



WATCH OVER ME

When all seems lost, help can come
from the most extraordinary places.

DANIELA SACERDOTI

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Prologue

PERSEPHONE

The strangest, most amazing day of my life, the day that changed my perception of life and death, started like any other. I woke up in the world I've always known, I went to sleep wrapped in a mystery.

All our lives we make ourselves busy, trying to ignore the fact that darkness will come, one day too soon, to get us. Infinity can't fit in our lives the way it is, too frightening, too huge. We have to cut it to size, doing all the million little everyday things that define the boundaries of our reality – using our five senses the way they're meant to be used, to touch things, to see things, things that are real and present and on this side of existence, the side of the living. We give the mystery a human face; we give a shape to something that's shapeless.

We invent rituals to define the passages, turn life and death into ceremonies, making them earthly and somehow easier to grasp, to comprehend. When a baby is born, we don't dwell on *why* that little soul is now here, where it was before, what it knows . . . The new mum comes back from her excursion into the unknown, taking the baby with her from darkness into the light, and both are cleaned and dressed and made to look as if they never were beyond . . . as if she hadn't just been underground, in the dark, where life and death touch and mix.

And when somebody dies, the family can mercifully occupy

their minds with all the heartbreaking little things we need to do when it's all finished – the flowers, the food, what needs to be put away, what needs to be given away – while tears fall on the objects left behind: a pair of slippers, a mug, a dressing gown. We comfort each other, holding on to a solid arm, clinging to a warm hand where the blood flows strong, we feel it underneath the skin and it sings so loud, so clear, that it banishes death away.

How could we, even for a second, face what *really* happened – the way someone was there and then she was not, gone forever, gone into non-existence – without falling on our knees and screaming in terror, thinking one day it will happen to us, that we'll close our eyes and never open them again? How can we ever be so brave as to gaze into the deep, senseless darkness that awaits us and still keep on living?

If darkness is what awaits us.

Because I know now that it isn't.

The day that started like any other day is the day all the frills were stripped away and I looked straight into the mystery. I saw someone whom I thought was gone, and she was there, standing in front of me. I saw a soul without a body and she smiled.

Maybe I'm naïve, maybe a whole lot of proof and science and thought stands before me to say I'm wrong, but I believe what my gran told me many years ago – that love never dies and that what awaits us is the love we felt when we were alive. That beyond the fear and pain, love is there to catch us when we fall.

This is what I learnt, one spring night in the woods, and since then, I am not afraid.

A LOST BABY

Eilidh

The day I lost my baby, the weather was so gorgeous, so sunny, that half the town was out, with sunglasses on and a smile on their faces.

I had gone for a walk, wearing my big flowery maternity top. I was only ten weeks gone, it was way too early to wear maternity clothes, but I just couldn't wait. I had also picked up some groceries, some bizarre combination, sardines and cashew nuts maybe, because I kept telling myself I had this craving or the other. I didn't, really. I just wanted to be finally able to say things like 'I'm living on mango and HP sauce and I chew on elastic bands. You get such awful cravings when you are *pregnant!*'

Pregnant.

I really was pregnant. It seems impossible now.

I wanted to experience the whole of it; I wanted every sign, every little symptom – the morning sickness, the swollen ankles, the tops that look like tents, the sleepless nights. I wanted to laugh at how huge my underwear had got and check the likelihood of having a boy or a girl on some silly test I found in a magazine. I wanted to pour over name books, choose the nursery furnishing and discuss the advantages of a sling over a baby

carrier. I wanted to buy the little vests, the little babygros, the hats, mittens and socks. All white, until the twenty-week scan, when I'd know if it was a boy or a girl. Tom and I would watch the screen in awe, saying to each other, 'Look, he's waving! He's saying hello!' We'd call our friends and relatives to tell them what we were having. We'd frame the scans and put them on the mantelpiece. Tom would bring one to his work, where the other doctors and the midwives and the receptionists would coo over it and say, 'He . . . or she . . . looks like you!' You can't really tell, of course, you can't see anything in these pictures, it's just one of those silly things, the sweet nonsense that people say to each other because it feels so good to be talking about them – the babies on their way to this world, all the hope and joy they carry.

But the thing I wanted most of all was to feel the baby kicking inside me. They'd told me it was like little ripples, like a butterfly flying in your tummy. I wanted to have Tom's hand on my bump, see the pride on his face and the tenderness for me, his wife, giving him a son or a daughter.

I'd waited so long, so long for this, while everybody else got pregnant and carried their lovely bumps around like a crown, and me in my size ten jeans and a flat stomach. I hated the way I was growing thinner instead of round and full and serene.

I desperately wanted to be *them*, the pregnant women: my sister, my girlfriends, my colleagues, my hairdresser. Even the postman – well, postwoman – inflicted her bump on me every morning, as I watched her waddle her way up and down our street and clumsily climb into the red post van. Until she told me they were changing her duties, health and safety you know, she was going to sit at the parcel collection desk behind the post office and watch her bump grow. She said to drop by, to say hello.

I'd scrutinize women's tummies obsessively, to see if they were swollen in that lovely, taut way you get right at the beginning, when your bump is barely there but already visible. I'd torture

myself, convince myself that everybody, *everybody* was pregnant except me.

Whenever I crossed ways with a pram, I'd look away. I didn't trust myself to not have that look – that longing, lingering look that mothers recognise, so that they pounce and say with their eyes: 'This baby's mine.'

I wanted to be like that. I wanted other women to look at my baby with shining eyes and envy me, and feel like the queen of the whole world, the luckiest woman on earth.

Like my sister. She's an expert at doing that.

Katrina is three years younger than me. We both love babies, we both wanted to be mothers since we were little girls. We used to play house, look after our dolls, feed them, put them to bed, take them for strolls in their little pink prams. Not surprisingly, we both decided we wanted to work with children: she became a paediatric nurse, and I became a nursery nurse. Well, a child development officer, they say now.

She got married early, barely out of college, and within six months she was pregnant. She had a boy, a lovely boy, my dearest nephew Jack. By the time Katrina gave birth yet again – to twin girls – I'd been trying for over three years. As I watched her holding them both, one under each arm, with their pink babygros and little pink hats and scrunched up faces, I felt sick with sorrow.

After Isabella and Chloe – while I was going through the second IVF attempt – came Molly. She was the baby of the family, the apple of our eye. More congratulations, more celebrating, more get-togethers, with my mum and dad joking that one daughter was providing enough children for them both.

Except they weren't really joking. They know about my struggle, it's just that my family is not very . . . how can I put it . . . tactful. Some would say they are a bit cruel. Well, with me anyway. My sister in particular. She is quite merciless, constantly reminding me how fertile she is, how abundant her harvest of

little faces and little hands and little toes is, how much they love her and cling to her and make her . . . worthy.

While I am worthless, barren, my arms sore with emptiness. Empty arms, empty heart.

‘If you had any kids, you’d know how I feel!’ she pointed out, crying, on Jack’s first day at school.

‘They just want their mum don’t they? An auntie is not the same!’ she’d laugh, as one of the twins bypassed me and ran to her with a scraped knee.

‘Sorry, it’s not like I don’t want you to, it’s just that she settles better with me,’ she’d say if I asked to put Molly to bed.

In the meantime, her husband was giving Tom the same treatment. Including cruel jokes about firing blanks, which wasn’t even true – they had already found out, after extensive tests, that the problem lay at my door. Tom would pretend to laugh, but would then become very, very quiet. He soon started finding excuses to miss family gatherings. I couldn’t blame him.

Tom is a doctor; he’s a few years older than me. It wasn’t a crazy passion or anything, we were good friends, we got on and we both wanted children. Tom was well over thirty and wasn’t close to his own family either, so we hoped to make a little family of our own and not be alone anymore.

We started trying for a baby just after our honeymoon. Ten years, a lot of tests and five IVF attempts later, it worked. I was pregnant.

But by then, our marriage was in tatters. Tom was seeing someone and had been for a long time. I was so worn out by the hormone injections and all that went with it, I didn’t have the strength to discuss it, let alone fight.

I had left my job two years earlier. The treatment was making me an emotional and physical wreck and I couldn’t keep taking time off. I worked with children all day, I had to smile and be cheerful and loving when my heart was perpetually bleeding.

Not to mention the pregnant mums I had to deal with. They’d come to collect their children, struggling to bend down and take

the children's sand shoes off, to which I'd say, 'There, I'll help you,' and they'd laugh and say, 'Thanks, sorry about that, I'm getting bigger by the day!' patting their rounded stomachs. And me, nauseous with envy, exhausted by hormone treatment, worn out by sleepless, sweaty nights, having to smile back.

I quit. I wanted to keep all my energy for my only goal, the only thing that mattered.

Four times they tried to put our babies into me – they called them embryos, I called them babies. Four times it didn't work.

It's not like they tried to latch on but then I miscarried. Not even that. Nothing happened, not even a bit of swelling, or some sort of feeling . . . different. I felt nothing, as if it had never happened, as if it had all been a dream of mine, those four babies-in-waiting. A dream that would vanish in the light, like dreams do. As if they were never there.

I would cry and cry for hours, sharing a glass of juice – wine was off limits during treatment – with my best friend Harry. His friendship saved my sanity. We met in school when we were thirteen, went out for a few weeks when we were sixteen and then decided we were better off as friends. A year later, he came out as gay, shocking his dad to the core. He went to stay with his aunt for about a week, until his dad turned up at his door and tearfully asked him to come home. After that minor upheaval, Harry's life rolled on smoothly. He met his partner Douglas when they were both at college and they're still together now.

While I was going through hell on earth, Harry and Doug provided a safe harbour for me and many a night was spent watching the soaps and some soppy film, eating prawn crackers and Singapore noodles.

I used to cry in Harry's arms and he'd say, 'Come on, come on, you'll be fine, you'll be fine . . .' and I was so grateful my heart would overflow with fondness for him. He's like a brother to me.

When I told him that Tom had a girlfriend, he reverted back to his old self, before he came out, and asked if I wanted him

to go and punch him. Then he came to his senses and suggested we'd post his profile, complete with mobile number and email, on a gay dating website.

'No, thanks. I think I'll just ignore it. Pretend it's not happening.'

'That never works.'

'I know . . . but I can't stop now. The treatment is booked in two months time, I can't possibly cancel, it might be my last chance!'

It worked. The fifth time, it worked.

As I stared at the blue cross on the pregnancy test, one line vivid blue, the one across hesitant and timid and barely there, I slipped down along the tiled wall onto the bathroom floor, closed my eyes and tasted the greatest happiness I had ever known.

Four tests later, four blue crosses later, I was out of pee and dizzy with excitement.

Tom was overjoyed. For a while, he didn't work late anymore, he didn't have any weekend conventions and meetings and overtime to do. I was in a bubble of happiness but didn't dare to prepare for the baby yet. It was too early, I didn't want to jinx it. Mine was classed as a high-risk pregnancy, I had to have constant checkups, so I couldn't relax.

One day, Tom came home with a beautiful cradle, made of wrought iron and painted white. It was gorgeous.

'It was Eva's,' he said, carrying it carefully inside. Eva is his best friend's, and our best man's, little girl. 'You know how they don't want any more kids, so he gave it to me. They got it up in Scotland, some small place in the Highlands. I thought you'd love it.' He was smiling. Those days, he looked like the old Tom. The man I married.

'I do! It's beautiful! And it comes from Scotland!'

I lived in Scotland for several years as a child, when my parents separated. My mum, my sister and I went to stay with my gran Flora in Glen Avich, in the northeast of the country.

'The only thing is . . .' I started, hesitantly.

He made a puzzled face.

‘Well, they say it’s bad luck to put the cot in the nursery too soon. Maybe we could put it in the loft.’

‘In the loft? It’d get spoiled. And anyway, all that stuff about cots in nurseries and black cats and ladders, it’s a lot of rubbish, you know that.’

‘Of course, of course, I know.’

But I wasn’t sure. My brain was saying, ‘Come on, Eilidh, don’t be silly,’ but my gut was saying, ‘Why chance it?’

‘Eilidh,’ laughed Tom, lifting the cradle to carry it upstairs, ‘since when are you superstitious?’

‘I don’t know, it’s just . . .’ I shrugged my shoulders. I had no words to explain.

‘Nonsense. Come on, come and see.’

He carried it up the stairs and through the landing, the cradle that was never going to be filled. He placed it carefully in what was to be the nursery, the room that had been waiting for years.

‘There. Doesn’t it look perfect?’

I nodded, and smiled.

I tried not to be afraid, but I was.

It wasn’t the cradle, of course. I’m not superstitious enough to think it really was that. It wasn’t the cradle, it wasn’t carrying the groceries home on a hot day either, it was nothing I’d done, the doctor said.

I shouldn’t blame myself, he said.

But I do, oh I do, I blame myself, for not having been strong enough to carry the baby full term, to give him a chance to live. I let my baby down and now he’s dead.

That lovely sunny day, three months ago, a lifetime ago, I stopped to chat with my neighbour for a few minutes, before saying goodbye and turning back to cross the road, towards my house. As I walked on, I heard my neighbour’s hurried footsteps behind me and felt her arm go around my waist, as if to sustain me.

‘Let me get these, Eilidh, darling, there’s a good girl,’ she said as she gently took the shopping bags from me and led me into the house, her arm still around my waist. I slowly realised that there was something wrong and then I felt something trickling down my legs, and it wasn’t sweat, and I looked and it was blood.

Had I had a boy, I would have called him Harry. Had I had a girl, I would have called her Grace.

When I finished crying, three months later, I got up from the sofa, had a long, warm shower, got dressed for the first time in weeks and made myself a cup of tea. I sat at the kitchen table with my phone, a spiral pad and a pen.

Tom was on a weekend away. Some convention, he said, as if I didn’t know the truth, as if I were stupid.

I wrote two notes:

Mum, Dad,

I’m going away for a while. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.

I’ll phone as soon as I’m settled.

Eilidh

Tom,

Our marriage is over. I am sure you know why but your girlfriend is not the only reason. It’s been over for years. I’ll be in touch with my parents when I’m settled, they’ll be able to reassure you I’m ok. Don’t look for me.

Eilidh

Then I picked up my mobile and texted Harry:

I’m going away for a bit. Don’t worry about a thing, seriously, I’ll be fine. I’m leaving my phone behind, but I’ll get on the net as soon as I can and e-mail you at once. xxxx E

I left the notes and the phone on the kitchen table, and packed a few of my belongings carefully, deliberately.

I felt empty. Like a shell, a dried-up shell with nothing inside, nothing left to give.

I got into the car and started driving, not having the slightest idea where I was going. I just knew I had to go.

On the motorway, I started seeing signs that said ‘North’.
North.

Suddenly, I realised where I was headed. Where the deepest, most secret part of me wanted to be, so that I could heal. I kept driving, on and on through the afternoon and the early evening.

The light was lilac and the pinewoods black against the sky when I got to Glen Avich. The sight of the whitewashed cottage and its red door made a million happy memories flood back. Had I been able to feel anything, it would have been relief. But I was numb.

I knocked at Flora’s door. She wasn’t there anymore, she’d been dead a long time – but my great aunt Peggy still lived there. She opened the door and gasped to see me so pale, so lost, so thin.

It was twilight, the hour when shapes seem to lose their definition and blur a little, as if they were beginning to vanish into the darkness. I was one of those things that were vanishing. I felt like Peggy could have opened the door and found a little cloud of blue cold air where I should have stood.

Peggy smiled, hugged me and led me in, made me a cup of hot, sugary tea, and spoke to me in the best accent in the world, the way my gran used to speak. By then, the night had fallen and it was pitch-dark, as we were deep, deep into the heart of the Highlands.

Peggy took me to my bedroom, the one I had shared with Katrina when I was a girl. I barely had the energy to put my pyjamas on and slip into bed. She brought me a cup of tea and left it on the bedside table. I whispered a thank you but couldn’t move, every bit of me felt like lead. I closed my eyes.

Slowly, slowly, Scotland started to seep into me. She enveloped me and held me – her sounds and scents comforting me, as they did when I was a child.

I fell asleep, under clean sheets and a duvet that smelled musty, but in a good way, like grandmothers' things do.

I slept for a whole twelve hours, after weeks and weeks of white nights. When I woke up the next morning, at first light, I felt like life was bearable.

Barely bearable, really, but bearable.

I felt like maybe, in the nick of time, I had managed to stop the vanishing process. Maybe I wasn't going to disappear and cease to exist.

Maybe life was giving me a second chance.

2

A LOST MOTHER

Jamie

I knew she was gone when I saw that the painting was missing from the living room wall. All her things – the canvases, the paints, the paintbrushes, the bottles of white spirits, her cloths and aprons – it was all still there. But the painting was gone.

She wasn't coming back.

It was the picture of a young girl, wrapped in winter clothes, her cheeks red from the cold, skating on a frozen lake. Janet had somehow managed to convey it all: the sense of joy on the girl's face, the apprehension of skating on thin ice, the defiance that said, 'I dare.' The cold and crisp air, the magic of the winter scene, with the icicle-covered branches, the pink-yellow sky, and the black silhouette of the winter trees in the distance . . .

That painting showed all of Janet's talent, her promise as an artist. It was part of her final exhibition when she had graduated from Slade in London. Everybody knew that Janet Phillips was one to watch, the one that would make it.

And sure enough, she did.

Three years after graduating, she was in great demand, owned a flat in an upmarket area of London and was swamped with work. Her work was true and honest and amazing.

Her art meant everything to her; she would paint through

the night and fall asleep at dawn on the sofa in her studio, among her canvases. When she was working on something, she couldn't think of anything else, she couldn't see anything else.

But after three years of this life, she started to feel the strain. Although happy, she was exhausted and physically drained. Her twin sister, Anne, convinced her to take a holiday in Scotland with a group of friends.

And that's when we met and both our lives were turned upside down.

I walked into the pub one night after work. They were sitting at the counter, all wrapped up in the high-tech fleeces, waterproof trousers and walking boots that seem to be the uniform of people coming here from down south, several whisky glasses in front of them.

You know that thing about love at first sight? People debating whether it exists or not?

Well, it does.

I swear, it took me about a second to fall in love. And I'm not even the romantic type. You know, quiet and all that. Shy. Brought up to hide my emotions as deep as I could, in the best Scottish male tradition. I wasn't even that interested in having a relationship, back then.

And still, there she was, there I was, everything changed in that second and it was never the same again.

We started talking and three hours later we were still together. Anne and their friends went back to their hotel, we went for a walk on the beach, among knowing smiles and innuendoes from the girls. We didn't care. I didn't even care about the people in the pub, most of whom had known me since I was born, and how tongues would start wagging. I didn't care about anything, except not leaving her side.

I watched her blonde hair on my pillow. It was the colour of ripe corn, of golden fields in the summer. I watched her face as she was sleeping, I watched over her all night.

She went back to London a few days later, leaving me in a

grey world, in a lifeless world where I wandered in a daze, not knowing what I was doing, where I was going.

I burnt my hand very badly. I am a blacksmith, like my father, and in my line of work, you better watch what you are doing or you end up hurt.

As she was bandaging my arm, Dr Nicholson smiled. The whole village knew about Janet and me. That is how things work in Glen Avich.

‘You are not the first and you won’t be the last,’ she said.

I looked at her.

‘To do something silly like that. You know, the day I met John, about thirty years ago, I missed my stop on the train back from university and ended up on the coast. My dad had to drive two-and-a-half hours to come and get me. There, *this* will heal in no time.’

A few stunned weeks later, after many a late-night session in the pub to drown my sorrow – and many a hungover day – she came back.

I opened the door and there she was. Golden hair, cornflower eyes, like the princess in fairytales. She had driven up from London with a small case full of clothes and laden with paints, canvases and a few paintings.

She looked scared. She clearly didn’t know how I’d react. I could feel the tension in her body as I held her and kissed her, and then I felt her relaxing in my arms. She looked at me, her face flooded with relief. She could read on my face that I was overjoyed to see her.

She looked relieved, but she didn’t look happy.

She wasn’t even in the door. We were still standing on my doorstep as she told me.

‘I’m pregnant.’

Everything spun around me and before my rational mind could process what she had just told me, I broke into a smile. She didn’t smile back. She didn’t look happy.

She was pregnant and she wasn’t happy.

★ ★ ★

We settled down to this new, unexpected life. At the beginning, it was like being under water, everything was surprising, fluid, unplanned. I cleaned and painted the spare room and turned it into a studio for her. She tried to work but morning sickness – all day sickness really – made it so hard. She was constantly exhausted, lying on the sofa or throwing up in the bathroom. She soon gave up on painting.

My mum was a godsend. She made Janet feel welcome, she did her utmost to help her settle in. Janet took to her and they became good friends. They would go for tea and a scone in the local cafe, up to Aberdeen shopping, or just sit in my mum's kitchen and chat while I was at work.

The local girls had been quite taken aback by the sudden appearance of this London woman, her blonde hair, her designer clothes. They weren't as ready as my mum to befriend her. My sister Shona pointed out to me that it wasn't nice for them to see one of the few eligible bachelors in the area snatched by a newcomer. Of course, I hadn't thought of that. My sister commented that men are useless that way – they never notice these things. My mum seemed to be the only person that Janet truly trusted. It goes against the stereotype of the wicked mother-in-law, I suppose.

Still, Janet was miserable. It was as simple as that.

I could see it, my mum and sister could see it, everyone could. People would wonder what on earth she had to be so miserable about – a man who adored her and couldn't wait to marry her, a baby on the way, a lovely home.

But I understood. The pregnancy had taken everything out of her; the baby was sapping every ounce of her strength. Because her art required all her energy – emotional, physical, and mental – the two things just couldn't coexist, for her. She was drained.

I didn't know much about pregnancies, I had only seen my sister whenever she was down from Aberdeen, and apart from being a bit tired and nauseous, she seemed fine. Happy. I didn't want to start discussing Janet behind her back but I had to ask my mum for advice. I was at a loss.

‘It happens sometimes. I was fine with you but with Shona . . . I was sick throughout, as big as a house and totally exhausted! She was my first – I just wasn’t prepared. But then, when the baby came, I was so happy I forgot all about it. Sometimes your dad and I tried to stay awake all night just to look at her . . .’

It didn’t happen that way for Janet. When the baby came, she didn’t seem better. Maisie was born after more than twenty-four hours of labour, she was in so much pain and I couldn’t help her. When it finished, Janet was exhausted, but rules were that I had to leave her there and come back the next day. Maisie must have been quite traumatised by the ordeal too, so she wouldn’t settle in Janet’s arms or at her breast. I left her holding the baby, sitting upright in her bed on the ward, and when I came back the following morning, she was in the same position, holding Maisie, with blue shadows under her eyes and looking like she was going to collapse. She told me she had held her all night because whenever she put her down, Maisie would start crying. She was so scared to nod off and drop her that she had pinched herself over and over again, so much that her arms were full of purple bruises. I couldn’t believe it.

‘Did the midwives not help you at all?’

‘I didn’t ask.’

As I held Maisie, my beautiful, sweet, wonderful wee girl, I didn’t know which feeling was stronger: happiness for her birth, or fear over her mother’s state of mind.

A fraught few months followed. Janet looked as if she was doing her duty to Maisie but not enjoying it much. Maisie was fed, changed, held – she was very well looked after – but Janet just didn’t seem . . . well, as enraptured as we were. Myself, my mum and Shona. And the rest of the village, really. Maisie was so pretty – she still is. The same blonde hair as her mum but not her cornflower eyes, she had inherited my own grey ones that were my father’s too.

Janet started leaving Maisie more and more often, with me, whenever I wasn’t working, or with my mum. She even tried to

arrange for Maisie to stay over in Aberdeen with my sister for a few days – but I said no, she was only three months old, it was too early to leave her.

Even when someone else looked after Maisie, Janet still wouldn't paint. I'd come home to a chaotic house and Janet sitting at the window in her studio, her apron on, but no painting done.

It was breaking my heart. I felt so terrible, so terrible that something that happened with me, one night of passion, had made her so unhappy. I knew it wasn't my fault, and I knew I was doing my very best to try and make her better, but it didn't help the guilt.

I felt like she was this beautiful tropical bird and I had caged her, though unwittingly, and now she was dying.

One night I couldn't take it anymore and I told her so. She burst into tears and held my hands.

'No, no, it's not your fault.' She was sobbing, she was distraught. 'It's not your fault, it's not Maisie's fault. I'll do my best, I'll try harder. I just don't know who I am anymore. I try to paint and nothing comes. I'll get better, I promise.'

In the next year or so, things improved. All of a sudden, she came back to life. She started painting again. She would paint all day, then on and on through the night. The colour came back into her face. She would sit down to dinner with us for ten minutes and then run back upstairs to her canvases. I missed her, and it seemed such a shame she wouldn't spend any time with Maisie and me – but it warmed my heart to see her happy again.

Maisie was now a toddler with golden wavy hair that curled around her face like a halo, a sweet little face and those beautiful grey eyes that I would lose myself in. She always asked for her mum, she was forever trying to cling to her and stop her from going upstairs. I could see how much she missed Janet – but she was generally a happy little thing and didn't seem to be overly upset by her mother's continuous absence.

Janet started driving down to London every month or so, to take new paintings down to galleries, or attend events, or just see friends. One time, she was offered an exhibition and spent five weeks down south without ever driving back, and she kept finding excuses for us not to visit her.

I grew terrified that she'd go and take Maisie with her. I couldn't sleep at night for fear that I'd awake and find them gone.

'We can all go down to London. I can get a job. If that's what you want, if it would make you happy . . .'

'Oh, Jamie. You would hate London. You know that very well.'

'But if that's where you need to be . . .'

'Stop it, Jamie,' she snapped. 'I don't even want to talk about this, it's not an option.'

I knew what she meant. She didn't want me with her.

She did go, just like I feared she would. But she left Maisie.

She took a few clothes, her painting and her cat. She took her cat and left her eighteen-month-old daughter.

I was relieved and distraught and horrified all at the same time.

That day I decided that it was going to be Maisie and me. We'd be a family. We didn't need anyone. Of course we had my mum and my sister and all our friends in the village, but the two of us were a wee unit in ourselves and would not allow anyone to come in and hurt us.

At the beginning, Maisie asked for her mum over and over and over again. Then, slowly, Janet's memory faded from her mind and she asked less and less. Then she stopped. I didn't give her an explanation. Maybe I was a coward, I don't know, but what could I say? 'Your mum left you because she was so unhappy here, she wanted to be in London and be a painter and yes, she could have still been a painter here, or take us to London with her, or even only you – as much as it would have destroyed me – but she didn't. Why? Because she didn't want me with her, and she didn't want you either.'

I decided that if Maisie ever asks, I'll find an excuse for what Janet did. Not to protect Janet but to protect Maisie.

The funny thing is, Janet's selfishness and cruelty in leaving Maisie behind meant that I could keep her, so in a strange, twisted way, I am grateful.

Now it's just us. Since my mother died unexpectedly three years ago, we are even closer. She is my life.

But when Maisie is in bed and the fire is dying, I sit looking at the embers with a glass of whisky and I feel a coldness inside, a loneliness that seeps into my bones. I feel myself withdrawing from life, rejecting it like something too dangerous, something only a fool would take his chances on.

I am frozen and I intend to stay that way. It's safer and I have a daughter to think of. Nobody will ever break our hearts again.

3

MOTHER AND SON

Elizabeth

I've been dead three years now, to measure time the way you do.

Time feels very different when you are dead, an eternity is condensed into a second, nights and days pass in eternal twilight.

It was such a wrench to have to go, to leave Shona and Jamie behind.

I was sixty-five, not that old really, but not that young either. I had a happy life, I did all I wanted to do, but what hurt me so much, so much, is that I had to leave my children to fend for themselves.

I know, they are adults, but are our own children ever really adults? Are mothers ever ready to leave them? So much of our world is defined by our parents being alive, a barrier between ourselves and our turn to die. When our parents go, there's no more protection. We are on our own, exposed.

And Maisie. I didn't want to leave Maisie, poor wee mite, motherless. Well, she has a mother of course, but a mother not overly concerned about her. Or not concerned at all, really.

I suppose I should hate Janet but I don't. It's difficult to have these sort of feelings, anyway, when you are dead and you feel peaceful, at one with everything, safe.

But to be fair, I didn't even hate her or resent her before, when I was alive. I'd been incredibly relieved when she left without Maisie. I'd spent night after night awake, fearing she'd take Maisie away, and we couldn't have said no; it was her daughter and clearly Janet wasn't happy up here, with Jamie. But how could he have moved down to London? It would have been like trying to take one of our trees, the lovely mountain pines that grow all around us, and replant it in some suburban garden. Jamie would have been miserable. But still, he would have gone. She spared him this painful choice; she went and left Maisie to us. She hadn't been that interested in her anyway, since the day that little life started inside her.

Maybe I should say she's some sort of monster, that she's unnatural, without motherly instinct. But life taught me compassion. Who says all women should be mothers? Who says all women know how to be a mother, or want to be one?

One night – one night was all it took for Janet, and I remember how it feels to be young and reckless and have life flowing through you so strongly that you have to live it, live it deeply and fully. One night of love at first sight, and whisky, and the beauty of the Highlands all around her, and her life was turned upside down.

Who are we to dictate she had to be happy, that she had to take to motherhood like a duck to water, like I did with my children and Shona did with hers? People pointed their finger and despised her, as if they didn't know how many women *pretend*. They pretend to be happy, they pretend to want this life, of wife and mother, because that's what's expected of them. They bend and break themselves to fit the mould they were handed down from their mothers. Misery handed down from mothers to daughters, a life of self-denial.

Janet couldn't do that. She's an artist. Like you would say, 'She's a human being,' or, 'She's a woman,' – the very basic qualities that define her essence – you would also say of Janet, 'She's an artist.'

I knew someone like her before. A boy I went to school with, who used to think of nothing else but playing the violin. His dad played too, his mum was a beautiful singer, and they loved music. But with him, it was different. He was consumed – I'm sure that had they taken his violin away, he would have withered and died. He went on to be a famous musician and composer, he lives in Glasgow now. He has three children. Because you see, he could keep playing the violin ten hours a day and travel the world and live his music as deeply as he wanted, while his wife raised the family. He could have both, because he's a man. But a woman artist, if she wants children, she has to stop, she can't be consumed by it, she has to put her art in a slot to fit in with the biggest slot, the most important one – her babies. Some are willing to do it; some, like Janet, are not.

I don't know what that feels like, to feel forced to give up your passion, your very reason for being. I can only imagine it is like some sort of death of the soul. I saw it happening to Janet. How can I judge her? The only passion I've ever known is my family, James and the children, and my home, this little-known corner of the world, and all its beauty. I don't know what it feels like to have to give up your own soul.

Since I died, I am at one with my home. I am the loch and the silver fish that swim in it. I am the wind and the leaves and the mountains. I am the particles of dust twirling around in the rays of sunshine, seeping through the windows of my son's workshop. I am the moon that shines in a pool of silver light on Maisie's floor, as she lies asleep. I am the wind that caresses Shona's face, and her girls', whenever they come home.

When we die, we can choose to go and be reborn. Or if we still have things to do, things to be seen to, we can stay, although not forever.

At first, I didn't want to go. But now I do. I feel myself dissolving, I feel myself drifting more and more, every day another bit of consciousness leaves me and I am less and less myself. If

I don't go, if I don't walk into the new life that has been chosen for me, I'll just disappear. It will be painful to go into the new life, because I'll have to forget all about them. James and my children and grandchildren, and all my friends, and everything I knew in this life. But I must go.

The one thing that really keeps me here is Jamie.

He's lost. I watch him and fear seeps even into this peace I feel in death. I suppose not even eternity can stop a mother from worrying. I'm worried sick that he'll keep freezing up until it's too late and he can never come back. Maisie keeps him going but not much else. He speaks to people but he doesn't say anything. He smiles and functions through his days and ends them with a glass in his hand, and another, and another. He seems to thaw a little when he's with Maisie, but she'll grow and build a family of her own, and Jamie will be one of those men you see in pubs up here, a whisky in their hand, not wanting to go home to a cold, empty house.

He has shut the world out.

My lovely son, who has so much to give. I am determined I will not go until I've helped him.

One night I was sitting on the rocks, listening to the water lapping at the shore, when something startled me. A wave of sadness washed over me, like a shiver, from my forehead to my spine. It was as if I'd been looking out to sea and suddenly saw a distress signal, cutting the sky in a burning arc.

As a ghost, there are a million souls floating in mine, a million voices whispering their thoughts, their memories. That voice, I knew.

It was Eilidh, the granddaughter of my childhood friend Flora McCrimmon, crying out her sorrow in her sleep. But she wasn't calling me, she was calling Flora.

Flora couldn't hear her – she had rejoined the sea of souls and she's not Flora anymore. But I could hear her, and I would *listen*.

I closed my eyes and called her.

I called and called, picturing the child that Eilidh used to be, the sweet girl with thoughtful eyes, so different from her brazen sister Katrina. Kind Eilidh . . .

Walking home from school in her blue uniform . . .

Dancing at the village ceilidhs, her brown hair flowing . . .

Eilidh on the swings . . .

Eilidh helping in Flora's shop, in her little maroon apron . . .

Sitting on the stone wall at the edge of the play park, daydreaming . . .

Sitting in our kitchen, chatting to me as I baked, Jamie coming in from fishing and them exchanging a few awkward words, the way children do when they are nearly teenagers and don't see each other with the same eyes anymore.

Memories of Eilidh kept flooding back as I called her, trying to seep into her dreams. I finally found her consciousness amid the million minds that floated in mine and stepped into it.

I recoiled. Such pain and sadness, it broke my heart.

'Come home, Eilidh, come home child . . . Come to Glen Avich . . .' I repeated over and over and over again.

I'm not sure she heard me. I hope so because she needs to come home.

And maybe, just maybe, she could be the answer to my prayers.

I'd never been much of a matchmaker when I was alive, I never meddled in other people's business, I was always too reserved, too quiet for that. Flora and Peggy, out of all the women of my generation, were the born matchmakers.

However, here I am now, trying to set my son up. Life can be surprising. And as I'm finding out, death can be quite surprising too.

'A courageous debut novel, full of integrity and heart.'

Cynthia Rogerson

Eilidh Lawson's life is in crisis. Years of failed fertility treatments, a cheating husband and an oppressive family have pushed her to the limits. At the end of her tether, she runs away to the one place she thinks she can find solace – her childhood home in the Highlands.

There, as she struggles to mend her broken life, she reconnects with her childhood friend Jamie McAnena, who is trying to raise his daughter Maisie alone. After Maisie's mother left to pursue a career in London and Jamie's own mother, Elizabeth, passed away, he has resigned himself to being a family of two.

But sometimes there is more to a story than meets the eye. Despite their reluctance, curious circumstances keep bringing Jamie and Eilidh together. For even when it seems all is lost, help can come from the most extraordinary places.

An ethereal and beautifully written debut novel, *Watch Over Me* is a poignant story about letting go and moving on – with a little help from beyond the grave.



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