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Written by Santa Montefiore

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Secrets of the Lighthouse



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Prologue

It is autumn and yet it feels more like summer. The sun is bright and warm, the sky a translucent, flawless blue. Ringed plovers and little terns cavort on the sand and bees search for nectar in the purple bell heather, for the frosts are yet to come and the rays are still hot on their backs. Hares seek cover in the long grasses, and butterflies, hatched in the unseasonal weather, flutter about the gorse in search of food. Only the shadows are longer now and the nights close in early, damp and cold and dark.

I stand on the cliff and gaze out across the ocean to the end of the earth, where the water dissolves into the sky and eternity is veiled in a mysterious blue mist. The breeze is as soft as a whisper and there is something timeless about the way it blows, as if it is the very breath of God calling me home. I can see the sweeping Connemara coastline to my left and right. The deserted beaches, the soft velvet fields dotted with sheep, the rugged rocks where the land crumbles into the sea. I look ahead to Carnbrey Island, the small mound of earth and rock that sits about half a mile out, like an abandoned pirate ship from long ago. The old lighthouse is charred from the fire that gutted it, leaving a forlorn white shell where once it stood proud and strong, guiding sailors safely back to land. Only

seagulls venture there these days to pick at the remains of unfortunate crabs and shrimps trapped in rock pools, and to perch on the fragile skeleton of burnt timber that creaks and moans eerily in the wind. To me it's romantic in its desolation and I remain transfixed, remembering wistfully the first time I rowed out to explore soon after we were married. It was a ruin even then, but just as I had hoped the lighthouse possessed a surprising warmth, like a children's playhouse that still resonates with the laughter of their games long after the children have packed up and gone. I remained captive in fantasy, oblivious as the wind picked up about me and the sea grew rough and perilous. When the skies darkened and I decided to row back to shore, I found myself stranded like a shipwrecked sailor. But shipwrecked sailors don't have heroic husbands to rescue them in gleaming speedboats, as I had. I remember Conor's furious face and the fear in his eyes. I still feel the frisson of excitement his concern gave me, even now. 'I told you never to row out here on your own,' he growled, but his voice had a break in it that pulled at my heart. I pressed my lips to his and tasted the sweet flavour of his love. The lighthouse never lost its allure and, to my cost, I never lost my fascination for that lonely and romantic place. It resonated with the lonely and romantic person that I was.

Now it beckons me across the waves with a light that only I can see and I'm almost sure that I can make out the figure of a child in white, running up the grass with outstretched arms; but then I've always had a fanciful imagination. It could just be a large seagull, swooping low.

I turn suddenly, my attention diverted by the people now arriving at the grey stone chapel behind me. It is a short walk up the hill from the car park and I watch with curiosity the mourners dressed in black, making their way up the path like

a solemn line of moorhens. Our home is situated outside the village of Ballymaldoon, which boasts a much bigger church. But there is something special about this weather-worn little chapel, surrounded by ancient gravestones and shrouded in myth, which has always enthralled me. Legend says that it was built in the fourteenth century by a young sailor for his deceased wife, so that she could keep watch over him while he went to sea, but the headstones have all been eroded by the elements so that it's impossible to read what was once carved into them. I like to think that the gravestone at the far end, closest to the sea, is the one that contains the remains of the sailor's wife. Of course she's not in there and never was: just her bones, discarded along with the clothes she no longer needed. But it's a sweet story and I've often wondered what happened to the disconsolate sailor. He must have loved her very dearly to build an entire church in her memory. Will Conor build a church for me?

The chapel fills with people but I keep my distance. I see my mother, pinched and weary like a scrawny black hen, beneath a wide black hat embellished with ostrich feathers – much too ostentatious for this small funeral, but she has always tried to look grander than she is – and my father who walks beside her, tall and dignified in an appropriate black suit. He is only sixty-five but regret has turned his hair white and caused him to stoop slightly, making him look older. They have travelled up from Galway. The last time they made this journey was the year Conor and I married, but that time they were pleased to be getting rid of me. None of my six sisters have come. But I am not surprised: I was always the black sheep and it is too late now to make amends.

My parents disappear into the chapel to take their places among the congregation of locals and I wonder whether they

feel shame in the glare of the people's love: for I am loved here. Even the one man I was sure would not attend is sitting quietly in his pew, hiding his secret behind a mask of stone. Tentatively, I step closer. The music draws me right up to the door as if it has arms that reach out and embrace me. It is an old Irish ballad I know well, for it is Conor's favourite: 'When Irish eyes are smiling'. And I smile sadly at the memory of those helicopter journeys from Dublin to Connemara when we'd all sing it loudly together over the rumble of the propellers, our two small children with their big earphones on their heads, trying to join in but unable to get their tongues around the words.

Just then, as I seek refuge in the past, I am wrenched back into the present where the tall, shaggy-haired figure of my husband is making his way up the path. Three-year-old Finbar and five-year-old Ida hold his hands tightly, their small feet stumbling occasionally as they struggle to keep up with his long strides. His dark eyes are fixed on the chapel, his long, handsome face set into a grimace as if he is already fighting the accusations muttered against him behind hands and pews. The children look bewildered. They don't understand. How could they?

Then Finbar notices a black-backed gull on the path ahead and suddenly drops his father's hand to chase it. The little boy flaps his arms and makes a whooshing noise to scare it away, but the bird just hops casually over the grass, careful to maintain a safe distance. Ida says something to her father, but Conor doesn't hear. He just keeps his eyes focused on the chapel in front. For a moment I think he sees me. He is looking directly at me. My heart gives a little leap. With every fibre of my being I want to run to him. I want him to enfold me in his arms like he always used to. I long for his touch as life

longs for love. But his expression doesn't change and I retreat back into the shadows. He sees only bricks and stone and his own desolation.

The desire to gather my children against my breast propels me into hell and I realize then what hell is. Not a land of fire and torture in the centre of the planet, but a land of fire and torture in the centre of one's soul. My longing is constant and unbearable. I am unable to kiss their sweet brows and brush my lips against their skin and whisper my love into their ears. I am certain their little hearts would be lifted to know that I am close. And yet, I cannot. I am imprisoned here and can only watch helplessly as they walk on past me into the chapel, followed by the coffin and its six solemn bearers. The coffin, which contains within its oak walls the greatest lie.

I remain outside a while longer. Singing resounds from inside the chapel. The scent of lilies is carried on the breeze. I can hear the shrill voice of Conor's eccentric mother, Daphne, who sings louder than everyone else, but I don't feel a mocking sense of amusement as I usually would: only a rising fury, boiling up from the bottom of my belly because she is there to pick up the pieces and nurse her son's broken heart, not I. I think of Finbar and Ida and the coffin that rests in front of them, and wonder what they are feeling as they face death for the first time in their young lives.

I have to find a way to tell them. There must be *something* I can do to tell them the truth.

I gather my courage like a warrior gathering arms. I never dreamed this would be so hard. I thought, at this point, everything would be so much easier. But I have brought it upon myself so I will bear the pain bravely. It is my choice to be here, after all.

But now I am afraid. I step silently into the chapel. The

singing has stopped. Father Michael takes to the pulpit and speaks in a doleful monotone and I believe that he is truly sad and not just pretending. The congregation is still and attentive. I am distracted a moment by the enormous displays of tall-stemmed lilies on either side of the altar, like beautiful white trumpets lifting their muted lips to heaven. They vibrate with a higher energy that draws me to them and I have to muster all my will to resist their pull. I am like a thread of smoke being drawn to an open window. I focus on my intent and tread noiselessly over the stone floor towards the coffin. It is bathed in a pool of sunlight that streams in through the dusty windows, like spotlights on a stage. I was never the famous actress I once yearned to be. But my moment of glory has come at last. Everyone's eyes are upon me. I am where I have longed to be all my life. I should revel in their devotion but I feel nothing but frustration and despair – and regret, it is true: I feel a terrible regret. For it is too late.

I turn and face the congregation. Then I scream as loudly as I can. My voice reverberates around the chapel, bouncing off the ancient walls and ceiling, but only the birds outside hear my cry and take to the skies in panic. Conor's eyes rest steadily on the coffin, his face contorted with pain. Finbar and Ida sit between their father and Conor's mother, as still as wax-works, and I turn to the coffin wherein lies my death. My death, you understand, but not my life – for I am my life and I am eternal.

And yet no one knows the truth: that I stand before them as an actress who's taken her final bow and stepped off the stage. The cliché is true. My costume and mask lie in that coffin, mistaken for me, and my husband and children mourn me as if I have gone. How could they think I'd ever leave them? For all the riches of heaven I would never leave them.

My love keeps me here, for it is stronger than the strongest chain, and I realize now that love is everything – it is who we are; we just don't know it.

I approach my children and reach out my hand, but I'm made of a finer vibration, like light, and they feel nothing, not even the warmth of my love. I press my face against theirs, but they don't even sense that I am close, for I have no breath with which to brush their skin. They feel only their loss, and I cannot comfort them or wipe away their tears. As for *my* tears, they are shed inwardly, for I am a spirit, a ghost, a phantom, whatever you want to call me; I have no physical body, therefore I suffer my pain in my soul. In a rage I fling myself about the church, hoping for some reaction. I tear about like a maddened dog, but I am as a whisper and no one can hear me howl but the birds.

The strangest thing about dying is that it's not strange at all. One moment I was living, the next I was outside my body. It felt like the most natural thing in the world to be outside of myself, as if I had already done it a hundred times before, but forgotten. I was just surprised that it had happened so soon when I still had so much left to do. It didn't hurt nor did it frighten me. Not then, anyway. The pain was yet to come. What they say about the light and your loved ones who come down to escort you on is true. What they don't tell you is that you have a choice; and I chose to stay.

Father Michael clears his throat and sweeps his moist eyes over the grave faces of his congregation. 'Caitlin is with God now and at peace,' he says, and I attempt and fail to wrench the Bible from his hand and fling it to the floor. 'She leaves behind her husband Conor and their two young children Finbar and Ida, who she loved with a big and generous heart.' He looks directly at my children now and speaks with grand

authority. 'Although she is gone to Jesus she leaves a little of herself with them. The love they will carry in their hearts throughout their lives.' But I am more than that, I want to shout. I'm not a memory; I'm more real than you are. My love is stronger than ever and it is all I have left.

The service finishes and they file out to bury me in the churchyard. I'd like to be buried near the sailor's wife, but instead I am laid to rest beside the stone wall a little further down the hill. It's farcical to watch the coffin lowered into the ground while I sit on the grass nearby, and it would be quite funny, were it not so desperately sad. Conor tosses a white lily into the trench and my children throw down pictures they have drawn, then step back into their father's shadow and cower against his legs, pale-faced and tearful. I am weary from trying to get their attention. A gull hops towards me but I shoo him away, just for the pleasure of watching him react.

Time does not exist where I am. In fact, I realize now that time does not exist where you are, either. There is only ever now. Of course, on earth there is psychological time, so you can plan tomorrow and remember yesterday, but that only exists as thought; the reality is always now. So days, weeks, years mean nothing to me. There is only an eternal present from where I watch the disintegration of everything I love.

It is as if, with my death, the life has gone out of Ballymaldoon Castle, too. It is as if we have died together. I watch the men in big vans motor up the drive, beneath the burr oaks that crowd in over the road to create a tunnel of orange and red, their gossamer leaves falling off the branches and fluttering on the wind like moths. On either side a low, grey stone wall once hemmed in sheep, but there haven't been sheep here since Conor bought the castle and surrounding land almost twenty years ago, so now the fields are wild. I like

them that way. I watch the long grasses swaying in the breeze, and from a distance they look like waves on a strange green ocean. The lorries draw up in front of the castle where Cromwell's armies stood four hundred years ago to seize it for an officer, as a reward for his loyalty. Now the army of burly men is here to take the valuable paintings and furniture into storage, because Conor is boarding up the windows and bolting the doors and moving into a smaller house near the river. He has always been a solitary man; creative men often are, but now I watch him retreat even further into himself. He cannot live here without me because I breathed the life into this place and now I am dead.

I loved the castle from the very first moment I saw it, nestled here at the foot of the mountain like a smoky quartz. I imagined its imposing grey walls once scaled by princes come to rescue princesses imprisoned in the little tower rooms that rise above the turreted gables. I imagined how swans once glided across the lake and lovers lay on the banks in the evening sun to watch their courtship. I imagined the three Billy Goats Gruff trotting across the ancient stone bridge, unaware of the wicked troll lurking in the shadows beneath. I imagined the ghosts of knights and ladies haunting those long corridors carpeted in scarlet and never guessed that I would be one of them, imprisoned by the longing in my heart. I never dreamed I would die young.

I watch helplessly as most of the pieces I chose with such care are lifted and carried and piled high in the vans, supervised by our estate manager, Johnny Byrne, and his son Joe. It is as if they are dismembering me, piece by piece, and placing my limbs into coffins all over again; but this time I'm sure I can feel it. The George VI pollard-oak library table; the parcel-gilt mirror; the set of twenty George IV dining chairs

I bought at auction from Christie's. The marble busts, Chinese lamps, my maple writing desk. The ebony chests, the Victorian armchairs and sofas, the German jardinières; the Regency daybed, the Indian rugs: they take them all, leaving only the pieces of no worth. Then they lift down the paintings and prints, exposing pale squares on the denuded walls, and I cringe at how ungallant they are, as if these brawny men have robbed a lady of her clothes.

I fear they are about to remove the greatest prize of all: the portrait of myself that Conor commissioned a little after we were married, by the famous Irish painter, Darragh Kelly. It takes pride of place above the grand fireplace in the hall. I am wearing my favourite emerald-coloured evening dress, to match my eyes, and my red hair falls in shiny waves over my shoulders. I was beautiful, that is true. But beauty counts for nothing when it lies rotting in a casket six feet beneath the ground. I rest my eyes upon it, staring into the face that once belonged to me, but which is now gone forever. I want to weep for the woman I was, but I cannot. And there is no point tearing about the place as I did in the chapel, for no one will hear me but the other ghosts who surely lurk about this shadowy limbo as I do. I'm certain of it although I have not seen them yet. I would be glad of it, I think, because I am alone and lonely.

Yet they do not take it down. It is the only painting left in the castle. I cannot help but feel a surge of pride when the doors are bolted at last and I am left in peace to contemplate the earthly beauty I once was. It gives me comfort, that painting, as if it is a costume I can slip on to feel myself once more.

Conor and the children settle into Reedmace House, which is built down by the river, near the stone bridge where the

goats and troll of my imagination dwell, and Conor's mother, Daphne, moves in to look after them. I should be pleased the children have a kind and gentle grandmother, but I cannot help but feel jealous and resentful. She embraces them and kisses them in my place. She bathes them and brushes their teeth as I used to do. She reads them bedtime stories. I used to mimic the voices and bring the stories to life. But she reads plainly, without my flair, and I see the children grow bored and know they wish that she were me. I know they wish that she were me because they cry silently in their beds and stare at my photograph that Conor has hung on the wall in their bedroom. They don't know that I am beside them all the time. They don't know that I will be with them always – for as long as their lives may be.

And time passes. I don't know how long. Seasons come and go. The children get taller. Conor spends time in Dublin but there are no films to produce because he no longer has the will or the hunger. The empty castle grows cold as the rocks on the hills, and is battered by the winds and rain. I remain constant as the plants and trees, with no one to talk to but the birds. And then one night, in the middle of winter, Finbar sees me.

He is asleep, dreaming fitfully. I am sitting on the end of his bed as I do every night, watching his breath cause his body to rise and fall in a gentle, rhythmic motion. But tonight he is restless. I know he is dreaming of me. 'It's all right, my love,' I say, as I have said so often, silently, from my other world. 'I'm here. I'm always here. Right beside you.' The little boy sits up and stares at me in amazement. He stares right at me. Not through me but at me. I'm certain of it because his eyes take in my hair, my nose, my lips, my body. Wide with astonishment they drink me in and I am as astonished as he.

'Mam?' he whispers.

'Darling boy,' I reply.

'Is it you?'

'It's me.'

'But you're not dead.'

I smile the smile of someone with a beautiful secret. 'No, Finbar. I'm not dead. There is no death. I promise you that.' And my heart lifts with the joy of seeing his face flush with happiness.

'Will you never leave me?'

'I'll never leave you, Finbar. You know I won't. I'll always be here. Always.'

The excitement begins to wake him and slowly he loses me. 'Mam . . . Mam . . . are you still here?'

'I'm still here,' I say, but he no longer sees me.

He rubs his eyes. 'Mam!' His cry wakes Daphne, who comes hurrying to his side in her nightdress. Finbar is still staring at me, searching me out in the darkness.

'Finbar!' I exclaim. 'Finbar. I'm still here!' But it is no good. He has lost me.

'It's only a dream, Finbar,' Daphne soothes, laying him down gently.

'It wasn't a dream, grandmam. It was real. Mam was on the end of my bed.'

'You go back to sleep now, darling.'

His voice rises and his glistening eyes blink in bewilderment. 'She was here. I know she was here.'

Daphne sighs and strokes his forehead. 'Perhaps she was. After all, she's an angel now, isn't she? I imagine she's always close, keeping an eye on you.' But I know she doesn't believe it. Her words satisfy Finbar, though.

'I think so,' he mumbles, then closes his eyes and drifts off

to sleep. Daphne watches him a while. I can feel her sadness, it is heavy like damp. Then she turns and leaves the room and I am alone again. Only this time, hope has ignited in my heart. If he managed to see me once, he might see me again.