

Chapter 1

23rd September 1993 – Late Afternoon

The words on the gravestone were simple and concise:

Fiona Mary Wilder - nee Mackinnon
Born 10.03.53 Died 17.09.93
Mother of Hazel and Kathryn
Wife of David

They told little of the subject herself however, giving no hint to her character, her painful illness or her willpower. Any stranger, any visitor-of-graveyards would perhaps comment on her age, or the sparsely worded inscription but would then pass, judging the lettering on the different granite headstones or the flowers on view. They were unaware that the ordinary grey slab had been worded by the subject herself in the months before she died. It merely stood there, proclaiming death where there had once been life, its gleaming surface signalling its recent arrival.

Kate Wilder, stooping to fill a jug with water from the tap by the gate, noticed just such a group of observers pause by her mother's stone. She straightened immediately, resentment raising the fine hairs on her arms. She wanted to scream at them to take their half-interest elsewhere, that if they were not here to grieve then to get the hell away. She almost did, but the atmosphere in this place was too reverent to be shattered by anything so harsh. Even the rising wind seemed to be stilled inside these gates and the Ben in the distance would not have approved. Instead, Kate gathered her roses and water and marched over to where the people murmured and pointed.

At her approach, a woman in glasses and raincoat turned to acknowledge her, but had no time to utter a word before Kate had brushed past her and picked her way through the already wilting wreaths to the flower vase. She said nothing as she snipped and arranged the roses, but her arrival caused embarrassed coughs and shuffling amongst the company. They had all but drifted away when Kate faced them.

"If you're interested," she began quite calmly, "She was my mother. This stone tells you nothing much except her age and her name but she was the most amazing person. Funny, really pretty and I can't believeWell, if you'd known her, you would know why there are so many wreaths." Red-faced now, Kate

hastily gathered the discarded rose stems and tapped the headstone with her scissors. "I'm the Kathryn, by the way."

As she strode off, staring straight ahead, one of the silenced group hurried after her. It was Mrs Thomson, the wife of the undertaker. She put her hand on Kate's shoulder.

"Wait, Kate," she implored.

At the mention of her name, Kate stopped and looked at the woman.

"Oh, it's you, Mrs Thomson," she breathed, recognising the face behind the glasses for the first time. "I thought you were all strangers coming to gawp. Sorry."

"No, let *me* apologise," Mrs Thomson extended her arm around Kate's shoulder. "If I'd known you were coming again today, we would never have walked this way." She gestured back towards the group, who were now huddled sheepishly together, the sea restless and grey behind them. "My cousin and family are over for the weekend, we were just out for a stroll, and the view across the bay is so nice. But we'll leave you now. Don't let us stop you... you know. I'm sorry."

As Mrs Thomson walked back down the gravel path, Kate let out a laboured sigh and realised that, her show of bravado over, she had begun to shiver inside her fleecy jacket. She no longer even had the ability to return to the graveside for her daily chat with her mother and although her outburst had been a release of some tension, she had not benefitted from it at all. She merely felt cold and on the brink of more tears, and with these feelings came the leaden realisation that this would always be the case. She could communicate with people, talk, argue, shout, but when it was over, her mother would still be missing. Her heart would once again lurch downwards, and it was beginning to feel at home in that place. Inevitably, it would settle there.

Unlocking her bike from the cemetery's iron gates, she struggled with the unfairness of inevitability. In Kate's experience, if something was inevitable, it was usually negative and unjust. No choice, no ability to fight, 'nothing you can do' – inevitable. She could think of no example when the word meant anything other than something to be dreaded and feared. But she didn't want to be stuck here, didn't want to be governed by these circumstances. She shook her head to stop herself going any deeper into this area and clenched her hands around the handlebars. She would take control of this. She would *demand* that she be given some choices in life. Surely she was old enough now to qualify for that privilege?

Kate was almost glad that the cycle home would be a chore in the keen breeze. She could fight her present injustices by gritting her teeth and forcing her legs to pump faster and harder, putting the steep rises behind her and freewheeling down to the village, through the now buffeting rain. Indeed, the three miles or so to Camastianavaig did seem shorter than normal although that may have been due to the satisfaction she had gained from screaming obscenities at the top of her voice. The recipient had been a passing tourist bus who had caused her to wobble and swerve as it misjudged the width of the road, and for

once she had been exhilarated as she tried to match its speed in retaliation. However, by the time she was wheeling her bike up the path to the cottage, her looks were blacker than the western sky. Yet the place was welcoming. The lamp shone in the far bedroom and Beth was at the kitchen window. She lifted her hand to Kate as she stacked a wet plate on the drainer. Kate managed a vague smile in return.

"You should have had a coat on, pet," began Beth, before Kate had even crossed the threshold, "There's a real chill in that wind... oh, and you're soaked!"

"I know," mumbled Kate, rubbing her hands over the gas heater, shaking the worst drops of water from her hair. "And the light's starting to go already."

As Kate pulled a chair nearer to the heater, Beth filled the kettle and switched it on. She glanced at her niece, who had laid her head on her folded arms across the table, and sighed. The funeral had been two days previously but Kate seemed even more out of sorts. She was lethargic, yet restless and seemed only interested in either visiting Fiona or sleeping. Beth could not find fault with her, however. They had all known Fiona was dying and the only remaining mystery was the actual date. Now that it was past, there was no focus, no point to anything.

"Where's Hazel?" muttered Kate into her arms.

"Stuart has taken her to Portree."

"Och, they could have given me a lift!" There was a moment's silence and then Kate sat up, blinking. "You don't think they're buying a ring, do you?" Her voice was suspicious, not excited.

"Good God, no," laughed Beth, and then turned to Kate, frowning. "At least, I hope not. Do you know something I don't? But that's ridiculous. And yet, just the kind of thing Stu would do to try and cheer her up. But never! If she thinks she could be happy settling - "

"Beth, I haven't a clue why they've gone. I just don't see the attraction of Portree on a filthy day. There must be something going on."

Beth's brow creased even deeper. This concern for her nieces' welfare was not new. She had shared the girls' lives since Fiona had returned from Canada, white-faced, pregnant and with Hazel clasped to her hip, more than seventeen years previously. Beth had cried at Kate's birth, had nursed both youngsters through chicken pox and was an endless source of advice on how the mind of a teenage boy might work. The emotion and stress of the last few months had blown them apart, and then almost instantly seared them back together. Now they were a closed unit. Three raw, grieving females under one roof, daring God to throw something else their way. He had not disappointed them.

Kate pushed her chair away from the table and leaned back in it. Passively, she looked around the room. "So. Where's everybody's favourite Canadian, then?"

At once, Beth was agitated.

"Sshh! He's next door," she shushed, her eyes flashing a warning. "And I'm not in the mood for a confrontation. Not today. Haze and I are perfectly aware of

how you feel, but if it's on your mind so much, its time you talked to him about it."

Kate leapt out of her chair. "On my *mind* so much? How can it *not* be on my mind?"

"Talk to him, Kate. Hazel's made the effort, why can't you?"

"Because I don't think he should be here!" Kate hissed. "I shouldn't have to see him. I didn't ask him to come." Pause. "And if you want my opinion, the whole thing is a completely insane situation."

Beth, wiping dishes vigorously with a checked cloth, seemed on the point of arguing, then her face cleared.

"Fair enough. Cup of tea?"

Breathing heavily, Kate reached for two mugs on her way to the kettle. "I'll do it."

"I think we could all do with a cup, don't you?" said Beth, pointedly, handing Kate a third mug.

Scowling, Kate took it. She absently dropped a tea-bag in each of the mugs, her neck already beginning to prickle with anxiety. Beth poked her shoulder with a teaspoon. "Maybe he'd prefer a coffee?"

Kate looked steadily at Beth, wondering how far she would push it. The slate-grey eyes regarded the older, bluer pair, neither gaze wavering. Slowly, Beth folded her arms. Kate, not renowned for her meekness, now gritted her teeth and headed towards the door. It was a shallow victory however, and rather than smile, Beth simply sighed and rubbed her neck.

The corridor between the kitchen and sitting room was cool and comforting but Kate would rather have been anywhere else in the world at that moment. The rooms of the one-storey cottage had been built around this space, and so the long passageway boasted no natural light, but as the doors were only ever closed at night, it had never caused a problem. Kate now leaned against the wall, hidden from view, frustration rising to choke her. Why was he in their house? Why, when everyone was at their most vulnerable? She listened, but there was no sound from the sitting room. She could sense him there, however, and tried to prepare herself for what the sight of him would do to her. It always followed the same pattern. His eyes on her, partly wary, partly apologetic but always anxious would set her jaw and twist her stomach. Her feelings were a brew of extremes. Amid the annoyance and hostility which years of his 'neglect' had caused, curiosity and wonder would surface against her will. She wanted to harbour zero feelings for this man because he was nothing to her and this would be infinitely easier if he was not here. After a moment, Kate realised that he would have heard the kitchen door open and was probably waiting for someone to make an appearance. Silently cursing her own stupidity, Kate walked boldly into the room.

David Wilder was perched on the arm of a chair, silhouetted against the window's autumn light. His long, lean body was completely motionless and he appeared to be studying a well-thumbed photo album, although there was scarcely

enough light to do so. Another number of albums lay scattered around. Kate faltered as the silence and dimness engulfed her, but was almost instantly defensive. Had he asked if he could look at those? She flicked on the ceiling light and made one determined step towards him, but was halted once again as David's head snapped up, startled from his stupor. Kate, for once, had no idea what to say.

His face was as pale as bleached bone but this alone did not cause the shuddering shock within Kate. It was the bleak agony in his eyes. His pupils were so black that she could see no life in them and he seemed frozen in position by her scrutiny of him. Kate hesitated, looked away, and then felt her shoulders sink as the familiar heaviness descended. Oddly, David did not try to engage her in conversation, but placed the album respectfully on the floor and stood with his back to her, staring out at the discontented sky.

She watched him scratch his wrist then fold his arms, his head dipped slightly forward into his chest. Still, he said nothing, didn't even clear his throat. Kate suddenly felt exhausted. This was too much. At seventeen she shouldn't have to cope with this. This tall, strong, living being, who should have been her whole world up to this point, was a total stranger to her and he was standing in her home, making her feel very uncomfortable. Yet, he too seemed to be grieving for all those years; she had just seen it in his expression. Maybe it was a bond of some sort and yet Kate could not conceive that this outsider had once been connected to any of them.

Carefully, Kate picked up the albums and stacked them neatly on the coffee table. She plumped one of the cushions on the sofa, switched on the standard lamp and turned off the harsh ceiling light. Finally, she wandered over to the window where David had made his retreat, and stood as near to him as she could bear to. He took one small step away from her, possibly not wanting to intimidate her with his height, but there could have been a multitude of reasons behind the action. Kate was unaffected by it anyway.

From the window, they watched the bluish-purple clouds begin their journey across the bay. The sea was now undeniably choppy in appearance and the rain marched across their view, turning it to a blurry dusk. Stormy, thought Kate. When David finally turned to face her, Kate absently brushed a straying cobweb from the window pane and shook it from her sleeve. As it floated to the floor, some of it landed on the arm of his jumper. Her objective complete, she took a breath and stared straight back up at him. His face was now hopeful, which caused another twinge of annoyance.

"I don't know you," Kate explained, her tone sufficient to alter David's expression. "You're a visitor in this house, that's all." Pause. "So, would you like a cup of something? Beth's put the kettle on."

David watched Kate as she spoke. Even after three days in her company, he was still catching his breath at the similarities between the girl and Fiona. Facially, there was a certain resemblance, but Kate's heavy eyebrows and angular chin gave her a permanently solemn look which he could barely associate with

the laughing, bubbling power-pack of energy he had married. Kate's eyes were more grey than blue, but the small hands and feet which turned in slightly, were all Fiona. The lilting voice, which barely rose above a quiet monotone in his company, but was strong and melodic when speaking to Hazel or Beth, had stirred countless memories. Now he was aware of something more. In this, their first actual conversation, he realised how disturbingly little she thought of him.

"Well?"

David cleared his throat. "No. Thanks anyway, Kathryn."

Immediately, Kate turned away from the window. David closed his eyes in despair as she marched from the room, but snapped them open as she spoke from the corridor.

"It's *Kate*, by the way."

Alone, David leaned his face against the glass, unable to ignore the accusation in her last remark. He felt completely disorientated, staring out at the spectacular but unfamiliar, acutely aware that the last time he had surveyed this landscape his wife had been at this side.

"God, Fiona. What made you think I could do it?" he whispered.

* * * *

"All I said was that I didn't get it. Don't go all moody on me, Haze."

"Then just shut up about it," snapped Hazel, facing Stuart's growing irritation. "Let's go for a coffee, I'm frozen."

Slipping her arm through his, Hazel steered her reluctant boyfriend in the direction of the nearest cafe. The evening was rapidly becoming less than pleasant, and not what Hazel had planned. It had started fairly well, with an afternoon walk round Scorrybreac, dodging the last of the summer tourists and enjoying the relatively warm weather; a break from the surreal atmosphere of the house. Now it had begun to pour, the streets emptying rapidly as the light disappeared and the wind rendered umbrellas useless, and Stuart kept asking the most ridiculous questions, to which she had not one answer.

Nicolson's Coffee Shop was overwhelmingly stuffy, full of steaming, sheltering couples and the odd whingeing child. As Hazel fought her way to a window seat, Stuart ordered two coffees and tried to decide which cake would cheer her up the most. She had become a bit of a mystery to him lately, and he was not afraid to admit that this whole bereavement thing was beyond him. He had thought the world of Fiona but had decided to ignore his own grief in favour of healing Hazel. Instead, he seemed continually to get on her nerves.

Hazel drew a five-pointed star in some spilled sugar, tried to transform it into a three-dimensional version of itself, and then failed to wipe it up with a napkin, cursing how sticky it had made her fingers. She watched Stuart edge his way carefully through the occupied chairs with a tray of two mugs and a plate of cakes.

"I didn't know what you fancied, so I brought two of three different kinds."

Hazel stared at the plate, starting to shake with suppressed laughter. She put her hand over the mouth, and then let out a shriek of mirth which caused many a turned head and the odd drop of spilled tea.

“Wha-at?” Stuart grinned uncertainly.

“You,” giggled Hazel, rescuing the tray from his hands. “I suddenly saw you in a cap and frilly apron. Quite suited you actually.”

“Well, I’m glad I can still make you laugh. I wondered ifsorry.”

“Och, it’s alright, Stuey,” sighed Hazel, inspecting the cakes on offer. “I know I’ve been a complete pain.” Pause. “But believe me, I’ve been a pure pleasure compared with Kate. Horrendous.”

“Tell me more,” said Stuart, sipping his coffee.

Hazel shook her head in despair and tried to convey what the past few days had been like. The periods of united grief interspersed with hours of avoiding issues and the occasional barbed comment, usually directed at David. Then there was Kate’s sporadic refusal to even acknowledge their Dad’s existence. But Hazel was caught in a trap. This man fascinated her.

Each night she lay awake, trying to separate actual recollections from those of her imagination. He was so familiar and yet, surely she could not remember him? Fiona had brought her home from Canada when she was barely three and she could not picture the place or anyone who lived there. Yet she *knew* David Wilder. When they had stood in the graveyard, heads bent as Fiona was laid to rest, Hazel had edged closer to his tall frame. It had been an instinctive movement and she had become light-headed, as his presence had been so absurdly familiar. It had caused her to sway a little and his hand on her shoulder had not felt out of place. She had leaned against him without giving it a lot of thought.

“She’s not giving him a chance,” sighed Hazel.

“Well,” replied Stuart, gently spraying sponge crumbs across the table, and causing Hazel to smile, “I don’t really blame her for that. It’s not like she ever met the man. You at least had a few years with him.”

“Yeah, but I can’t remember much. I don’t really know him at all.”

Except that she *did*. However, these were not feelings that Hazel was about to discuss with Stuart. She hoped that she would address them some day with the person concerned. But for now, she wanted to cherish them a bit longer, maybe try and make a bit of sense out of them.

“What do you think of him, Stu?”

Stuart’s face fell as he laid down his cup. It was one thing to try and cheer Hazel up, to take her out of the house and ply her with pieces of millionaire shortbread. But to express opinions on her father, when he could turn out to be the best or worst thing that ever happened to her, was a game even he found too dangerous to play. His hesitation and startled expression made Hazel lean back in her chair. She released his hand from hers.

“It’s alright,” Hazel said softly. “I’ll ask you when you know him better. Come on, it’s getting late.”

Chapter 2

17th September 1993 - Six Days Earlier

Kate's eyelids started to droop. Every few seconds she had to actively will them to stay open. For mid-September on Skye, it was a sticky afternoon and even the prospect of double English, her favourite subject, could not prevent Kate from adopting the recently familiar position of head on folded arms. Her stomach was in permanent spasm, she could not remember the last time that food had held any interest and there was a density brewing in her head which she knew would not leave her that day. For a moment or two, she watched chalk dust rise from where Mr Ellis had dropped the board cleaner, before she gave up the fight and allowed her eyes to close.

Within seconds she was winging her way through a multi-coloured universe. Vivid blue and bright green clouds bombarded her vision, before plunging her into a sea of pink, prawn-like creatures. Mr Ellis' voice was a comfortable accompaniment to this fantastic journey and occasionally the words he spoke would appear superimposed on the pink ocean. She felt herself physically relax. It was her last conscious movement.

Kate stood at the edge of a sea of blue crystal. It was calm, completely flat and there appeared to be only two layers of colour before her, the sky a paler version of the water. She dipped her toe into the liquid and was surprised at how warm it felt, so warm that it began to creep up her skin like the sun's rays and it seemed the most natural thing to simply throw her body forwards. She wanted to be engulfed by that warmth and float in its embryonic fluid. Still, she hesitated.

"Go on, Katy."

Kate turned to see her mother – young, glowing, healthy – waving at her from her seat on a sandy dune. She wore a floral dress and her hair was waist-length, the dark strands being picked and up distributed by the breeze.

"Go on, you'll love it!"

She took a step forward and sank into the water's embrace. It lapped at Kate's chin and was an altogether becalming and peaceful sensation. The sunshine was angelic on her face and it did not sting nor blind; her legs were weightless, blending with the water around them. She raised her hand to where Fiona had been, but her mother was no longer seated or alone. Fear tightened around Kate's throat. A dark-haired, clear-eyed man was standing beside Fiona. They stood perfectly still in a formal pose, both grinning at Kate. Fiona held flowers, the man wore a suit. They looked like black and white cardboard cut-outs.

“Mum!” yelled Kate, choking on the tepid, salty water. The figures on the shore were frozen to the spot. They grinned on.

“Mum?”

Now Kate’s legs felt heavy, the water she trod in as thick and as black as oil. Desperately, she kicked towards the shore, but made no progress. As she forced her arms and legs to plough through the thickening sludge, she saw the two-dimensional couple sway in the breeze. She couldn’t reach them and they were going to topple. They would fall into the water and disintegrate unless she could reach them and prevent it. She couldn’t quite...

“Kate?”

Kate was on her feet in a moment, sending her chair careering backwards. Temporarily blinded by the brightness of the room, she gradually became aware of many pairs of eyes on her. Mr Ellis stood beside her desk. Gently he laid his hand on her shoulder and spoke quietly.

“Easy now. Are you okay?”

Kate could feel her heart racing and the blood swishing in her ears. Her face hot with shame, she bent to pick up her chair.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, unable to look at anyone. “My head hurts.”

The class watched with varied interest as Kate sat down, but remained upright in her seat. Somewhere a boy sniggered. She wiped her damp brow but could not raise her eyes from her desk. There was not one person in the High School who was unaware of her personal circumstances and if she saw one more sympathetic look, she thought she might actually throw her chair through the window.

“Take it easy,” Mr Ellis repeated, then made his way back to the front of the class. “Graeme, open that window. The rest of you, back to it.”

Kate forced herself to breathe slowly and deeply, which helped, but she remained mortified. It was not the fact that she had fallen asleep, but rather that she had done it in Mr Ellis’ class. He was one of the few teachers she respected and really worked for. Now, without a doubt, she had offended him. Miserably, she flicked through her textbook to the appropriate page and tried to concentrate on the black print before her. The heat was intolerable. Her classmates coughed and shuffled and she was aware of their occasional glances. But when at last Kate raised her head, it was to look, sheepishly, at her teacher. Mr Ellis, without wavering from the point he was making, winked quickly at her. Everything was fine.

“So, Catriona, question one. I’d rather hear your thoughts on it than watch you chew that ruler.”

The lesson crept on, Kate trying to lose herself in the comprehension task. She was grateful for the challenge, it would see her through to the end of another day, but as she dotted her last ‘i’, all she really wanted was for someone to sprinkle a watering-can’s worth of cool water over her head. She tried to imagine the rivulets running down her temples and easing the pain there, how her scalp

would eventually stop throbbing. She wondered if she would actually steam in the process.

There was a knock on the open door. As Mr Ellis, frowning, left the room, the murmuring and sighing started automatically.

“Have you finished it, K?”

The question came from a chair to her right, where Shona Syme, continuing to scribble furiously, glanced in her direction.

“What?”

“Have you finished it yet? What d’you get for 3a?”

But Kate could not answer. She was holding her breath, staring at her own words before her, absolutely determined not to look in the direction of the doorway. If she merely sat here, following the loops and slashes that her pen had made in good faith, she would never have to acknowledge what was taking place. She could hear her teacher’s footsteps heading in her direction and for the first time ever, hated the man, simply for taking part in this scene. And there was her sister, eyes black and puffy, following his route to her desk. Kate felt herself slowly stand and watched as her own hands began to reload her pencil case with its scattered contents. Silently, she handed over her exercise book, noting his uncomfortable expression.

“I’ve finished it,” she croaked, hauling her ruck-sack onto her shoulder.

“That’s fine, Kate,” Mr Ellis assured. “I hope ... Well, we’ll see you when we see you.”

“Let’s go,” faltered Hazel, taking her sister by the arm. Mr Ellis stood back, unable to say more in front of a class of less than sensitive teenagers, and she was grateful for that. The second they were clear of the stifling room, however, Kate’s vision began to swim and she leaned against the corridor wall, clutching her eyes.

“Come on, Kate,” sobbed Hazel, her anxiety also suddenly brimming and spilling down her face. “We have to get there yet.”

Somehow they made it out to Hazel’s ancient Ford Fiesta, encountering only two concerned and knowing nods along the way. As they swung out of the car park and down to the main road junction, Kate saw a few faces staring out from classroom windows. Were they watching them, or were they simply longing for the bell to allow them out into the fresh air? Did it matter either way?

“So, this is it?”

“Everybody seems to think so,” sniffed Hazel, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. “There’s been a big change since this morning.”

Kate wound down her window, allowing the moving air to fan her face. This was not right. In her moments of preparation, her mother would die on a foggy November morning, with the lamps casting golden globes around her head and a fire crackling in the grate. Fiona’s sister and daughters would be holding hands, talking gently to each other, reminiscent of when Beth had succumbed in Little Women. It should not be happening on a day like this, when the already turning

leaves were blistering and rustling in the hazy heat. It should not be happening at all.

"Kenny phoned the shop," stated Hazel, crunching back into second gear as the road steepened and twisted. At twenty, she had been driving for over two years, but had never really excelled at it.

"What's Beth saying?"

"Well, Mum's been in and out of it all day, but now her breathing is the problem. I think" Hazel stopped until Kate looked in her direction. "I think she doesn't want us to miss the, you know, the chance - "

Kate suddenly flung her rucksack violently over onto the back seat, narrowly missing Hazel's head.

"What the hell?" cried Hazel, swerving in surprise.

"I-am-so-sick-of-this!" Kate punched out the words, beating time with her fist on the dashboard.

"What?" shouted Hazel. Then, "I mean, what *exactly*?"

"Everything!" growled Kate, holding her head which was pounding harder than ever. "This whole saying goodbye rubbish. Too many words! It's all crap. Get all the loose ends tied up, tell Mum for the thousandth time that we love her and that we will be fine, which we won't be. So actually, trying to pull the wool over her eyes, which is something we have never managed yet."

"She's hardly aware of anything," protested Hazel.

"I don't want to do it!"

"Okay, but maybe she does!" Hazel's voice now matched her sister's in volume. It caused Kate to pause for a second.

"Well, it's not right," she mumbled, after a moment. "We're not ready."

It was a meagre argument and Kate knew it. What she really wanted to say was 'Who's going to visit me in Edinburgh when I'm at University? Who's going to arrive, wide-eyed and smiling on the train and marvel at the way I've decorated my room? Who's going to whisper in my ear, while we're doing the dishes, that she thinks my boyfriend is gorgeous?'

"We haven't shared enough yet," Kate's voice had dulled considerably. "Oh, that's pathetic."

"No its not," replied Hazel, softly. And there the conversation stopped.

Kate leaned her elbow on the open window and cupped her chin in her hand. She watched the colours of the day blur past. Kate was a colour person, as her mother had been, and she always made use of what she saw, allowing it to alter her mood. When she was elated or excited, the scenery would provide a pleasant accompaniment to whatever was occurring, but when all optimism had left her, the shades and shapes became a welcome focus for her and she would study her surroundings with fresh eyes. On this Indian summer's day, the heat shimmered above the mossy, olive grasses and indigo larks hovered and swooped. The grey, single-track road wound its way ahead of them, Hazel bumping the car over every pothole and ridge on it. Kate now closed her eyes against the brilliance of it all,

wanting only to ease the pressure behind them. Her spinning thoughts settled on her sister for a moment.

Hazel was easy to love. Her face was never guarded or wary and she would talk to strangers in the same manner she addressed old acquaintances, a quality which Kate had sometimes envied, sometimes despaired of. She was perky and easy-going and friends sought her company; her job behind the counter at the baker's suited her sociable nature and Stuart worshipped her. She had seemed genuinely content with life, until the last few weeks, when rather than withdrawing into herself as Kate had done, she had allowed frustration at her own helplessness to drive her forward. She was the oldest child and so had a duty to perform.

As they began their steep descent down to the bay, Hazel's stomach clenched inside her. There were four cars abandoned in front of the cottage. It seemed to make the situation even more definite and unavoidable and she sensed Kate sit upright in her seat.

"It's alright, K," breathed Hazel. "After this, it will get better." This was her job now. To get herself, Beth and Kate through this. If she fell apart, then they all might, and yet she thought that maybe they had every right to do just that.

Fiona was forty years old. She had received the news of the cancer two weeks before her fortieth birthday and had kept it to herself until the celebrations were over. They had held a ceilidh in Portree and all her colleagues from the nursery, as well as Beth's friends from the fish farm had each been instructed to bring as many folk as they liked to it. Stuart and Hazel had spent the entire night trying to get Kate interested in his cousin, but she had spent most of her time watching the band, astounded by the sheer magnetism of the second accordion player. It had been a loud, raucous night and if anybody had noticed how much champagne Fiona had consumed without actually becoming incapacitated, then it was not remarked upon. Guests were still talking about the festivities a week later, when the news broke. Since that time, Fiona had rested only when she had been physically forced to.

Once the final set of tests had proved incontestable, she had positively decided against further treatment in order to concentrate her energies on her 'plan for the future'. Each of them had accepted her decision, because every minute was a precious minute, and it could not be squandered on argument or conflict. The period of time she had been given had appeared oddly acceptable as they had moved through the first numbed hours. Now, it felt as if they were hurtling towards a brick wall, accelerating each day. Hazel saw it as a wall rather than a precipice. There would be no sense of falling when the time came, there would simply be a hard, immovable smack and then nothing. She refused to think about what her mother might be feeling. She could not bear the thought of Fiona being scared, even though she had given no indication that this was the case. But the idea of suffering pain whilst having to walk towards the unknown filled Hazel with iced terror. Something in all of this had managed to keep Fiona sane.

By the time afternoon had crawled into evening, cooler but still bright, Fiona was gone. Kate and Hazel had sat by her bed, dry-eyed for everybody's sake, while Beth had fussed and hovered, coping in her own way. This had included dusting the many photographs on Fiona's dresser and continually rearranging the furniture as officials came and went. Dr Simpson had seemed almost embarrassed to be hanging about, 'intruding' as he had the grace to call it. But he and Jen, the Macmillan nurse, had been such regular visitors in the past week that nobody thought it at all awkward.

When it was over, Kate unfolded her stiff body from her chair and escaped to the bathroom. Locking the door behind her, she perched on the edge of the bath and watched the dust particles dance in the low sunlight. The bathroom was yellow; too yellow. Why would anybody want a pale yellow suite, yellow and orange tiles and bright citrus walls? Didn't they know that even in dying sunlight, it could seriously sting a person's eyes? And when you felt sick to the stomach, all it did was remind you of lemon meringue pie, or thick cloying custard. Kate now recalled the week Fiona had taken off work to decorate the room.

"All hands on deck, mind!" she had cried, depositing tins, brushes and a box of tiles on the kitchen table. "And I don't want any complaints about the choice of colours either, sister. That bath will have to stay and when a room only gets the sun in the evening, I want it bright, bright, *bright!* Are you listening, Beth?"

At twelve and fifteen, the girls had found the painting quite enjoyable, although Beth had designated herself as refreshment provider only. The smell of paint made her dizzy. But Fiona had tiled and stencilled, sewn curtains and hunted the island for a set of deep peach towels, which in the end had arrived by mail order. The finished room had certainly screamed Fiona's personality at all who visited and was at least one contemporary spot in the dated surroundings. They had all loved it. But now, the colours and shades seemed to jar with each other and were just too much. As one salty, hot tear rolled down Kate's nose, she couldn't even begin to compare the young woman who had cheerfully broken four tiles before successfully fitting one, with the cold, wasted creature in the next room.

There was a timid knock at the door.

"Kate? I need a paracetamol. Can you open up?"

It was Hazel. She sounded calm, even composed, but on opening the door, Kate saw that she looked dreadful. Her eyelids remained swollen, the delicate skin stretched and shiny, and pale purple semi-circles had appeared beneath her eyes. She walked straight up to Kate and held open her arms. They stood, silently holding each other upright, both wondering at their continued ability to do so.

"Oh, God," Hazel murmured into Kate's hair, "What do we do without her?"

There really was no answer and instead, Kate settled her head sideways on her sister's shoulder and stared at the shadows on the wall. The shapes sharpened and then blurred as the sun allowed clouds to pass over it unchecked and finally there was a peace to be found in that riotous room. Their bodies shared the warmth of the embrace as only two people who had grown up together could do.

No words, no explanations were necessary, just a mutual need for contact. Kate felt Hazel tense as she sniffed and then moaned, "My head really hurts."

As she began to rummage in the cupboard below the sink, Kate resumed her bath-edge seat and frowned.

"What?" asked Hazel, sensing Kate's expression rather than seeing it.

"I didn't get half of what she said," replied Kate, hopelessly. "Did you understand any of it?"

Hazel shrugged. "What I could hear didn't make much sense. It seemed to be mostly for Beth anyway."

Kate nodded. Every time Fiona had spoken, it had exhausted her, but she refused to stop trying. It had resulted in short bursts of individual words, followed by lengthier periods of laboured sleep and nobody knew when the last communication would be. They did not know, even now, if she had said all she needed to, if she was finally at peace with how she had left things. They would never know and there was a danger it may drive them mad wondering. But something else was irritating Kate, cutting its way through the icy numbness to her brain. As she gnawed at her fingernails, Kate knew she would have to start this particular conversation.

"She definitely said his name," Kate's voice was very low. "More than once."

Hazel's shoulders dropped and as she studied Kate's face, she began to nod slowly.

"I know. What do you think it meant?"