the sunrise, knowing it would be her last. Then she had slotted Alistair's letters into an envelope from Mother Carlin's desk, scribbled her mother's address on it and hidden it in the post tray before creeping back up the stairs to her bed.

Without any hope of freedom, or of finding Rose, I no longer have the strength to go on. But Elvira, you can. Your file told me that you have a twin sister named Kitty, who probably has no idea you exist, and that your family name is Cannon. They live in Preston, so they will attend church here every Sunday. Wait in the outhouse until you hear the bells and the villagers begin arriving for church, then hide in the graveyard until you see your twin. No doubt you will recognise her, although she will be dressed a little differently to you. Try and get her attention without anyone seeing. She will help you.

Don't be afraid to escape and live your life full of hope. Look for the good in everyone, Elvira, and be kind.

I love you and I will be watching you and holding your hand forever. Now run, my darling. RUN.

Ivy XXX

Ivy started as the lock to the drying room where she and Elvira had spent so many hours together clicked suddenly and Sister Angelica burst through the door. She glared at Ivy, her squinting grey eyes hidden behind wire-framed glasses that were propped up by her bulbous nose. Ivy hurriedly pushed herself up and stuffed the note into the pocket of her overalls. She looked down so as not to catch the nun's eye.

'Aren't you finished yet?' Sister Angelica snapped.

'Yes, Sister,' said Ivy. 'Sister Faith said I could have some TCP.' She buried her trembling hands in her pockets.

'What for?'

She could feel Sister Angelica's eyes burning into her. 'Some of the children have bad mouth ulcers and it's making it hard for them to eat.'

‘Those children are of no concern to you,’ Sister Angelica replied angrily. ‘They are lucky to have a roof over their heads.’

Ivy pictured the rows of babies lying in their cots, staring into the distance, having long since given up crying.

Sister Angelica continued. ‘Fetching TCP means I have to go all the way to the storeroom, and Mother Carlin’s dinner tray is due for collection. Do you not think I have enough to do?’

Ivy paused. ‘I just want to help them a little, Sister. Isn’t that best for everyone?’

Sister Angelica glared at her, the hairs protruding from the mole on her chin twitching slightly. ‘You will find that hard where you’re going.’

Ivy felt adrenaline flooding through her body as Sister Angelica turned to walk back out of the room, reaching for her keys to lock the door behind her. Lifting her shaking hands, she took a deep breath and lunged forward, grabbing the nun’s tunic and pulling it as hard as she could. Sister Angelica let out a gasp, losing her balance and falling to the ground with a thud. Ivy straddled her and put one hand over her mouth, wrestling with the keys on her belt until they finally came free. Then, as Sister Angelica opened her mouth to scream, she slapped her hard across the face, stunning her into silence.

Panting heavily, with fear and adrenaline making her heart hurt, Ivy pulled herself up, ran through the door and slammed it shut. Her hands were shaking so violently, it was a struggle to find the right key, but she managed to fit it into the lock and turn it just as Sister Angelica rattled the handle, trying to force the door open.

She stood for a moment, gasping deep breaths. Then she unhooked the large brass key Elvira needed to get into the tunnels and wrapped her note around it. She heaved open the iron door to the laundry chute and kissed the note before sending it down to Elvira, pressing the buzzer to let her know it was there. She pictured the little girl waiting patiently for the dry laundry as she did at the end of every day. A wave of emotion crashed over her and she felt her legs buckling. Leaning forward, she let out a cry.

Sister Angelica began to scream and hammer on the door, and with one last look back down the corridor that led to the ironing room and Elvira, Ivy turned away, breaking into a run. She passed the heavy oak front door. She had the keys to it now, but it led only to a high brick wall topped with barbed wire that she had neither the strength nor the heart to climb over.

Memories of her arrival all those months ago came flooding back. She could see herself ringing the heavy bell at the gate, her large stomach making it awkward to lug her suitcase behind Sister Mary Francis along the driveway, hesitating before she crossed the threshold to St Margaret's for the first time. Hurrying up the creaking stairs two at a time, she turned as she reached the top and pictured herself screaming at the girl she once was, telling her to run away and never look back.

As she crept along the landing, she could hear the murmur of voices coming towards her and broke into a run, heading for the door at the foot of the dormitory steps. The house was deathly quiet, as all the other girls were at dinner, eating in silence, any talk forbidden. Only the cries of the babies in the nursery echoed through the house. Soon,

though, Mother Carlin would know she was gone, and the whole building would be alerted.

She reached the door of the dormitory and ran between the rows of beds just as the piercing alarm bell began to ring. As she reached the window, Sister Faith appeared at the end of the room. Despite her fear, Ivy smiled to herself. If Sister Faith was with her, that meant she was not with Elvira. She could hear Mother Carlin shouting from the stairway.

‘Stop her, Sister, quickly!’

Ivy pulled herself up onto the ledge and, using Sister Angelica’s keys, opened the window. She pictured Elvira running through the tunnels and out into the freedom of the night. Then, just as Sister Faith reached her and grabbed for her overalls, she stretched out her arms and jumped.

Chapter One

Saturday 4 February 2017

‘Have you cracked it yet?’

Sam pulled on the handbrake of her battered Vauxhall Nova, wishing it was a noose around her news editor’s neck.

‘No, not yet. I’ve only just arrived. I had to drive all the way from Kent, remember?’

‘Who else is there?’ barked Murray down the phone.

Sam craned her neck to see the usual suspects standing in the drizzling rain outside a row of pretty terraced cottages set back from the road in perfectly manicured gardens. ‘Um, Jonesey, King . . . and Jim’s at the door now. Why am I even here if Jim’s already on the case?’ She watched one of Southern News Agency’s most experienced hacks trying to get his foot through the door. ‘Won’t he think I’m treading on his toes?’

‘I thought this one might need a woman’s touch,’ said Murray.

Sam glanced at her watch. It was 4 p.m. – close to cut-off time for the national press going to print – and she could picture the scene in the office now. Murray on his mobile, shouting orders at everyone whilst admiring his reflection in the glass of the framed covers of Southern News scoops. Koop would be typing, pulling anxiously at his unkempt hair, surrounded by cold cups of coffee and wilted sandwiches, while Jen chewed on her Nicorette gum and

frantically made calls to contacts trying to fill in gaps in her copy. After he'd hung up on her, Murray would be straight on the phone to the *Mirror* or the *Sun*, lying through his teeth and telling them Sam was already on the case and to hold the press for her.

'I'm really not sure I'm the right person for this,' she said, studying her reflection in the rear-view mirror and catching sight of her grandmother's birthday flowers wilting on the back seat. She was supposed to have been at Nana's flat an hour ago to take over with Emma and cook Nana her birthday dinner.

'Well, the cream of the bunch will have already left for the Press Awards tonight. You'll have to do it.'

'Great. Good to know I'm considered the dregs of this agency,' mumbled Sam.

'Call me when you've got something,' Murray hung up.

'Wanker.' Sam threw her battered phone onto the seat next to her. She was pretty sure that the hours she'd worked that day on her tiny salary amounted to slave labour, and now she was expected to pull off a death knock.

She pressed her fingers into her eyes, massaging the sockets. She'd thought she knew what tiredness was before she became a mother. People lied to new parents, telling you to hang in there, that babies slept at six weeks, which was patently a lie. Then it became once they were weaned, then when they were a year old. Emma was four now, and it was still a miracle if she slept through. Before, Sam would complain of tiredness after getting six hours' sleep instead of eight, dragging herself into work in a haze of hangover after a night out clubbing. Now, at the grand age of twenty-five, she felt like an elderly lady; the four years of accumulated

sleep deprivation had infected every muscle in her body, altering her brain and dragging her down so that some days she could barely form a sentence. On Ben's days with Emma, she could at least sleep until seven. But now that he had whittled that down to two days a week, on the pretext of needing more time to job-hunt, she had to be up at six most days to get herself and her daughter up and out of the door in time for nursery drop-off.

She sighed as she watched a dejected Jim walk back down the uneven stone pathway to join the other reporters under a golf umbrella. She knew the game, knew door-stepping was a necessary evil of her trade, but it was the worst part of being a reporter. Though she liked every one of the hapless gaggle standing at the end of this poor woman's pathway, they always looked to her like vultures circling their stricken prey.

She adjusted the mirror, pulled out her make-up bag and assessed how much of her face was salvageable. She would need a trowel of foundation to fill in the scowl-induced dent in the middle of her brow. As she dabbed at it, she closed her eyes and images of the fight she'd had with Ben the night before rushed back. It was always tense when she collected Emma from Ben's flat, the two of them trying not to snipe at each other in front of their daughter, but yesterday hadn't gone well. The fight had been a bad one, she knew that much, but as usual the exchange of insults had become a blur that had ended with them shouting so loudly they'd made Emma cry. Sam hated herself for dragging Emma into their arguments, and hated Ben for not trying harder to hide his disdain for her.

Recoiling at the sight of her frizzy hair, she reached for the portable tongs in her bag. In between getting Emma

dressed and pouring breakfast down them both, she had little time for pampering in the mornings. Her red corkscrew curls were usually scraped back from her face, and the five minutes she had spare were given to blow-drying her heavy fringe. Heels were her uniform, and on her wages, eBay was her best friend. Days never went right without Louboutin or Dior to prop her up in a man's world, and she often found the pack sniggering at her as she made her way across muddy fields or flooded car parks in killer heels.

'Hey, Sam!' called Fred as he turned and spotted her, breaking free from the pack and tripping on the edge of a paving stone in his rush to get to her. He laughed in embarrassment, pushing his floppy fringe back and adopting the lovesick gaze he usually reserved for her.

'Hey, yourself. How long have you been here?' Sam pulled the passenger seat forward to grab her coat, bag and Nana's flowers from the back seat.

'Not long. It's my day off and I was rock-climbing in Tunbridge Wells so I've only just got here.' Fred's waterproof waxed jacket made him look like he'd just come from a pheasant shoot, Sam thought, pulling her black mac tightly around her.

'Why has Murray called you in on your day off? That's not fair,' she said, checking her phone as she walked.

'I know, I was a bit gutted. The friction was sick,' said Fred, smiling.

'You were sick? Oh dear.' Sam moved away slightly.

'No, it was good; sick is good,' said Fred, embarrassed.

'Sick is never good when you've got a four-year-old. How long have the others been here?' Sam asked as they approached the pack, huddled in a group.

‘Hours. She’s a tough one; we’ve all tried. The *Guardian* and *Independent* have been and gone too. Don’t think even you can crack this one, Samantha,’ said Fred in the public-school accent that earned him merciless teasing from the troops at Southern News.

Sam smiled back at him. At twenty-three, Fred was only two years younger than her, but as a commitment-free, fresh-faced graduate full of heroic ideals, he seemed part of another generation. It was obvious to most at Southern News that he had a huge crush on Sam. Despite the fact that he was tall, good-looking and accidentally amusing, with an endless supply of blue suede shoes and rainbow-coloured glasses, she found it hard to take him seriously. He was obsessed with climbing, and as far as she could gather spent every weekend scaling mountains and then getting drunk with his friends. She had no idea why he was interested in her. She was an exhausted, joyless grump whose greatest fantasy in the bedroom was eight hours’ uninterrupted sleep.

They reached the back of the press pack. ‘I’m not sure why Murray’s sent you,’ Jim called over his shoulder at Sam. Sam smiled politely at the Southern News old-timer, who found it hard to hide the fact that he thought she should be back at the office making tea.

‘Me neither, Jim! Am I passable?’ she said, turning to Fred.

Fred flushed slightly. ‘Yes, definitely. Look out for the old witch next door,’ he added hurriedly, keen to change the subject. ‘She looks like she’s going to attack us all with her Zimmer frame.’

All eyes were on Sam as she walked past the pack and down the path, clutching the bouquet to her chest like a terrified bride. As she reached the front door, she caught

sight of an elderly lady at the window of the house next door. She had her net curtains pulled back and was staring intently. Fred was right, she did look like a witch. She was wild-eyed, her long grey hair loose around her shoulders and her bony fingers white from gripping the curtain so hard. Sam took a deep breath and pressed the bell.

It was a good two minutes before Jane Connors opened the door, ashen-faced.

‘I’m so sorry to bother you at this difficult time.’ Sam looked directly into the woman’s reddened eyes. ‘My name is Samantha, I represent Southern News. We wanted to offer our sincere condolences—’

‘Can’t you just leave us alone?’ the woman snapped. ‘As if this isn’t hard enough. Why won’t you all just go away?’

‘I’m so sorry for your loss, Mrs Connors.’

‘You’re not sorry! If you were sorry, you wouldn’t do this . . . at the worst time in our lives.’ Her voice trembled. ‘We just want to be left in peace. You should all be ashamed of yourselves.’

Sam waited for the right words to come, then hung her head. The woman was right. She should be ashamed, and she was.

‘Mrs Connors, I hate this part of my job. I wish I didn’t have to do it. But I’ve learnt from experience that sometimes people wish to pay tribute to their loved ones. They want to talk to someone who can tell the world their story. In your case, you could talk about how brave your father was trying to save your son.’

Tears sprang into the woman’s eyes as she moved to close the door. ‘Don’t talk about them like you knew them. You don’t know anything about them.’

‘No, I don’t, but unfortunately it’s my job to find out. All these reporters out here, myself included, have very tough bosses who won’t let us go home to our families until you speak to one of us.’

‘And if I refuse?’ Mrs Connors peered round the half-closed door.

‘They’ll talk to other members of your family, or local shopkeepers, or write features based on potentially inaccurate information from well-meaning neighbours.’ Sam paused. ‘That would be a lasting memory for readers that you might find even more upsetting than all this in years to come.’

The woman was looking at the ground now, her shoulders sagging. She was broken. Sam hated herself.

‘These are for you.’ She laid the flowers on the doorstep. ‘Well, they were actually for my grandmother – it’s her birthday today – but she’d want you to have them. Please accept my sincere apologies again for intruding. That white Nova is my car, and this is my card. I’ll wait for half an hour and then I’ll go. I won’t bother you again.’ She started to make her way back down the cobbled pathway, hoping she wouldn’t trip in her heels in front of the bored pack.

‘Would I get to check what you wrote first?’ Mrs Connors’ voice was faint.

Sam turned round. ‘Absolutely. You can read every word before I send it off.’ She smiled gently at the woman, who examined the sodden handkerchief squashed into her palm.

Sam had noticed that the elderly woman in the house next door was standing at her open door now, still staring. She must be in her nineties. What must it be like to be so old, to have lived through so much? The woman was almost bent double over her Zimmer frame, an age spot like a large

bruise on her hand. Her heart-shaped face was pale apart from the dark red lipstick she wore.

‘Well I suppose you’d better come in then,’ said Mrs Connors, pulling her door open wide.

Sam glanced back at the pack, then at the old lady, who had fixed her with her pale blue eyes. It wasn’t uncommon for neighbours to become involved when the press were out in force, but their presence was usually accompanied by a great deal of swearing. She offered the woman a smile that wasn’t returned, but as she turned to close the door behind her, she looked up and their eyes met.

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