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Written by S. K. Tremayne

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THE ICE TWINS

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Anyone who knows the Inner Hebrides will quickly notice the very strong resemblance between 'Eilean Torran' and the real Eilean Sionnach, off Isleornsay, in Skye. This is no coincidence: the book was inspired, in part, by a lifetime of visiting that beautiful tidal island, and staying in the whitewashed cottage under the lighthouse.

However, all the events and characters described herein are entirely fictional.

Editorially, I want to thank Jane Johnson, Helen Atsma, Kate Stephenson and Eugenie Furniss: without their encouragement, and wise advice, this book would not exist.

Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to Hywel Davies and Elizabeth Doherty, for sowing the original seed, which grew into an idea: twins.

For my daughters


W
E
S

1

Our chairs are placed precisely two yards apart. And they are both facing the big desk, as if we are a couple having marital therapy; a feeling I know too well. Dominating the room is a pair of lofty, uncurtained, eighteenth-century sash windows: twin portraits of a dark and dimming London sky.

'Can we get some light?' asks my husband, and the young solicitor, Andrew Walker, looks up from his papers, with maybe a tinge of irritation.

'Of course,' he says. 'My apologies.' He leans to a switch behind him, and two tall standing lamps flood the room with a generous yellow light, and those impressive windows go black.

Now I can see my reflection in the glazing: poised, passive, my knees together. Who is this woman?

She is not what I used to be. Her eyes are as blue as ever, yet sadder. Her face is slightly round, and pale, and thinner than it was. She is still blonde and tolerably pretty – but also faded, and dwindled; a thirty-three-year-old woman, with all the girlishness long gone.

And her clothes?

Jeans that were fashionable a year ago. Boots that were fashionable a year ago. Lilac cashmere jumper, quite nice, but worn: with that bobbling you get, from one too many washes. I wince at my mirrored self. I should have come smarter. But why should I have come smarter? We're just meeting a lawyer. And changing our lives completely.

Traffic murmurs outside, like the deep but disturbed breathing of a dreaming partner. I wonder if I'm going to miss London traffic, the constant reassuring white noise: like those apps for your phone that help you sleep – by mimicking the ceaseless rushing sounds of blood in the womb, the mother's heartbeat throbbing in the distance.

My twins would have heard that noise, when they were rubbing noses inside me. I remember seeing them on the second sonogram. They looked like two heraldic symbols on a coat of arms, identical and opposed. The unicorn and the unicorn.

Testator. Executor. Legitim. Probate . . .

Andrew Walker is addressing us as if we are a lecture room, and he is a professor who is mildly disappointed with his students.

Bequeathed. Deceased. Inheritor. Surviving Children.

My husband Angus sighs, with suppressed impatience; I know that sigh. He is bored, probably irritated. And I understand this; but I also have sympathy for the solicitor. This can't be easy for Walker. Facing an angry, belligerent father, and a still-grieving mother, while sorting a problematic bequest: we must be tricky. So his careful, slow, precise enunciation is maybe his way of distancing, of handling difficult material. Maybe it is the legal equivalent of medical terminology. *Duodenal*

hematomas and serosal avulsions, leading to fatal infantile peritonitis.

A sharp voice cuts across.

'We've been through all of this.'

Has Angus had a drink? His tone skirts the vicinity of anger. Angus has been angry since it happened. And he has been drinking a lot, too. But he sounds quite lucid today, and is, presumably, sober.

'We'd like to get this done before climate change really kicks in. You know?'

'Mr Moorcroft, as I have already said, Peter Kenwood is on holiday. We can wait for him to come back if you prefer—'

Angus shakes his head. 'No. We want to get it done now.'

'Then I have to go through the documents again, and the pertinent issues – for my own satisfaction. Moreover, Peter feels . . . well . . .'

I watch. The solicitor hesitates, and his next words are tighter, and even more carefully phrased:

'As you are aware, Mr Moorcroft, Peter considers himself a long-standing family friend. Not just a legal advisor. He knows the circumstances. He knew the late Mrs Carnan, your grandmother, very well. He therefore asked me to make sure, once again, that you both know exactly what you are getting into.'

'We know what we are doing.'

'The island is, as you are aware, barely habitable.' Andrew Walker shrugs, uncomfortably – as if this dilapidation is somehow his company's fault, but he is keen to avoid a potential lawsuit. 'The lighthouse-keeper's cottage has, I am afraid, been left to the elements, no one has been there in years. But it is listed, so you can't completely demolish and start again.'

'Yup. Know all this. Went there a lot as a kid. Played in the rock pools.'

'But are you truly apprised of the challenges, Mr Moorcroft? This is really quite an undertaking. There are issues concerning accessibility, with the tidal mudflats, and of course there are various and salient problems with plumbing, and heating, and electrics in general – moreover there is no money in the will, nothing to—'

'We're apprised to the eyeballs.'

A pause. Walker glances at me, then at Angus again. 'I understand you are selling your house in London?'

Angus stares back. Chin tilted. Defiant.

'Sorry? What's that got to do with anything?'

The solicitor shakes his head. 'Peter is concerned. Because . . . ah . . . Given your recent tragic bereavement . . . he wants to be absolutely sure.'

Angus glances my way. I shrug, uncertainly. Angus leans forward.

'OK. Whatever. Yes. We're selling the house in Camden.'

'And this sale means you will realize enough capital to enable renovations to Ell—' Andrew Walker frowns. At the words he is reading. 'I can't quite pronounce it. Ell . . .?'

'Eilean Torran. Scots Gaelic. It means Thunder Island. Torran Island.'

'Yes. Of course. Torran Island. So you hope to realize sufficient funds from the sale of your present house, to renovate the lighthouse-keeper's cottage on Torran?'

I feel as if I should say something. Surely I must say something. Angus is doing all the work. Yet my muteness is comforting, a cocoon, I am wrapped in my silence. As ever. This is my thing. I've always been quiet,

if not reserved; and it has exasperated Angus for years. *What are you thinking? Tell me. Why do I have to do all the talking?* And when he says that, I usually shrug and turn away; because sometimes saying nothing says it all.

And here I am, silent again. Listening to my husband.

'We've already got two mortgages on the Camden house. I lost my job, we're struggling. But yeah, I hope we'll make a few quid.'

'You have a buyer?'

'Busting to write a cheque.' Angus is obviously repressing anger, but he goes on. 'Look. My grandmother left the island to me and my brother in her will. Right?'

'Of course.'

'And my brother, very generously, says he doesn't want it. Right? My mother is in a home. Yep? The island therefore belongs to me, my wife, and my daughter. Yes?'

Daughter. Singular.

'Indeed—'

'So that's that. Surely? We want to move. We really want to move. Yes, it's in a state. Yes, it's falling down. But we'll cope. We have, after all' – Angus sits back – 'been through worse.'

I look, quite intently, at my husband.

If I was meeting him now, for the first time, he would still be very attractive. A tall, smart guy in his thirties, with three days of agreeable stubble. Dark-eyed, masculine, capable.

Angus had a tinge of stubble when we first met, and I liked that; I liked the way it emphasized his jawline. He was one of the few men I had met who could happily own the word handsome, sitting in that large, noisy, Covent Garden tapas bar.

He was laughing, at a big table, with a bunch of friends: all in their mid-twenties. Me and my friends were on the next table over. Slightly younger, but just as cheerful. Everyone was drinking plenty of Rioja.

And so it happened. One of the guys tossed a joke our way; someone came back with a teasing insult. And then the tables mingled: we shifted and squashed, and budged up, laughing and joking, and swapping names: this is Zoe, this is Sacha, this is Alex, Imogen, Meredith . . .

And this is Angus Moorcroft, and this is Sarah Milverton. He's from Scotland and he's twenty-six. She's half English, half American, and she's twenty-three. Now spend the rest of your lives together.

The rush-hour traffic grows louder outside; I am stirred from my reverie. Andrew Walker is getting Angus to sign some more documents. And oh, I know this procedure: we've signed so very many documents this last year. The paperwork that attends upon disaster.

Angus is hunched over the desk, scribbling his name. His hand looks too big for the pen. Turning away, I stare at a picture of Old London Bridge on the yellow-painted wall. I want to reminisce a little more, and distract myself. I want to think about Angus and me: that first night.

I remember it all, so vividly. From the music – Mexican salsa – to the mediocre tapas: luridly red *patatas bravas*, vinegary white asparagus. I remember the way other people drifted off – gotta get the last Tube, got to get some sleep – as if they all sensed that he and I were matched, that this was something more important than your average Friday-night flirtation.

How easily it turns. What would my life be now, if we'd taken a different table, gone to a different bar? But

we chose that bar, that night, and that table, and by midnight I was sitting alone, right next to this tall guy: Angus Moorcroft. He told me he was an architect. He told me he was Scottish, and single. And then he told a clever joke – which I didn't realize was a joke until a minute later. And as I laughed, I realized he was looking at me: deeply, questioningly.

So I looked right back at him. His eyes were a dark, solemn brown; his hair was wavy, and thick, and very black; and his teeth were white and sharp against his red lips and dark stubble, and I knew the answer. *Yes*.

Two hours later we stole our first drunken kiss, under the approving moon, in a corner of Covent Garden piazza. I remember the glisten of the rainy cobblestones as we embraced: the chilly sweetness of the evening air. We slept together, the very same night.

Nearly a year after that, we married. After barely two years of marriage, we had the girls: identical twin sisters. And now there is one twin left.

The pain rises inside me: and I have to put a fist to my mouth to suppress the shudder. When will it go away? Maybe never? It is like a war-wound, like shrapnel inside the flesh, making its way to the surface, over years.

So maybe I have to speak. To quell the pain: to quiet my thoughts. I've been sitting here for half an hour, docile and muted, like some Puritan housewife. I rely on Angus to do the talking, too often; to provide what is missing in me. But enough of my silence, for now.

'If we do the island up, it could be worth a million.'

Both men turn to me. Abruptly. She speaks!

'That view,' I say, 'is worth a million by itself, overlooking the Sound of Sleat. Towards Knoydart.'

I am very careful to pronounce it properly: Sleat to

rhyme with slate. I have done my research; endless research, Googling images and histories.

Andrew smiles, politely.

'And, ah, have you been there, Mrs Moorcroft?'

I blush; yet I don't care.

'No. But I've seen the pictures, read the books – that's one of *the* most famous views in Scotland, and we will have our own island.'

'Indeed. Yes. However—'

'There was a house in Ornsay village, on the mainland, half a mile from Torran . . .' I glance at the note stored in my phone, though I remember the facts well enough. 'It sold for seven hundred and fifty thousand on January fifteenth this year. A four-bedroom house, with a nice garden and a bit of decking. All very pleasant, but not exactly a mansion. But it had a spectacular view of the Sound – and that is what people pay for. *Seven hundred and fifty k*.'

Angus looks at me, and nods encouragement. Then he joins in.

'Aye. And if we do it up, we could have five bedrooms, an acre – the cottage is big enough. Could be worth a million. Easily.'

'Well, yes, Mr Moorcroft, it's worth barely fifty thousand now, but yes, there is potential.'

The solicitor is smiling, in a faked way. I am struck with curiosity: why is he so blatantly reluctant for us to move to Torran? What does he know? What is Peter Kenwood's real involvement? Perhaps they were going to make an offer themselves? That makes sense: Kenwood has known of Torran for years, he knew Angus's grandmother, he would be fully *apprised* of the unrealized value.

Was this what they were planning? If so, it would be

seductively simple. Just wait for Angus's grandmother to die. Then pounce on the grandkids, especially on a grieving and bewildered couple: shell-shocked by a child's death, reeling from ensuing financial strife. Offer them a hundred thousand, twice as much as needed, be generous and sympathetic, smile warmly yet sadly. *It must be difficult, but we can help, take this burden away. Sign on the line . . .*

After that: a stroll. Ship a busload of Polish builders to Skye, invest two hundred thousand, wait for a year until the work is done.

This beautiful property, located on its own island, on the famous Sound of Sleat, is for sale at £1.25 million, or nearest offer . . .

Was that their plan? Andrew Walker is gazing at me and I feel a twinge of guilt. I am probably being horribly unfair to Kenwood and Partners. But whatever their motivation, there is no way I am giving up this island: it is my exit route, it is an escape from the grief, and the memories – and the debts and the doubts.

I have dreamed about it too much. Stared at the glowing pictures on my laptop screen, at three a.m., in the kitchen. When Kirstie is asleep in her room and Angus is in bed doped with Scotch. Gazing at the crystal beauty. Eilean Torran. On the Sound of Sleat. Lost in the loveliness of the Inner Hebrides, this beautiful property, on its very own island.

'OK then. I just need a couple more signatures,' says Andrew Walker.

'And we're done?'

A significant pause.

'Yes.'

Fifteen minutes later Angus and I walk out of the yellow-painted office, down the red-painted hall, and

exit into the damp of an October evening. In Bedford Square, Bloomsbury.

Angus has the deeds in his rucksack. They are finished; it is completed. I am looking at an altered world; my mood lifts commensurately.

Big red buses roll down Gower Street, two storeys of blank faces staring out.

Angus puts a hand on my arm. 'Well done.'

'For what?'

'That intervention. Nice timing. I was worried I was going to deck him.'

'So was I.' We look at each other. Knowing, and sad. 'But we did it. Right?'

Angus smiles. 'We did, darling: we totally did it.' He turns the collar of his coat against the rain. 'But Sarah . . . I've got to ask, just one more time – you are absolutely sure?'

I grimace; he hurries on: 'I know, I know. Yes. But you still think this is the right thing? You really want' – he gestures at the queued yellow lights of London taxis, glowing in the drizzle – 'you really, truly want to leave all this? Give it up? Skye is so quiet.'

'When a man is tired of London,' I say, 'he is tired of rain.'

Angus laughs. And leans closer. His brown eyes are searching mine, maybe his lips are seeking my mouth. I gently caress one side of his jaw, and kiss him on his stubbled cheek, and I breathe him in – he doesn't smell of whisky. He smells of Angus. Soap and masculinity. Clean and capable, the man I loved. Love. Will always love.

Maybe we will have sex tonight, for the first time in too many weeks. Maybe we are getting through this. Can you ever get through *this*?

We walk hand in hand down the street. Angus squeezes my hand tight. He's done a lot of hand-holding this last year: holding my hand when I lay in bed crying, endlessly and wordlessly, night after night; holding my hand from the beginning to the end of Lydia's appalling funeral, from *I am the resurrection and the life* all the way through to *Be with us all evermore*.

Amen.

'Tube or bus?'

'Tube,' I say. 'Quicker. I want to tell Kirstie the good news.'

'I hope she sees it like that.'

I look at him. No.

I can't begin to entertain any uncertainty. If I stop and wonder, then the misgivings will surge and we will be stuck for ever.

My words come in a rush, 'Surely she will, Angus, she must do? We'll have our own lighthouse, all that fresh air, red deer, dolphins . . .'

'Aye, but remember, you've mainly seen pictures of it in summer. In the sun. Not always like that. Winters are dark.'

'So in winter we will – what's the word? – we'll hunker down and defend ourselves. It'll be an adventure.'

We are nearly at the Tube. A black flash flood of commuters is disappearing down the steps: a torrent being swallowed by London Underground. I turn, momentarily, and look at the mistiness of New Oxford Street. The autumn fogs of Bloomsbury are a kind of ghost – or a visible memory – of Bloomsbury's medieval marshes. I read that somewhere.

I read a lot.

'Come on.'

This time I grasp Angus's hand, and linked by our fingers we descend into the Tube, and we endure three stops in the rush-hour crowds, jammed together; then we squeeze into the rattling lifts at Mornington Crescent – and when we hit the surface, we are practically running.

'Hey,' Angus says, laughing. 'Is this an Olympic event?'

'I want to tell our daughter!'

And I do, I do. I want to give my surviving daughter some good news, for once, some nice news: something happy and hopeful. Her twin Lydia died fourteen months ago today – I hate the way I can still measure the date so exactly, so easily – and she has had more than a year of anguish that I cannot comprehend: losing her identical twin, her second soul. She has been locked in an abyssal isolation of her own: for fourteen months. But now I can release her.

Fresh air, mountains, sea lochs. And a view across the water to Knoydart.

I am hurrying to the door of the big white house we should never have bought; the house in which we can no longer afford to live.

Imogen is at the door. The house smells of kids' food, new laundry and fresh coffee; it is bright. I am going to miss it. Maybe.

'Immy, thanks for looking after her.'

'Oh, please. Come on. Just tell me? Has it all gone through?'

'Yes, we've got it, we're moving!'

Imogen claps her hands in delight: my clever, dark-haired, elegant friend who's stuck with me all the way from college; she leans and hugs me, but I push her away, smiling.

'I have to tell her, she knows nothing.'

Imogen grins. 'She's in her room with the Wimpy Kid.'

'Sorry?'

'Reading that book!'

Pacing down the hall I climb the stairs and pause at the door that says *Kirstie Lives Here* and *Knock First* spelled out in clumsily scissored letters made from glittery paper. I knock, as instructed.

Then I hear a faint *mmm-mmm*. My daughter's version of Come in.

I push the door, and there is my seven-year-old girl, cross-legged on the floor in her school uniform – black trousers, white polo shirt – her little freckled nose close to a book: a picture of innocence but also of loneliness. The love and the sadness throbs inside me. I want to make her life better, so much, make her whole again, as best I can.

'Kirstie . . .'

She does not respond. Still reading. She sometimes does this. Playing a game, mmmNOT going to talk. It has become more frequent, this last year.

'Kirstie. Moomin. Kirstie-koo.'

Now she looks up, with those blue eyes she got from me, but bluer. Hebridean blue. Her blonde hair is almost white.

'Mummy.'

'I've got some news, Kirstie. Good news. Wonderful news.'

Sitting myself on the floor, beside her, surrounded by little toys – by her penguins, and Leopardy the cuddly leopard, and the Doll With One Arm – I tell Kirstie everything. In a rush. How we are moving somewhere special, somewhere new, somewhere we can start again, somewhere beautiful and fresh and sparkling: our own island.

Through it all Kirstie looks at me. Her eyes barely blinking. Taking it all in. Saying nothing, passive, as if entranced, returning my own silences to me. She nods, and half smiles. Puzzled, maybe. The room is quiet. I have run out of words.

'So,' I say. 'What do you think? Moving to our own island? Won't that be exciting?'

Kirstie nods, gently. She looks down at her book, and closes it, and then she looks up at me again, and says:

'Mummy, why do you keep calling me Kirstie?'

I say nothing. The silence is ringing. I speak:

'Sorry, sweetheart. What?'

'Why do you keep calling me Kirstie, Mummy? Kirstie is dead. It was *Kirstie* that died. I'm Lydia.'