

From the author of the bestselling
Watch Over Me

DANIELA SACERDOTI

TAKE ME HOME

Can the ghosts of your past
help you find a better future?



TAKE ME HOME

Also by Daniela Sacerdoti

WATCH OVER ME

DREAMS: SARAH MIDNIGHT TRILOGY (BOOK 1)

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ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL

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To my mother, Ivana Fornera Sacerdoti, who, as a child, saw.

To Claudio Corduas: the blood is strong, but friendship is stronger.

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Those of you who know me, personally or virtually, know that I'm more than a bit obsessed with music. Here are the artists who soundtracked Inary's story: Máire Brennan, Julie Fowlis, Norrie McIver, Manran, and The Treacherous Orchestra among many. Thank you guys.

Thank you, thank you, thank you to the many thousands of readers who read and reviewed my first Glen Avich story, *Watch Over Me*. It makes me so happy to know that Eilidh is in many hearts now. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for your trust in me, so thanks for listening to my stories and for making them yours.

And finally, thank you Scotland for making *me* yours. There's nowhere else I'd rather be.

Daniela

Emily's Song

From the depth of winter
Comes new life
Little birds I see from my window
And I wish I could fly

Spring is for the living
I will not let go of this heartbeat
Faltering inside me
Like a fading sun

I'm part of it until my heart stops beating
Mine is the sky and mine are these hills
Until my heart stops beating

I am like a snowdrop
Shivering and still
I raise my head to the sky
This beautiful land

Hold my hand, don't cry
I shall not be afraid
And when I have to go
Don't forget my love

I'm part of it until my heart stops beating
Mine is the sky and mine are these hills
Until my heart stops beating.

PROLOGUE

Across the worlds

Morag Kennedy waved at me from across the worlds, on a clear, sunny day in Glen Avich. She was standing in front of her whitewashed cottage, and the summer sun was shining behind her like a golden halo, making the fields gleam just as golden. I waved back and began walking towards her, hoping she would have some of those lovely sugared jellies she always gave me, but I hesitated. I knew she was ill and I didn't want to trouble her. All of a sudden I realised I was feeling strange – my arms and legs were tingling and there was a low noise in my ears. It was a sensation alien to me, one I'd never felt before.

Just at that moment a cluster of clouds covered the sun, and without its glare I could see Mrs Kennedy properly: she wore the flowery cotton dress she usually put on to work in her garden, her hair in a tidy bob, a cardigan held close by a simple brooch. I did a double take – Mrs Kennedy's face seemed different. She had been ill for so long, her features becoming more and more drawn, her frame getting thinner every day. Even at my young age – I must have been about eight years old – I'd been aware of the pain and fear slowly taking over her mind and spreading over her face, in her eyes, just like the illness was spreading through her body. But that early summer evening she looked herself again. Her smile was

serene, her light-blue eyes as bright as they'd been before she got sick.

All of a sudden I heard footsteps behind me, and I turned around to see my brother stepping out of our cottage across the road. I guessed he'd been sent to call me in for dinner, and I wondered why my mum hadn't just called me from the kitchen window like she usually did. Maybe she wanted to make sure I would come in at once; I'd been known to run off into the fields instead, trying to steal an extra hour of play.

"Mum wants you inside, Inary," Logan said in a quiet voice. He was always quite serious, but at that moment he looked nearly solemn. I turned around to say goodbye to Mrs Kennedy, but she was gone.

"Is dinner ready?" I asked my brother.

"I don't think so."

"Then why do I have to come in?"

"Shush, Inary, come inside now!" My mum had appeared on our doorstep; she was slipping her apron off and smoothing her hair. When we reached her, she continued: "I want the two of you to keep an eye on Emily while Granny and I walk across the road. I won't be gone long; time to give my condolences to Karen and Isabel."

I had no idea what she meant. 'Condolences' was too difficult a word for an eight-year-old. "Where are you going?"

She stopped and looked at me tenderly. "Mrs Kennedy has gone to heaven, darling . . . I'm going to tell her children how sorry I am."

"She's not gone to heaven. She's here. I saw her."

Many years have passed, but I still remember the look in my mother's eyes when I spoke those words. Surprise, and at the same time, a sense of recognition.

“Where did you see her, Inary? Did you go into the house?”

“No. She was outside, in the garden. She waved hello to me.”

My mum kneeled down and held me very tight. She stroked my face, and her fingers smelled of the raspberries she’d picked earlier in our garden. “You’re just like your granny Margaret, aren’t you? In every way,” she whispered.

I smiled. I loved my granny, and to be told I was just like her felt like the best compliment.

“Let’s go, Anne,” came Granny’s voice from the doorway. “What’s wrong?” she added, having seen my mother’s face.

“*An da Shealladh,*” my mum whispered. They always used Gaelic between them when they didn’t want me to understand what they were saying. “She saw Mrs Kennedy, Mum.”

My granny’s eyes widened. She took my hand and led me to her, gently.

“Oh, Inary . . .”

Suddenly I was confused. I didn’t understand if I’d been very good or very bad, and why my mum and my granny were showing such emotion. I had seen Mrs Kennedy just before she died. That was all. I didn’t really understand the concept of death, anyway.

Before I could stop myself, my eyes brimmed with tears. “What did I do?”

“Aw, Inary, don’t be upset now, pet,” my granny said. “You’re so little, still. I was much older when it started. All you need to know for now is that you have a gift.” She cupped my face and kissed my forehead. Her eyes were shining too. “On you go and keep your sister company, dearie. We won’t be long.”

They walked across the street to go and see Mrs Kennedy’s

daughters, and Logan and I were left in charge of Emily. I went up to her room to sit with her. She was only five at the time, and she'd already gone through two heart operations. She was having a nap; her lips were slightly blue even when she was sleeping.

I usually struggled to sit still for long, but after what had happened I felt strange and somehow disquieted, like all the energy had gone out of me.

It took me a long time to realise that I had seen Mrs Kennedy after she'd died, that her body was lying empty in her house but her soul had gone free. It took me a long time to realise that she wasn't waving hello to me: she was waving goodbye.

The night I fell

Inary

“Cassandra kept running, so fast that she felt like her lungs were about to burst. She could sense the change coming. Her muscles were cramping and her bones were aching, about to stretch and extend nearly to the point of breaking. If she didn’t find a place to change soon, her secret would be out. What would they do to someone like her? Experiment on her? Lock her in a zoo?”

“Lock her in a zoo?” I read aloud in dismay. I took my glasses off, and for the umpteenth time that afternoon I held my face in my hands. It was the weekend and I was supposed to get on with my writing. Except my head wasn’t cooperating. I had worked on Cassandra’s story for months, but it just wasn’t going anywhere. Several thousand wasted words, several months of wasted work. Cassandra was never going to see the light of day. She was going to join the pile of the Manuscripts That Were Never Sent. And I would spend the rest of my life sorting out other people’s books and dreaming of the novel I would never write. I was an editor in a small London publisher, and I enjoyed my job – but recently, it had grown tight on me, like unshed skin.

I sighed and folded my legs against my chest, gazing at the photograph of the hills around Glen Avich on the wall

above my desk: the wild, windswept Scottish sky and the black silhouette of the pinewoods, a hint of mist resting on the land and a white, ghostly moon peering from behind a peak. It was such a beautiful picture that I could almost smell the woods and the peat fires, and feel the breeze on my skin. Looking at it usually uplifted me, but this time a sudden, inexplicable sense of dread filled me instead . . .

“I’m home!” My flatmate’s voice resounded in the hall.

Trying to shake off the gloomy feeling that had taken hold of me, I ran out into the hall and squeezed her tight. “Lesley!”

“Inary!” She laughed, returning my hug. “What’s up with you?”

“Save my life and come out for a drink with Alex and me,” I begged. “I’ve had a hard day.”

“Oh honey, I can’t. I’m working tonight.” Lesley was a music promoter, which often meant working weekends. It also meant a lot of free tickets to gigs, which was a bonus.

“A quick one,” I pleaded.

“I can’t!” She glared at me, or tried to. It’s difficult to glare and smile at the same time. “Free all next weekend, though.”

“That’s great,” I replied, and I meant it. I was looking forward to a weekend together. Lesley and I had been flatmates since I’d moved to London; she’d introduced me to one of her closest friends, Alex, and the three of us had been pretty much inseparable for the last three years.

Living with Lesley was just perfect. I had a habit of forgetting to take care of myself, and so she fussed over me, made sure I ate regular meals, bought me Lemsip when I was ill and put up with my constant chaos. In exchange, I *entertained* her, or so she always said. I made her laugh and kept things cheerful.

I've always been good at doing that, even when I don't *feel* cheerful at all.

I met Lesley the summer before moving to Aberdeen to study English at Uni, one of those seemingly unimportant encounters that end up being of huge consequence. I'd gone to visit my Aunt Mhairi in her cottage on the loch shore. It was pouring, but of course, me being me, I had forgotten my umbrella. Actually I hadn't seen my umbrella in months.

While I stood at my aunt's door, getting soaked and calling her name to no avail, I saw a group of people walking towards the neighbouring cottage, a holiday let. They were clearly tourists. If a six-foot-tall man with skin the colour of black coffee and a full head of dreadlocks – Lesley's brother Kamau, I was to learn – had been living in the village, I would have known. The impossibly tall man was accompanied by a group of young men and women, and among them there was a startlingly beautiful girl with her hair in cornrows. The group stopped in front of the cottage, occasionally looking at me, but too polite to stare. They exchanged a few words that I couldn't hear over the noise of the rain, and then the girl with braided hair walked towards me.

“Hello, we are just . . . um . . . We are staying at Heather Lodge there, and you're getting soaked, so we were wondering if you wanted to wait inside, you know, out of the rain. For whoever you're waiting for.” She had a pleasant London accent, with a touch of something else – I thought it was French, but it turned out to be the West Indies, not an easy mistake, but one I would make. I was touched by their concern. “Thank you, it's okay. I'll just walk back to my house. It's not far.”

“Oh . . . Then take this,” she said, offering me her bright-red

umbrella and lifting her hood up, negotiating the mass of braids.

“Don’t worry, I’m used to getting soaked! You need it anyway,” I said, and put my hands up.

“Not really. Look,” she said with a smile, rummaging in her backpack. “I’ve got another one!” She produced a tiny polka dot umbrella and handed it to me.

I laughed. “Why do you have two umbrellas?”

“Just to be on the safe side.” She shrugged. That was Lesley in a nutshell.

I took the polka dot one and walked away under the pouring rain. I remember turning back and seeing Lesley standing there, framed by her scarlet umbrella like a shiny exotic flower, still looking at me – she waved with a smile and turned back, following her friends inside. Little did I know then that she was to become my best friend, in spite of the distance and the fact that we came from two different worlds.

The next day I returned to the cottage to give back her umbrella, and we ended up chatting for hours. When she went back to London we kept in touch and emailed nearly every week. Slowly our friendship deepened, and after . . . after my life in Scotland fell apart, I moved in with her. She saved my sanity.

“So why the hard day?” she asked now, hanging her coat up and taking off her shoes, lining them side by side as she always did. Beside her things, on a wicker chair, was a messy pile of jackets, hats, mismatched gloves and the odd sock, mixed with various rubble: that was *my* corner.

“I’m stressed!” I sighed.

“It’s hard to be a writer!” she teased, walking on the wooden floor to the kitchen in her bare feet, her braids bouncing on her back.

“It’s hard *not* to be one,” I replied, truthfully. I was fast losing hope of ever writing for a living. And writing had been my ambition since . . . since forever.

“Right. The werewolf thing not going as planned?” she asked, switching the kettle on. “Want some coffee?”

“No thanks. The werewolf thing . . . not good. I don’t know why this kind of story works in other people’s books, but when I try to write it . . .”

Lesley took her sip of her milky coffee. “Maybe it’s not *your* story. I mean, the story you’re supposed to tell.”

“Maybe.” Was there a story for me to tell at all? I’d always thought so, but I was beginning to wonder if that was the case, or if I was just deluded. If my saying ‘one day I’ll be a writer’ was the equivalent of a five-year-old girl declaring, ‘When I grow up, I want to be a ballerina.’

I sighed. “Anyway. Better go get ready . . .”

“Do you have time for a curry?” Lesley asked me.

“A takeaway curry or a Lesley curry?” I enquired hopefully. Lesley’s family was Jamaican, and her curries were out of this world . . . while I barely managed spag bol. Lesley had renamed my signature dish spag bog, which I suppose says it all.

“A Lesley one, my dear!”

I was sorely tempted, but I didn’t want to be late for Alex. “Can you leave some for me? For when I come home?”

“Maybe . . .”

“Oh, go on!”

“All right. But you must eat something. To line your stomach.”

“Yes, *Mum!*” I laughed.

I went back into my room and saved the Cassandra file,

though I was tempted to just delete all I had written that afternoon and start again later.

I slipped on a pair of jeans and a jumper – I wasn't going to dress up. It was Alex, after all, not a date. But then casual didn't feel right, and I decided on a black dress and a pair of bright-purple tights. I tried my best to brush my hair into submission – there was *so much* of it – and then looked at my reflection in the mirror. It's the weirdest thing, when you don't really recognise the person looking back at you. A girl who looks like you – the same mass of wavy hair and Scottish snowy skin – and still, who is she?

I sighed and started hunting for my handbag among the mounds of discarded clothes. I had no idea how it happened or why, but pretty much everything in my life seemed to have become difficult all of a sudden, and a strange, subtle restlessness had crept into my days and nights. It was like I had lost something very important, something I was desperate to recover. Something I used to have, someone I used to be . . . someone who went by the name of Inary, and who wasn't the girl sorting out other people's books and writing about werewolves. Who wasn't the girl I just saw in the mirror.

I looked around me, at my little London room – messy, tiny, but mine: the wardrobe I'd painted light blue and silver, rows of dresses peeking from its doors, one haphazardly hanging from its left handle; the pile of books on my bedside table; the corkboard covered in tickets from gigs and plays; the desk overflowing with paper and magazines and books . . . The debris of my life, a happy life – a life I'd built from nothing after everything I had, everything I knew, crumpled.

So why the restlessness?

Maybe because everything looked and felt so mundane. I

used to be able to see *beyond* all this, beyond the little things of everyday life, beyond our reality. I used to be someone with six senses, and not five. But not any more. And still, the thought that my life was somehow meant to be different was rising inside me and would not let me be.

I spotted my handbag's strap hanging from underneath a pile of manuscripts on my desk. I walked through the room to retrieve it, and my eyes fell on the Glen Avich picture once more. There it was again, the chill running down my spine. I slipped the bag around my neck and rested my hand on the framed photograph of my sister sitting just beside the computer. Even when my room was at its messiest, Emily's photograph was never hidden, its silver frame shiny and polished.

I was due to visit in a few weeks, and I was conflicted about it, as always – I couldn't wait to see Emily, but I dreaded seeing Logan, and I dreaded his silences and recriminations . . . As I was thinking of them, the silver frame of Emily's picture grew icy under my touch – I shivered and took my hand away. I looked at my watch – was there enough time to give her a call? But I was already late. I'd call her from the pub, I thought, and ran out with a quick goodbye to Lesley.

The London night was full of noise and people, as it always was, its sky lit with orange – so different from the still, black nights back home.

Why did I keep thinking of home? I often did, but not as much as tonight. I tried to focus on the here and now and stepped into the pub, dribbling clusters of men and women clutching their drinks and chatting loudly over the music.

Alex was there already. I wish I could say my heart didn't jump at the sight of him, but it did – another of the things

that have been unsettling me recently. I was beginning to look forward to seeing Alex a bit too much; I was starting to notice how solid his hands looked, and how good it felt when they somehow ended up on me – on my shoulder, casually, or grabbing my fingers as he led me through a busy club . . . I spotted the top of his head – a mop of black hair – and there it was again, that little *oh* I felt inside whenever I saw him.

Not good.

“Hey!” He was waving at me, his fingers stained with ink from a Pantone marker, as they always were. Alex has had Pantone-stained hands since he was old enough to hold a pen. He was a graphic designer, and fanatical about his job. It was his livelihood and his passion, and he certainly was a lot more successful at it than I was at my writing.

“Hiya, how’s things?” I said, sitting beside him. It was a miracle we got a table the place was so crowded.

“Aye, good. Busy. You?” Alex had lived in London for years, but he still used *aye* instead of *yes*. It always made me smile. I suspected that keeping his Scottishness was a point of principle for him.

“All right, I suppose.”

“What’s wrong? Wait, I’ll get you a drink, then you’ll tell me. The usual?”

I nodded, and I watched as he glided through the crowd – he was a lot taller than most people there, and far from making him awkward, it seemed to command attention wherever he went. Female attention, especially, I thought as I spotted some pretty girl eyeing him approvingly. I rolled my eyes. I didn’t want to admit to myself that it annoyed me. The good thing was that Alex never seemed to notice, or to act on the

attention anyway. How someone like him could be single, I had no idea. He'd broken up with his long-term girlfriend three years before, and there had been no one else since.

"So. Tell me all," he said on his return, sliding my drink towards me.

"Well . . . Oh, nothing." How could I put into words how strange I'd been feeling recently? How my skin felt tight on me, how nothing felt quite right?

"Come on, tell me. I'm listening."

"It's my writing," I blurted out. Well, that was part of the problem, at least. "It's not really working out." I took a sip of my drink. "Lesley says that maybe what I'm writing now is not my story to tell . . ."

"The Cassandra one? I just can't believe you won't allow me or Lesley to read anything of yours. I'm sure it's great . . ."

I felt myself blushing and shook my head. "No it isn't. Believe me."

"You'd say that. I find everything I do complete rubbish, as a rule. When things fall into place at the end of a project I'm always kind of surprised."

I laughed. Anything Alex did seemed quite wonderful to me, but I knew what he meant. I worked with writers and I knew how they were usually full of every kind of insecurity. But there was more to my dismay than insecurity. My work just didn't *feel* right any more.

"You seem to be doing pretty well, for someone whose work is regularly rubbish . . ." I said.

He laughed. "Well, maybe it isn't, but often it feels that way. That's what I'm trying to say. You feel down on your work, but everyone else thinks it's good. It happens a lot. Thing is, you won't know if you don't let anyone read it . . . Hint, hint."

“I will give you something of mine to read, I promise! Just not yet.”

“Has anyone ever read your stuff?”

“Only my sister. Nobody else.”

“Emily? How is she?”

“She’s been doing okay . . .” As I mentioned my sister, my mind wandered to Glen Avich again. A sudden longing nearly made me gasp – I needed to hear her voice. I needed to hear her voice so badly it hurt.

I shook myself. Alex was still talking. “. . . maybe it’s just a dry spell. You know, no inspiration, feel depleted . . . that kind of thing. It happens.”

“Oh . . . yes. Yes. I hope so,” I replied, and took a sip of my vodka orange. “Sorry Alex, I just need to make a quick call . . .”

“Sure. Is everything okay?” he asked. I probably looked worried. I certainly felt it.

“Yeah, all fine,” I said, and jumped up without bothering with my jacket. I negotiated my way out of the pub, squeezing myself between warm bodies. I stepped outside between two wings of smokers freezing and puffing, and the cold air took my breath away. No reply on my siblings’ home phone. I tried Emily’s mobile, and then Logan’s – they were both switched off. They were probably out somewhere, maybe at the cinema in Aberdeen. I made my way back inside, elbowing through the Saturday night crowd.

“All okay?”

“No reply. I was phoning my sister.”

“It’s Saturday night. They’re probably out painting the town red. Painting the village red, as it were.”

“Ha ha.”

“By the way, did I log that?” he asked, pointing at my purple tights.

“My legs?” I smirked, but I knew what he meant. Just like I collected owls, Alex collected colours – he took pictures of things, and logged his findings in a special database he was building, called Chromatica. It was some sort of colour bible or something that would change the graphic-designing world as we knew it, or so he said. Yes, that was Alex. At the moment, he was working on the endless shades of the colour purple.

“Not sure, did you?”

“Don’t think so. Wait,” he said, and slipped his phone out of his pocket. He took a picture of my knee under the bewildered gaze of our next-table neighbours. “Thank you. Oh, before I forget . . .”

A blast of loud music exploded from the speakers just above us, drowning out the last of his words. We went to that pub all the time, but recently they seemed to have upped the noise to an unbearable level.

“Has it always been this noisy?” I said, massaging my ear.

He laughed. “That, or maybe we’re just growing old! Do you want to go to mine?”

My stomach tightened a little. Now, after three years of spending evenings together on the sofa watching DVDs, and crashing in each other’s spare rooms, and dropping by uninvited at the weekend for an unscheduled lunch thrown together using anything we could find in the cupboards . . . after all this, an invitation to go to his house shouldn’t have disquieted me. Or thrilled me. Or disquieted and thrilled me all at the same time. But it did.

Nonsense. It was just nonsense. We were just friends. Weren’t we? Okay, sometimes things got a bit ambiguous

between us. But we'd never crossed the line, and I was sure it'd stay that way. If I tried hard enough. I had my reasons not to get involved with Alex, or anyone else. I just wasn't ready.

And still, recently I'd felt so confused . . . No point in agonising over it now, though. It was just another night between friends, like many before.

"Sure," I said, and gathered up my handbag and my jacket.

We walked into the freezing February night, and twenty minutes later I was sitting on the rug in front of Alex's fireplace, a whisky in my hand. A *Talisker* in my hand, to be precise. Not many places in London have a real fire, and for me, raised on peat fires, it was wonderful to have found one. I lost myself in the dancing flames.

"Inary Monteith, you're the only woman I know who appreciates a good whisky. My sisters hate it."

"Oh no, there are a lot of us. You just don't know many women, Alex," I teased.

"Yes, it's probably that!" He smiled and sat down in front of me, crossing his long legs. The fire made his blue-grey eyes shine and played on his features – he looked so familiar, like I'd known him forever, and not just three years.

"So, I tried to tell you in the pub, but I happen to have something that will cheer you up," he said, and slipped a little box out of his pocket. I could guess what it was, and I smiled in anticipation.

I opened the silver ribbon and lifted the lid – it was, like I'd guessed, an owl statuette – iridescent blue and no bigger than a marble. "It's beautiful! Thank you . . ."

Years ago, my mum and dad went to a pilgrimage to Lourdes together, and they brought me back a terracotta owl – instead of the usual religious statuettes, I suppose. I loved it – for some

reason, I always felt an affinity with owls – and that’s how my collection started. Once I mentioned my collection to Alex, and ever since he’d taken to bringing me owls from wherever he went. He was a graphic designer who worked on large campaigns for companies all over the world, and because of this he travelled a lot. He got me owls from Oslo, San Francisco, Beijing, Kuala Lumpur . . . and the best one, my favourite: a little one made of whalebone, from St Petersburg.

“You’re welcome. I got it in Madrid in this amazing covered market . . . I’ll take you there one day,” he said and looked away, into the fire.

“That would be nice,” I scrambled, trying to ignore the implications.

“But seriously, Inary . . . what’s up? You’ve been strange recently. I don’t know . . . not yourself. Is everything all right at home?” He started playing with the metal tongs, avoiding my gaze.

“Yes. I don’t know . . . Just . . .” I shrugged. “I don’t know.” I took another sip of my whisky. I couldn’t explain the way I’d been feeling. I could never tell Alex the way I used to be, the things I used to see, and how it stopped when I was twelve. And how I just didn’t feel whole.

“Whatever it is . . . you know I’m always here for you, don’t you?” he said, and looked straight at me. At that moment a little Catherine wheel started spinning in my heart. It was a physical effort not to kiss him there and then – I was used to it, I was used to stopping my arms from wrapping themselves around him, stopping my mouth from looking for his. I could do that once more. But something betrayed me.

Maybe it was the warmth from the whisky, maybe it was the fire reflected on his face, or maybe the strange feelings I’d

had recently – of not knowing who I was any more. Because another me, another Inary, reached over and kissed him. And then it was like gravity, the way we were pulled towards each other again. He put one hand on the nape of my neck, and entwined his other hand with mine. I was still for a moment, my face against his – I freed my hand and wrapped my arms around his neck, drawing him closer.

His lips tasted of whisky and honey and home and it felt right, like it should have happened a long time ago. But all too soon his mouth left mine and I felt suddenly dizzy at the loss of him.

His breath brushed close to my ear. “I’m not sure how to say this, but . . . I think I’ve fallen for you,” he whispered into my hair, and immediately a cold knot of fear twisted my insides, snapping me momentarily back to reality.

What was I doing? What were we doing?

I had sworn . . .

But it was too late. It was done. Those words were said; they couldn’t be unsaid. They hung between us and echoed in both our minds. “Inary,” he whispered, and he said it *right*. Like we say it at home. My heart was winning the silent battle with my head. It usually did.

He stood up and took my hand, and led me into the bedroom, into another world.

I remember every minute of that night. I remember the way he locked his eyes onto mine and the way he said *you’re so precious to me*. I remember how I could think of nothing, wanted nothing, needed nothing but him and me together, at that moment.

★

The morning came and I found myself in his bed, naked and defenceless, and I felt afraid as the reality of our previous night hit me.

Alex was sleeping, his long, black eyelashes casting soft shadows on his skin, one arm around my waist. I didn't know what beauty was, but I knew he looked perfect in my eyes. Like I'd known him forever, even when I was a little girl, as if the features of my soulmate were encoded in my blood, in my genes.

Still, I looked at him and I imagined the moment he'd wake up. I imagined the moment after, and the one after, and the one after that. Hundreds and thousands of moments that would add up into days and weeks and months where I loved him, and trusted him, and made him the centre of my life. Until *that* moment – when he opens his mouth to speak and I think it's something harmless, something or other about our life, about our family or the weather or some new book he's read, and instead he tells me we're not going to be together any more.

I imagined all that and it was easy, because it had happened to me before.

And I couldn't let it happen again.

I got up as quickly as I could, wrapping a sheet around me, and started gathering my clothes scattered all over the floor. I heard him call my name from the bed, his voice sleepy, full of warmth. Full of contentment.

“Inary . . .”

“It was a *mistake*,” I said without turning around, before *he* could say it, now or next week or in six months, because I knew that sooner or later he would. “I'm sorry, Alex,” I began, each word a drop of blood dripping on his plush cream carpet.

I rummaged in my bag looking for new contact lenses – my eyes stung. “We shouldn’t have . . .”

“What do you mean?” He sat up, shock painted all over his face. I felt a spasm of guilt. Those words could never be taken back . . .

I emptied the contents of my purse onto the floor, looking for the lenses’ blister, when I caught a glimpse of my phone. Again, that sinking feeling from the day before, the same sensation I’d felt when I looked at the picture of Glen Avich, invaded me. There was a little red icon in the corner of the screen – I lifted it up to check what it was, and all my words died in my throat. Fourteen missed calls. All from Logan.

“Oh . . .”

“Inary?” I heard Alex calling, from somewhere far away.

The room was spinning and I felt like I could double over with pain – I didn’t know why, I didn’t know what this searing ache in my heart could be. And then the phone rang, and I saw my brother’s name flashing on the screen, and at once I *knew*.

I could barely tap the green button, my hands were shaking so much. I listened to Logan say that our sister’s time was nearing its end, that the new heart she was waiting for, if it ever came, would be too late. I had to hurry back, or I might not see her alive.

*I loved her since forever***Alex**

She's gone. The wall doesn't protest as I pound it over and over again.

A mistake.

That's what she called our night together, and then her mobile rang. There were broken words and tears, and I didn't know if I was too furious to even look at her or if I wanted to hold her in my arms and comfort her and tell her it'd be okay, that I was sure her sister would be fine, that whatever happened I would always, always be in her corner. Always be there for her.

But I said nothing. I stood there, too conflicted to speak or move.

And then she finished getting dressed. Her face was strewn with tears – she was about to step out the door and, I feared, out of my life – and I grabbed her hand and turned her to face me. “Whatever last night was, Inary, don't call it a mistake. Don't call my feelings for you a mistake.”

She said nothing. The door closed behind her, and she was gone.

★

I've loved Inary since forever, or at least it feels that way.

The first time I saw her she had paint all over her. Even her lovely auburn hair – somewhere between red and brown, a warm, coppery hue that I'd only seen in paintings – had strands of purple in it. I'm obsessed with colours, and to see that girl crowned in purple and red and blue, like she'd just walked out of a Chagall masterpiece, took my breath away.

I was helping Lesley move into her new home. She'd hit me with a van full of stuff, and another few bin bags and boxes to pack my car with – she owned enough to fill two houses. She had also given me a set of keys, and I was about to try and extract them from my pocket while keeping hold of the box when I realised the door was ajar. I made my way in, and there she was. Inary. I'd heard so much about her, Lesley's best friend from up north, but somehow we'd always missed each other.

“You must be Alex,” she said, smiling that sunny smile she has.

“You must be Hilary,” I replied.

“Inary,” she corrected me with a smile. “No H or L. N in the middle.”

“Oh, sorry . . .”

“Don't worry,” she smiled again. “It happens all the time. My mum found the name in a book of Scottish fairy tales, never heard it anywhere else. Is that Lesley's?” she asked, gesturing to the big box I was carrying.

“Yes. Yes. Not long to go. There are only another twenty-seven of these. We'll be done in a week or so.”

She laughed. That's good, I thought. I made her laugh.

“There's a few bin bags as well. Oh, and Lesley is on her way with the van.”

“Oh no!” Inary swept a lock of hair behind her ear. She kept talking, and I could hear her words, but I couldn’t quite make them out. I was somewhere else, somewhere windy and beautiful, somewhere I had been as a child and long forgotten. “I knew Lesley was a bit of a hoarder, but I didn’t realise she had so much stuff! Come, I’ll show you her room. At the end of the hall, there. Alex?”

I shook myself. “Yes. Yes, sorry.”

“You’re a man in need of a cup of tea!” She laughed again. She was so . . . alive. Beside her I felt grey, like she had all the colours I’d ever need.

“That would be great. Thank you.” I put down the box in Lesley’s room and followed her into the kitchen, desperately thinking of something else to say. “So, Lesley said you’re Scottish too . . .” I said.

“Not that I have an accent or anything . . .”

I smiled. She had a soft, musical Highland lilt. “Whereabouts?”

“Glen Avich, not far from Aberdeen. You probably won’t have heard of it, it’s tiny. You?”

“I was brought up in Edinburgh . . .”

“Hello!” Lesley entered, carrying another box. She dumped her burden on the floor with a sigh, her mane of tiny braids falling over her face.

“Hello! I already started painting!” Inary said.

“I can see that!” Lesley replied, taking in Inary’s paint-sprayed clothes. “So you met Alex. At last! I’ve wanted you two to meet for ages . . .”

I went to University with Lesley’s brother, Kamau – that’s how Lesley and I met. There was never anything more than a friendship between Lesley and me, though I often wondered

why. We got on so well. Still, it never happened. Once it was clear to everyone involved, including us, that we would only be friends, we became very close. It didn't stop Kamau trying to set us up though, even if by then I'd had a girlfriend for a while, Gaby.

And then I met Inary, covered in colours like a little earthed rainbow. Everything about her – her small body, the sound of her voice, the way she smiled – was so full of life, she made me come alive too.

I could sense Lesley looking at me looking at Inary, and I knew she would guess what I was thinking. She knew me too well. I almost ran out of the room, mumbling something about twenty-seven boxes and a van to unload.

The rest of the day was a blur. Lesley's insane amount of stuff made its way from the van to her flat, bit by bit, while I caught glimpses of Inary painting, making tea and singing along to the music Lesley put on. We finished the day with fish and chips, our plates balanced on boxes – there were no sofas or chairs yet – and then we walked to a pub in Battersea, not far from my house. It was dark already, and we hurried on to get out of the cold. I went to order a round of drinks while the girls sat at a table.

As I was leaning on the counter, waiting my turn, I felt a presence beside me. I turned to see that Inary had followed me; she was standing very, very close, our arms touching.

“It's okay,” I said. “I'll get the drinks.”

“I know. I just thought I'd keep you company.”

Tenderness came to her as easily as breathing. She was unafraid, unashamed, wearing her emotions like a crown.

A few weeks later I broke up with Gaby.

Now three years on, after an endless will we/won't we, she'd

finally spent the night with me. And then she'd called it a mistake, and it hurt like hell.

She'd gone back to Glen Avich, swept away from London by the horrific news about her sister. I couldn't believe that Emily was dying – Emily, as vivid and cheerful as a little windmill, one of those brightly coloured ones that people put in their gardens. Emily, five feet of spark and cheekiness and love of life.

The first time she came down – she only visited twice; the journey to London was exhausting for her – she and Inary didn't stop chatting for a week solid. They were like sparrows, chirping and twittering to each other, so happy to be together.

I couldn't quite believe it.

I wanted to be there for Inary – I *had* to be there for her. But the question was, could I keep doing this to myself? Was I some sort of crutch she used and then discarded? I didn't deserve to be treated like that. Her fears and doubts didn't give her the right to use me that way.

★

I went to work feeling like a zombie and waded through it as though through a field of mud. No word from Inary. The stupid phone went all day with messages and emails and stuff I didn't care about, but none of them were from Inary. She clearly meant what she said.

As soon as I got home, I drowned all my thoughts in a glass of whisky, and before I knew it, it was dawn. She was in Glen Avich by now. She might as well have been on another planet.

Why, why did she say it was a mistake? Why, as she said those terrible words, did she look frightened? Frightened of me, of us?

My fingers, clumsy with alcohol and sleeplessness, started composing a text. And then I deleted it. I lay on my bed, studying a crack on the ceiling. It was then that I spotted something on the floor near the window. It was an enamel daisy chain – the necklace Inary was wearing last night.

I sat on the window seat and stayed there for a long time, weaving the necklace between my fingers, looking out to the London skyline and thinking of home.

The last word before silence

Inary

I went back to my flat and stuffed a bag with random clothes and my laptop, the taxi still waiting downstairs to take me to Heathrow. As soon as I got to the airport I called Rowan, my boss at Rosewood Publishing, to say I wouldn't make it to work on Monday and that I needed extended leave. And then I called Lesley. I was falling somewhere deep, bottomless – a dark well – and I needed her to drag me back to the surface.

“Oh, Inary, I'm so sorry . . .”

“Yes. Yes. Well . . .” I was struggling not to cry. “We sort of knew it could happen, but we always thought she'd get the operation and she'd be fine . . .”

“She might be okay in a few days. It might just be a false alarm . . .”

“I hope so,” I said, and I did, against all the evidence, in spite of what Logan had told me. I did hope so, with all my heart. Miracles, after all, do happen. And that was what we needed: a miracle.

“If you need anything, just call me. Any time, day or night,” she said, and she sounded so kind, so Lesley, that I couldn't hold the tears in any longer, and I had to finish the conversation quickly. After I put the phone down, a text from her came through – the image of a little green clover for good

luck. I realised she hadn't asked me why I hadn't come home last night. Just as well. I just couldn't discuss that now, anyway.

It was like a nightmare, one I couldn't wake up from. All of a sudden, my life had been turned upside down. Again. Things were pretty messed up before – losing my mum and dad in the accident, and the Lewis thing, and now this: my Emily . . .

Maybe I'd known for a while that something wasn't quite right with Emily, I'd just refused to see it. In the last few weeks there had been a brittle, forced cheerfulness in Emily's voice. I'd meant to ask Logan if something was up, but I was due to visit the following week for a few days anyway, so I thought I'd see with my own eyes. It would save me from having to speak to Logan more than was strictly necessary. My brother had never forgiven me for having moved to London, and he didn't make a secret of it.

And he was right. I left Emily, and now she was dying, and I'd been away for three years. Away from her, away from Glen Avich, away from Logan, who was left shouldering it all.

Tears started streaming down my face again. Thankfully from where I was sitting nobody could see me. I slipped on my iPod, trying to get a grip of myself.

I wanted to speak to Alex so badly. I craved his voice. But it was all too much; I just couldn't deal with all that too. Spending the night with him had been a bad decision on so many levels. As if I could let myself be in *that* situation again. Let myself be broken into pieces again.

Three years ago I was engaged to be married. Although Lewis came from Kilronan, a village down the road from mine, our orbits had never collided until we both enrolled on the same course at Aberdeen University. I bumped into him

– literally – in the cafeteria, and his scalding coffee burnt my arm. I still have the scar, a white, discoloured patch on the inside of my arm, where the skin is softer, more fragile. How symbolic.

So yes, we ended up in A&E, with him even more upset than I was and apologising over and over again. A few months later we were living together. I'd never felt that way about anyone before – it was like stepping into a new world, a new solar system where he was the sun. We moved to a house in Kilronan and he insisted we get engaged. It was like his life depended on it. Soon after, the venue was booked and the wedding dress was hanging in my wardrobe, cocooned in thin white fabric. I wore his grandmother's wedding ring.

Then one day, eighty-nine days before our wedding – yes, I counted – he changed his mind.

Just like that.

Maybe it was cold feet, maybe he realised he had fallen out of love, maybe he'd never actually been in love. But I suspected he was scared. Scared because in a moment when the intimacy was complete, in a moment when I wanted him to know everything about me, I told him about my gift – and since then things had never been the same. He probably thought I was some kind of freak.

I moved back home with Logan and Emily, but I couldn't bear to walk the streets of Glen Avich any more. People kept looking at me that way – you know, the *poor thing* look. I kept bumping into his mum and brothers everywhere. I had to drive past our former house to get to the bloody supermarket. It was torture. Everywhere spoke of him and the life I was supposed to have, everywhere I looked there were memories of us.

Not long after, in a haze of grief, I went to see Lesley in London while I figured out what to do next. I had introduced her to Lewis once when she was up in Glen Avich for a visit. I'd sensed she didn't like him much, although she never said. I wish I had paid more attention to her moods around him.

In one of those weird moments of serendipity, Lesley told me that her housemate was going to teach English in Singapore and that she was looking for someone else to share a new flat; and an old University friend emailed me to say that Rosewood Publishing was looking for an editorial assistant. It was the perfect opportunity, a new life laid out for me to seize. I had the chance to leave Lewis and what he did to me behind.

I was moving to London without plans to ever live in Scotland again.

A few days before I left, Emily came into my room as I was finishing my packing. We were just back from a farewell meal in the Green Hat with Aunt Mhairi and our cousins. It had been bittersweet, the end of an era for me, for us all – Kilronan was twenty minutes away from Glen Avich, but London was another planet.

“Take this,” Emily said, offering me something sheer and weightless, the colour of Loch Avich in the summer – something between aqua, turquoise and blue. She'd made it as part of her project in college – they'd even had a small fashion show with all the graduates' work showcased. Emily's collection was the best, of course. I was so proud of her.

“Hey, no . . . That's yours, I can't take it.”

“You're going to need dressy clothes a lot more than me, Inary! With all those glamorous gigs Lesley will take you to!”

She smiled her breezy smile. Emily and I had this in common: we tended to be cheerful most of the time.

“You’ll have nights out too. You don’t plan to always be stuck in the house with Logan, do you?”

She sighed, and I remember that for a second her face had looked nearly other-worldly, translucent – as if she were there with me, in my room, but at the same time she was far away already. Like her presence in this world was only transient.

“I want you to have it, and I want you to go and be happy and not look back. I want you to live for me. To do all the things I want to do but can’t.”

Live for me. Her words cut too deep. I couldn’t speak for a moment. It was as if she had given up on life, and that wasn’t the plan. We were supposed to prove the doctors wrong. Emily would outlive us all, I was convinced of that.

And there I was, my bags packed, abandoning her.

“Maybe this is a mistake . . .” I agonised.

“It’s not a mistake. Don’t let Logan convince you of that. You must go, Inary! You must build a life for yourself, and you will. I can’t just now, but you can and you will. Away from . . . everything that happened.” She didn’t mention Lewis, but his name hung between us, unspoken.

“Logan is furious. He’s barely said a word to me.”

Emily rolled her eyes. “He doesn’t want you to go because he’s worried I’ll get mortally ill on him, but I won’t. Besides, there’s a good chance I’ll be on the heart transplant list soon. We’ll be fine,” she said, and laughed. “Logan’s just forever looking for a reason to sulk!”

“He has a point.”

“Yeah, well.” She shrugged. “You’ll be the London branch of our family. You’ll do us proud. Look . . .” She smiled again,

resting her hand on the pile of manuscripts sitting on my desk ready to be packed, all lovingly tied with ribbons to keep the sheets together. “You’ve been working on your books for forever. Giving up sleep, spending all weekends in your room, typing away . . .”

“Because I’m a geek, really . . .” I laughed.

“Yes, you are!” She laughed too. “But also because you are so dedicated. You have never wanted anything else, have you?” I shook my head in response. She was right. Ever since I was a little girl I had never really wanted much else but to write. “You’ve got to go and make your dream come true.”

“It’s not that simple . . .”

“It is really, Inary.” She twisted a lock of my hair around her finger, in one of those little affectionate gestures of hers. “All you need is determination . . .”

“And talent . . .” I said, my voice dripping with self-doubt.

“Yes, talent, and you have it. I know you have it and I know you’ll make it. Whether I’m here to see it or not . . .”

“Don’t say that, Emily. You’ll get on the list and you’ll get a new heart and everything will get better.” To hear her talk this way was like a stab to my heart.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she laughed. “I still have a bit of life left in me! I’ll come and see you in London and go for nights out with Lesley’s crazy friends . . .”

“Exactly! Which is why you need your top . . .”

“Tell you what. Hold on to it for me, I’ll wear it when I come and see you.”

“Deal.”

She didn’t really keep her part of the deal, though. She could only come to see me twice, and a night out with Lesley’s friends would have been too much for her. Soon even the car

journey with Logan was out of the question – it would have been too tiring. And I didn't keep our deal either; I still didn't have a book to my name, and I didn't even know what I was supposed to write any more.

I fell into a fitful, restless sleep, and I only woke up when we were about to land. I saw from the window that while I slept, England had turned into Scotland's soft hills and moors at last, a million shades of brown and purple shining in the light of dawn.

My head and my eyes hurt as I waited at the station for the first train to Glen Avich, drinking a double espresso that managed to wake me up and bore a hole in my empty stomach. I couldn't phone Logan to come and get me – it was nearly two hours round trip from Glen Avich to Aberdeen, and I didn't want him to be away from Emily for so long. Finally I boarded the train, a tiny two-carriage. It was just a couple of pensioners, the conductor and me. From the train window I could see the landscape I've known forever, the place I'd called home for the first twenty-odd years of my life.

As I stepped onto the platform in Glen Avich, my heart soared for a moment, in spite of the exhaustion and worry. I took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet smells of pine trees and peat fires. I could see a cluster of pink clouds over the hills where the earth was kissing the sky, the air was chilly and pure, and there was a sense of peace, of calm all around. I was home. Funny that I should still call our Glen Avich house home, even after a few years of living away . . .

I nearly ran from the station to our house, a few hundred yards away, keeping my head down in the hope of not having to stop and chat with anyone. I just wasn't ready to talk about Emily. My feet were heavy as I walked through the back alleys,

avoiding the faster route through Main Street. I stopped across the road from our house, a whitewashed cottage that stood at the foot of St Colman Way. I took a deep breath, clutching my overnight bag. The lights were on in the windows upstairs, in the cold, grey gloom of early morning.

I crossed the road, each step agony. I didn't know what I would find; I didn't know what I would see once I stepped into Emily's room.

I stood in front of the heavy wooden door and knocked lightly, my hands shaking. A woman I didn't know, in a nurse's uniform, let me in.

"You must be Inary," she said.

I nodded, too anxious to speak, and I stepped in.

My brother was standing on the landing, conferring with Aunt Mhairi in a low voice, their heads bent towards each other, with Logan towering over her. My heart broke, because as soon as I saw my brother's face I knew all was lost. I knew for sure that the doctors weren't wrong like I'd always thought they would be. I knew for sure that Emily's days were really coming to an end.

Despair is a weird thing, the way it can come over you in a scarlet wave, making you scream and sob and curse the world; or it can just freeze you on the spot, deprive you of all the energy and purpose, tear your soul away from you and leave an empty shell behind. That is how I felt when I saw my brother's stricken face and I realised death was in our house, waiting for the right time, and that time would come soon.

"Oh, Inary! Thank goodness you're here!" Aunt Mhairi smiled at me, her face lined and exhausted. She hurried down the stairs and enveloped me in a warm hug. Logan followed

her, but he didn't throw his arms around me, like I hoped. He stood in front of me and fixed his eyes on mine, as if he were pleading, as if he were drowning and only I could save him – but how could I save him when I was drowning too?

“You're here,” he said, as if he were surprised. There was an accusation in his voice, and guilt clawed at me once more.

“Emily . . .” I whispered.

“She's sleeping. Best not disturb her now.”

For a moment the air hung heavy between us, full of all the words we weren't saying. Then Aunt Mhairi said she would put the kettle on and make some breakfast, and to come and warm myself by the fire, and those simple, everyday words about tea and toast and what a cold morning it was, and how lovely it was for all three of us to be back home together, broke the spell I was under and forced me back to the land of the living.

Emily was dying upstairs, and still, time would not stop, and we would keep going. But nothing, nothing would ever be the same again.

★

While Aunt Mhairi was making breakfast, I stepped into Emily's room as quietly as I could and sat by her bed. She was ashen, and her lips had a blue tinge. There were dozens of medicine bottles carefully lined on her bedside table, and her sewing machine sat unused on its table in the corner, together with samples of fabric piled on top of one another. She'd been working on something, I noticed, before she was forced to stop; it was still under the needle in the sewing machine. Something in a deep plum colour, with tiny flowers all over . . .

My eyes returned to Emily, and I froze. That broken doll

couldn't be my sister. My sister was full of life and shining from the inside, happy and rebellious and strong. I noticed that her nails were painted bright green; it was such an Emily touch . . .

I was grateful that she was sleeping, because I had to step out and escape to my room. I screamed silent screams into my pillow, with Logan hovering on the doorstep, heartbroken and awkward. And then I dried my tears, I shaped my mouth into a smile, and I decided I would not cry again until . . . Until it was time. I decided I would be strong and never, never show upset in front of Emily. I decided I would bring her joy until her last moment. In a way, my parents' death being so sudden was a blessing – I know it sounds strange, but at least they didn't have time to be afraid, to suffer. But for Emily, it was going to be a long agony, a tunnel with only more darkness at the end of it.

I went back into her room, and she was waking, her eyelids fluttering, like she was still wandering in a dream. I took her in my arms – she'd lost weight, she was like a little bird – and instead of breathing in her lovely, sweet Emily scent, I breathed in illness and medication, and my heart sank once more. But I kept my resolution.

“Hey, sweetheart . . .”

“You're back . . .” she murmured.

“Of course. I'm here to drive Logan mad.”

“You always do that,” she said, and laughed a small ghost of a laugh.

“She does that all right,” said Logan from the door. He looked at me, and there was a weird mixture of bitterness and relief in his eyes.

Yes, I was back, and I would not go anywhere.