

COLD ISLAND



MEET BORIS



1.

The car floundered through mud, sleet tracing the beam of the headlights. At the end of the track, a woman watched, rucksack slung over one shoulder, thin cords of rain twisting down her face and tunnelling below the collar of her parka.

She'd spent the last few days shivering in the ramshackle bothy up on the moors, subsisting on Marmite sandwiches and rainwater heated over a primus stove. A shelf of foxed books had provided the only entertainment—she'd found *Animal Farm* there, a book which had been censored in the East Germany of her childhood, and had thus attained an almost mythological status in her mind, but which hadn't come her way before.

She'd also used the time to cut her hair, but never satisfied with the end result, had sheared off more and more until all that was left was a short bob. Her head felt light, she could walk more easily. By hacking off her locks she had lightened the touch the land had on her. A bottle of brown dye completed the styling and, looking in the mirror, she realised that now she had lost ten inches of hair she would have to grow a new self-identity.

Her hair had been buried on the moor, just a hundred yards from the bothy. She'd checked each window before leaving, careful to avoid any approaching ramblers or estate workers, but in the sleety rain there was little chance of encountering another human in the empty uplands. So with a rusty spade she sliced into the thin layer of soil, striking rock within inches. She scalped a tussock, burying her past in the earth of England.

When she got back, she changed into dry clothes and stood by the window, staring out into the emptiness. The radio she carried around with her chirruped, a burst of static, then: *ETA twenty minutes*. A final look out of the window—dusk was falling and it was already dark inside the hut—then she packed Animal Farm, her sleeping bag, the scissors and the empty bottle of dye.

When the car stopped, she put her rucksack on the back seat and climbed into the front.

“Good night for it,” said the driver with a welcoming smile. “I’m Boris.”

As the car started back down the track and onto the road, the woman held out her hand for Boris to shake, but before he'd taken his own hand off the steering wheel she'd had second thoughts. She pulled back, wiped the dampness from her forehead and looked out at the blackness beyond the

windscreen.

“I’m Mara,” she told him when they reached the gate at the end of the track.

Boris didn’t reply immediately, his focus was on the night outside, counting darkened buildings and fluorescing traffic signs.

“We’re coming up to a main road,” he said eventually. “I’m going to pull over so you can get down in the footwell in the back and I’ll cover you with a blanket.”

Mara looked at him in surprise, the glow from the dashboard lit ruddy cheeks, a face built for laughter, but now so sober.

“We don’t need a fugitive sitting up front when we hit civilisation.”



“Welcome to the Den, I’m Boris,” said the person with a mass of messy dreadlocks tied up at the back of her head.

“Boris?” Mara was confused. She looked over her shoulder to where Boris, the Boris that had brought her, stood in the doorway.

“We’re all Boris here.” The one with the dreads, laughed. “If it helps, you can call me DJane Boris and the other one,

he's Transport Boris."

"Everyone calls me TB," the first Boris chipped in.

"Should I be Boris, too?" Mara wondered.

"You can be whatever you want to be." DJane Boris pulled her further into the bungalow.

"I'm Mara, thanks for your help—"

"C'mon, enough of the introductions. You must be starving? Let's sort you out with some food."

DJane and TB disappeared down a long hallway, assorted coats, scarves and gloves on pegs down one side, a closed door opposite. The smell of cooking spices drifted down the corridor and Mara felt her eyes moisten. To be in the warmth, hot food waiting, friendly company—these were the basic comforts of life that she'd not expected to miss so much.

Mara followed DJane Boris to the kitchen and stood in the doorway, watching as TB began rolling out flat circles of dough. DJane Boris stirred a huge pot on the range.

"Can I help with anything?" Mara asked.

"Sit yourself down—you've got a visitor." DJane pointed a wooden spoon towards a table behind the door. In the flickering light of a single candle, a face watched Mara.

She sat down opposite the face and stared at it. "What are you doing here?"

“I once knew a girl,” the face said. “She was great, real fun to be around. That girl was good for me-”

“Beth, what are you doing here?”

“She was German. Just like you.”

“I don’t need to hear this.” Mara’s voice had hardened.

“It was a long time ago, feels like centuries. Actually, now I think of it, it *was* last century when I met this girl. 1994. She was called Mara.”

“Will you shut up? It’s not story time!” Mara looked over her shoulder at the Borises, but they were politely busying themselves at the stove.