THE DOLL TWIN

Janine Beacham

First published in 2024 by Firefly Press
25 Gabalfa Road, Llandaff North, Cardiff, CF14 2JJ
www.fireflypress.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-915444-47-9
Ebook ISBN 978-1-915444-48-6

This book has been published with the support of the Books Council of Wales.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group UK

November 1, 1925

Dear Mary

Today I went back to the house. That big abandoned mansion. Sea spray had rusted the doorknobs and warped the window frames, making the shutters crash and bang in the wind. It looked like a shipwreck. No smoke from the chimneys, tiles falling from the roof, the garden cluttered with weeds and rotting leaves. Everyone thinks it's empty.

You and I both know it's not.

But I had to go back. I'll have to do this for the rest of my life. Maintain the light, beat back the dark. Those words are written in my bones. One day they'll be carved on my gravestone.

I hope that you are safe. *And having fun being you, out in the world of automobiles and jazz, bobbed hair and bangles, movie stars and aeroplanes and dashing adventurers.*

But I wonder.
Do the villagers ever hear music in the night?

I pray she never comes back.

Your friend, always,
Una

Chapter 1

Five years earlier

Una sat in Matron's office, heels hard against the floor, her battered suitcase on her knees. It contained the only treasures she had been allowed to keep: pieces of driftwood, books on lighthouses and sea creatures, her paintbox, and her father's pristine watch, sent back from the trenches. The suitcase had been her mother's and she was lucky to have it still. Matron tried to burn anything connected to victims of the Spanish flu.

Una had never wanted to leave the Home so badly. It was a place of thin damp mattresses; displaced, war-shocked children; enforced cleanliness and constant desperation. She never felt quite at home with groundlings, though she tried her best to make friends. Everyone loathed Matron and supported each other against her.

Una's overalls and home-knitted clothes had been replaced by drab grey smocks, and her gannet-pale eyes and odd behaviour infuriated Matron. Not only did Una fill her pockets with pebbles and feathers, but she had also been caught up on the roof at nights, gazing at the stars as if they were long-lost friends. Asked to tell the time, she would reply 'six bells' instead of three o'clock. Una used what Matron called 'strange words' like *cobalt* and *rusticle*. Once, she'd run out into a storm instead of indoors, entranced by the lightning in the bruised and wounded sky. It was no shock to Matron, as she was fond of telling her, that no one wanted to adopt such a strange, disobedient child.

Potential new parents did come to the Home: dashing men in crisp suits and smart hats, ladies in silk or georgette dresses and rounded cloche hats that revealed their daringly short hair. At first, Una hungrily drank in the sight of these strangers. She clung to the lucky feathers in her pocket and prayed for a new family.

Yet two years had passed with no offer of adoption. Una's poor opinion of groundlings was not improved by these visitors. One man thrust a page of sums under her nose and snorted when she confused fractions

with light refraction. A woman holding tightly to her purse eyed Una disparagingly and muttered, 'What terribly bright red hair! And so short. Does she know any hymns?' Una did not, and the woman adopted a little girl who had been a parson's daughter and knew more hymns than nursery rhymes. After this, Matron gave Una a new nickname: Una the Unwanted.

Now, suddenly, unexpectedly, she had been summoned to Matron's office.

Beyond the doorway loomed shadows. Matron cleared her throat meaningfully, and Una stood up so fast her knees clicked. When the Smiths entered, her breath caught painfully hard.

Curly-haired Mrs Smith was all smiles in bright lipstick, a green tweed coat and jaunty hat with a feather, while Mr Smith radiated old-fashioned comfort in a patched brown jacket and glasses. He took off his hat to greet Matron, revealing pale hair poking up to circle a balding spot. Kindness and good humour overflowed from every pore.

Mrs Smith tugged at her kid gloves. 'How utterly enchanting to meet you, Una dear.'

'Hello, young Una,' murmured Mr Smith shyly, settling himself in the chair Matron offered him.

Una's heart twisted into sheet-bend knots. Quickly

she dug a feather from her pocket and handed it to Mrs Smith. 'This is very rare; it's from a Bounty Island shag,' she burst out.

Matron groaned, but Mrs Smith looked charmed. 'I shall look after it carefully,' she assured her. 'We live near the sea. Did you know? In a big old house; in fact, it's a little like a lighthouse.'

'I miss the sea fantastically,' said Una, pressing her hands to her heart. She broke off, seeing Matron's glare, but Mrs Smith only nodded encouragingly. 'I miss helping my father with the lighthouse, and baking crab cakes, and catching fish, and watching storms roll in. My family, the Wexfords, we always tended the light, that was our first duty, and the island was so beauti—'

'Her spelling is adequate, as is her grasp of mathematics,' cut in Matron.

Mrs Smith's eyebrows lifted. 'Thank you, Matron. We're very glad to hear that, but we'd like to chat with Una and get to know her, what makes her tick. That's more important to us than her educational records.'

Matron frowned, which made Una feel even warmer towards the Smiths. Matron didn't approve of the sea or lighthouse families, but this couple actually seemed delighted by Una's strangeness.

Mr Smith fumbled with his glasses, glanced at Matron, and lowered his voice to an even shyer whisper to confide in Una. 'I restore carousels. Merry-go-rounds.'

'Carousels with a clockwork mechanism?' breathed Una, causing Mr Smith to chuckle and Matron to stare at Mr Smith as if he had declared himself a snake-charmer.

Mrs Smith bent forward too, smelling pleasantly of cake and violet talcum powder. 'We are old-fashioned,' she said. 'And we don't have any brothers or sisters for you, I'm afraid. But I know we will love you.

'We never had a child of our own and we are so lonely without one in our big old house. I restore antique dolls and Hugh has his carousels, but if we don't have a young one in the house, we're in danger of turning into a pair of fuddy-duddies. I think the most important question, Una, is whether you approve of us as adoptive parents?' She glanced at Matron, and discreetly winked at Una. 'Our mathematics is quite sound and our spelling is more than adequate.'

Right under Matron's eye, Una laughed. Laughter, forbidden in the coldly correct Home, broke a hundred rules and seemed to cement Matron's belief

that the child was of unsound mind. The Smiths were welcome to her and the sooner the better.

'I'll arrange the paperwork,' she said stiffly.

Una hugged her suitcase to her chest, waves of joy crashing through her ribs, while the Smiths leaned back in their seats, beaming like beacons.

'I knew we'd find you,' Mrs Smith whispered to Una. 'Our darling little lighthouse child. Look at you. Clever fingers, sharp eyes, good with delicate machinery. You are just the child we've dreamed of. You will fit in perfectly at Copperlins.'