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With All My Love

Written by Patricia Scanlan

Published by Simon & Schuster

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With All My Love

Patricia Scanlan



SIMON &
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First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2013
A CBS Company
This hardback edition published 2013

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

www.simonandschuster.co.uk

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HB ISBN: 978-1-47111-076-4
TRADE PB ISBN: 978-1-47111-077-1
EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-47111-079-5

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Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Great Britain by xxxxx

When the heart weeps for what is lost. The spirit laughs for what it has found.

Sufi saying.

Prologue

He could feel the heat of the sun streaming over him, and had a flash of vibrant memory of lying with his brother in a field of prickly golden stubble, the scent of new-cut straw filling his nostrils, the drone of the tractor fading as it drove away towing its bounty of neat bales to the nearby farm.

As adrenalin surged through him he raised his face to the blue immensity of sky, reaching higher, higher, every muscle, ligament and fibre protesting as he strained to reach his target. His hands curved around the hard leather of the ball and Jeff felt a rush of emotions, triumph, joy, and deep satisfaction that nothing else in life could equal. Every aching bone, every second of weary exhaustion from the punishing training regime he followed was worth it for this moment.

The roar of the crowd lifted him higher. The shiny red faces of the men he soared over, a blur in the bright sunlight. If only Valerie were here to see this, he thought with a brief pang of regret as his hands tightened around his prize and he plotted the optimum trajectory towards the goalmouth. But Valerie didn't like football. She resented the time he spent training. He should be spending it with her and their young daughter she'd say. He

hated how she made him feel guilty about his passion. It took the good out of moments like this. He twisted on the downward descent, elbowing his marker in the shoulder as he tried to grab the ball from him, clearing his way to prepare his onslaught on the box.

The pain hit, gripping him like a vice, forcing the breath out of his lungs, and bringing him to his knees. The roar of the crowd faded. Surprise and shock staggered him. He crumpled to the ground and saw the blue of the sky briefly before the darkness enveloped him.

And then it seemed that only like a moment had passed and brightness bathed him in a soft light as he opened his eyes and felt a wondrous sense of wellbeing. Thank God for that, Jeff thought relieved. He felt so well, so fit, so . . . so . . . *perfect*. Perhaps he'd imagined that brief, shocking jolt of pain. Or maybe he was in hospital and they had injected him. That must be it. He had no memory of getting there, no memory of being in an ambulance. He must have been out like a light.

Had they won the match? He'd liked to have scored that goal, it would have been a beauty, one of his best, he mused, feeling utterly relaxed. Whatever they'd given him was working a treat. The light drew closer and his eyes widened . . .

Everything was going to be absolutely fine, Jeff knew as he recognized his beloved grandmother coming towards him, smiling at him as he took her outstretched hand.

Chapter One

Briony McAllister felt the glorious heat of the Mediterranean sun on her upturned face as she contemplated the cobalt sky above her and felt the tension ease out of her body, dissipating into the soft green tartan rug she was lying on. Little cotton puffs of clouds drifted over the sharp-ridged peaks of the sierras to the north and the breeze whispered through the pine trees.

Beside her, her 4-year-old daughter Katie was engrossed in plaiting her Moxie Girl's hair. It was a Sunday afternoon in September and a somnolent, peaceful air pervaded the Parque Princessa Diana, a pretty park on the Costa del Sol. Katie had wanted to go there instead of the beach, the swings and modest playground being a big attraction. Thankfully, she was now happy to play with her dolls after twenty minutes of blissful soaring back and forth on the swings and Briony was content to lie drowsily in the late afternoon sun, her novel unopened beside her.

Riviera, a small town on Spain's southern coast, was empty of tourists, who had long gone back to their jobs and mundane lives, their Costa holiday a faded summer's dream. Where once older couples and retired ex-pats would have filled the many restaurants and coffee shops,

the recession had ensured that the Costa del Sol was decimated after many years of lavish boom. Briony knew full well the effects of economic collapse. She, too, should have been back behind her desk, dealing with the thousand and one queries that came with being an administrator in a busy private hospital. But life as she knew it had changed completely the day two months previously, when the owners of the Olympus Sports clinic had called staff together and told them that due to the current economic climate and falling patient numbers, redundancies would have to be made.

Briony knew, even before it was her turn to meet with HR, that she would be one of the staff to be 'let go'. She had been last into the department, having left a similar position in a big teaching hospital the previous year to work nearer home and closer to her daughter's crèche.

Briony sighed and brushed away a mosquito that had taken a fancy to her lightly tanned flesh. The truth was that with all the cuts in her salary in the last couple of years, the prohibitive crèche fees had taken most of what was left, and now that she was redundant she and her husband, Finn, were almost no worse off with her dole money, especially without having to pay for childminding. They had decided after much discussion that for the next year, before Katie started school, Briony would be a stay-at-home mother.

It was disconcerting adjusting to her new circumstances. Strange not having to get up at the crack of dawn and wake her daughter from sleep to feed and dress her before dropping her off at the crèche, greeting the other equally stressed, bleary-eyed parents she had got to know. And then making the bumper-to-bumper commute

to work, hoping that she would get a parking place and not be last in, keeping her head down like a naughty schoolgirl and not a thirty-something, self-confident, career woman and working mother. She was still a 'working' mother', she thought defensively, realizing in these last few weeks how irritating the term was to mothers who could choose to stay at home and rear their children themselves.

Why *did* she feel guilty every morning, though, when she and Katie shared cuddles in bed when Finn had left for work? It was such a treat having a leisurely breakfast and fascinating conversations with her 4-year-old. She had already missed so much of her child's development. When she'd worked in the clinic, the time they'd had together after Briony collected her from the crèche in the evenings was often ruined by teary tantrums and squabbles over bath-time and bedtime, both of them exhausted after their early start. It was all so different now, so much *fun*! But no doubt this, too, would change. It was still very new and different. She felt like she was playing truant from real life.

She was going to make the most of this unexpected blessing. It would be her gap year, Briony decided. This unemployment that had been foisted upon her would not diminish her. She would not allow herself to feel guilty that she wasn't contributing to the family income, or that she was taking money from the state. She had paid her hard-earned money week after week, in social insurance, for just this eventuality.

How she and her colleagues had complained bitterly about the previous government's atrocious handling of the economy and the 'brown envelope' mentality that

pervaded every level of society from the top down, and the avarice of bankers, politicians, developers and the so-called 'golden circle'. For all the good their complaining did. Ordinary folk like them were being hammered while the people responsible were still living in their big houses, holidaying in the sun and paying outrageous sums for lavish weddings, at the expense of tax payers. Every tea-break there would be heated discussion of some new revelation of chicanery, or some new pay cut proposed, that would leave Briony and her friends despairing of how they were going to manage in the future and what lay ahead for their children.

She hadn't wanted to be made redundant from her job. She had been perfectly willing to work, albeit, she conceded with hindsight, at the expense of her relationship with her daughter. But the old saying 'When one door closes another one opens' was true. Everything depended on the way you looked at things.

This time had been given to her and Katie to strengthen their bond and that was how she would view it. She no longer had money for life's luxuries, eating out was a thing of the past for them, where once they had dined out three or four times a week and not given it a second thought. Even buying books, glossy mags and make-up now required a 'Do I really need this?' debate, whereas before they would have been tossed willy-nilly into her supermarket trolley. She'd sold her Ford Focus reluctantly, trying not to cry when she'd seen it disappear down her street, and with it, the privileged life she taken for granted.

The upside now, thought Briony, was that she was no longer time poor. The speed on her life's treadmill had decelerated and she felt she was slowly exhaling years of

stress and tension that juggling her life as a wife and mother, combined with holding down a job, had entailed.

Briony felt the knot that had been in her stomach since she had walked out of her office for the last time loosen another little bit as she lay in the sunshine, and the feelings of failure, guilt, helplessness and fear wafted away on the balmy breeze blowing across the sea from Africa, as the scent of jasmine and the chorus of birdsong sent her drifting off into drowsy slumber.

'Mom . . . Mom . . . I is hungry.' An indignant poke brought Briony back to wakefulness and she squinted up to see her daughter's indignant face hovering over hers. 'Can we have our picnic now?'

'Can we have our picnic now, *please*?'

'Can we have our picnic now, *pleeeese*?' Katie echoed exasperatedly and Briony managed to hide a grin as she struggled up into a sitting position and wrapped her little girl in a joyous hug.

'Let's have our feast then. I'm hungry too,' Briony smiled, nuzzling into Katie's neck. Her daughter smelled of suntan lotion and talc, and as Briony inhaled the scent of her she wished Finn was here to share their lazy Sunday afternoon.

They had spoken earlier. He was up to his eyes doing a last edit on a report he had written for his MD. He headed the export department of a large food producing company who were constantly looking for new foreign markets. He was good at his job and in the last year the company's revenue had bucked the trend as new markets in China and Brazil opened up. Ireland's booming export market was the one bright shining star on the gloomy economic horizon and Finn had never been busier.

Briony hated that he had to work so hard, but he was driven and enjoyed it. He had *urged* her to take the few weeks to help her mother settle into her new villa, despite Briony's protests that she didn't want to be away from him for too long. Had she still been working in the clinic, they would have been like ships that pass in the night. Funny how life had balanced out for them as a result of her redundancy, she mused, as she opened the picnic basket she'd brought with them and spread out the egg, and tuna salad sandwiches, and their absolute favourites, the pear and custard tartlets she'd bought from the bakery in the big Super Sol supermarket across the road. She and her mother, Valerie, had done a shop on the way from the airport the previous day and Briony still found the difference in food prices hard to believe. They had bought two huge fillets of salmon and a big bag of prawns for a half the price she would have paid at home, and a bottle of Faustino was almost a third less than what she was used to paying.

The two weeks she was going to spend with her mother, helping her settle into the small beach-side villa she had recently purchased, would not cost her a fortune, in fact she'd live far cheaper here than in Dublin. She watched as Katie busied herself putting sandwiches on two bright green plastic plates, revelling in this great new adventure. 'One for you, one for me,' she sang in a singsong voice, putting her juice bottle beside her Moxie Girl. Her Lalaloopsy doll, Jenny, had been left back at the apartment as a punishment for some naughty deed. Katie was a very stern mother, and the dolls lived under a much stricter regime than Katie herself did, Briony thought, grinning as her daughter

admonished her doll to 'sit up and eat properly and say thank you'.

Mother and daughter munched companionably on their sandwiches, Katie chattering away to her doll, sometimes singing, oblivious to all around her as she immersed herself into a scenario with her dolly that mimicked what was happening in her life right now. She had a vivid imagination and was a self-sufficient little girl who could entertain herself for hours on end. Even so, Briony longed to get pregnant again, to give her daughter a sibling. She didn't want there to be too big an age gap between her children should she be blessed with another baby.

Briony savoured the creamy egg sandwich, a hazy memory of picnics she'd had in her own childhood floating into her mind. Picnics on a golden beach under the cliff at the end of her grandparents' house. She could remember the gritty grains of sand mixing with the egg as the breeze whipped the sand around them. Sadness pricked like an unexpected wasp sting as she remembered her grandmother, Tessa. She had loved her father's mother with all the love her child's heart could muster and she had been greatly loved in return. And then the indescribable shock of separation, of being told by Valerie that Gramma Tessa didn't want to see them any more. The grief of that bereavement equalled the pain of the loss of her dad. Briony's eyes darkened at the memory and she brushed it away, annoyed that it still had the power to wound, even after all these years. It was a long, long time ago. Looking back only brought unhappiness and pain, and what was the point of that? For all she knew, the woman could be dead. She knew nothing of her father's family now.

And yet, she had been curious when, earlier, she'd unpacked a box of photo albums and tatty brown A4 envelopes full of old photos curling at the edges. Black-and-white ones, faded Kodak colour prints, and memory cards of long-dead relatives she didn't know. Now that she had a child of her own she had become more interested in her family history; the time would come when Katie would want to know more of her family background. Valerie had always hated talking about the past and wasn't very forthcoming when Briony quizzed her, but the photos would give her an excuse to bring up the subject.

She was looking forward to sitting out on the patio over a glass of chilled wine, the comforting shushing of the sea as it feathered the beach below them in the ground, and studying this tapestry of her and Valerie's lives.

She'd not been able to resist bringing one of the old-fashioned albums with her to the park. A photo of her father and mother had caught her eye. Snuggled close together, laughing, her father squinting into the camera as the sun caught him, looking so handsome and vital next to Valerie, petite and tanned, in a pretty blue sundress and making a face at whoever was taking the photo. Probably Lizzie, Valerie's best friend, and Briony's godmother.

Idly, she finished off her sandwich, took a slug of fresh orange juice and reached into her beach bag to pull out the album with its garish plastic cover of pink daisies and splashes of yellow. A torn brown A4 envelope fell out from the back flap and a pale blue envelope slid half-way out of it. She was about to put it back when she saw that it was addressed to her: Miss Briony Harris, 12 Eldertree Road, Dublin 9.

Eldertree Road, she noted, surprised. That was where Valerie and she had lived all those years ago when they had first moved back to Dublin before her mother had bought her own house. Who would have been writing to her there, and why had her mother never given her the letter? And why was the address written in a different pen and by a different hand from that of her name? The fine elegant cursive, written in blue ink, was neat, precise, the letters beautifully formed – script from a bygone era, she thought, studying it intently. No one wrote like that now. Why on earth were they writing to her, this person with the graceful old-fashioned writing? The address, however, was scripted in a rather untidy, less meticulous style.

She opened the thin envelope and eased out the two pages of closely written script, and for a surreal moment was sure she caught a hint of a long-remembered scent. Gramma Tessa had always worn perfume, and face cream. Briony could remember playing with the cosmetic jars on her grandmother's dressing-table and Tessa daubing her face with Nivea and spraying her wrists with scent. Even to this day she could remember cuddling into her grandmother's shoulder, as Tessa sang '*Sugar and Spice and all things nice, that's what little girls are made of.*' That sweet distinctive smell that would forever remind her of a time when life was good and she was safe and happy.

'My Darling Briony,' she read as Katie hummed happily beside her, completely oblivious to her mother's mounting shock.

Slowly, shaking her head, Briony read and reread her grandmother's letter, so engrossed she hardly heard the

'Yoo-hoo!' that a slender blond-haired woman was hollering as she ran up the steps of the park.

Almost in a daze, Briony studied her mother, willowy and tanned, looking ten years younger than her fifty years as she waved at them.

'Hello, my darlings, are you enjoying your picnic?' she asked breezily, bending to kiss Katie and tracing a tender finger along her cheek.

'Valwee,' squealed Katie, throwing her arms around her.

The rush of bitterness that surged through Briony almost made her gag as she stood up.

'Having fun?' Valerie raised laughing eyes to her. The smile faded from her lips when she saw Briony's expression. 'What's wrong? Are you OK?' She straightened up and reached a hand out to touch her daughter.

'How *could* you, Mum?' Briony's voice was shaking, as was the hand that held the letter, the letter that revealed that her mother had betrayed her in the most cruelly grievous way. A letter that revealed a litany of lies, lies and more lies. A letter that showed that Valerie Harris was a heartless, selfish, cruel bitch, who was now standing in front of her pretending to be concerned.

'You make me sick,' Briony hissed, not wishing Katie to know that there was anything amiss.

Aghast at the venom in her daughter's voice, Valerie glanced at the letter in Briony's hand. Comprehension dawned. She paled under her tan.

'I can explain,' she said urgently, running her fingers through her blond bob. 'I did it for you, Briony. You must believe me. I can explain.'

Chapter Two

She stands on the uneven cobblestones watching the small green and white tug nudge the enormous cargo ship up the wide mouth of the river towards its berth. The steady thrum of the engines, rhythmic, insistent, blends with the raucous shrieks of the gulls as they circle then swoop and dive into the choppy sea on some tasty titbit. The wind is getting up and she wishes she had brought her scarf. Behind her, down on the beach, the sand is whipping across the rocks, and shells and small bits of driftwood skitter along the strand, taking on a life of their own. The ship is looming closer and she turns to observe the action on deck as it passes before her, blocking out the view of the opposite shore.

She likes to come and watch the activity in the port: the toing and froing of ships and liners, the big ferries, regular as clockwork, the arrow-swift little pilot boats that race towards the open sea, always an indication that a ship is coming. And then, as the new arrival appears on the horizon, the sturdy dependable tugs chugging down the river, preparing to take charge, reassuring, she imagines, for a weary captain and crew at the end of a voyage.

This is her favourite place now. The place she comes to be peaceful and still. The place that she comes to escape.

The wind whips her grey hair around her face and she inhales deeply, enjoying the salty, bracing air. Great banks of leaden black clouds loom up over the trees and rooftops of Clontarf and Sutton across the bay. Howth is shadowed and grey. It will be raining soon. The ship ploughs past, churning up the water, almost home. The white caps of the wash slapping hard against the seawall and, as the ship heads up the river, soon to disappear from view, she turns and makes her way, with some difficulty, down the rocks and sand to the shelter of the beach that faces the Southside.

'Blackie!' She calls the black Labrador who has his nose stuck in a cleft trying to get at some buried treasure, a dead crab or fish head or some such. Tessa smiles as he lopes towards her, tail wagging furiously. 'Good boy, good boy,' she says, leaning down to stroke his dear face as he gazes at her with brown-eyed adoration. 'What would I do without you?' she murmurs, grateful beyond measure for his unconditional love, especially today of all days.

Even after all these years the memory of that warm September day is still clear and present whenever she resurrects it. Time has dulled the sharp edges of the pain, but it is always there in the background. She glances at her watch. It was around this time . . . She gazes unseeingly towards the mountains and Dun Laoghaire, lost to her memories.

The wind's keening and Blackie's bark at a plastic bag flying past him brings her back to reality and she pulls her parka around her. 'Come on, Blackie, come on, boy.' She hurries across the sand to where she has parked the car. Once she would have been able to run she thinks

ruefully. Her left knee aches and stiffens and she is glad when her dog is plonked on his rug on the back seat, chewing on a treat before settling for a snooze. He knows the routine. knows that she will pour herself a cup of tea from a flask and take out her pen and pad, and for a while his beloved mistress will be immersed, her pen flying over white paper, interspersed with mouthfuls of hot sweet tea and ginger nut biscuits.

Tessa pours the tea into a plastic cup, looking forward to that first taste of the warming golden liquid. What is it about tea from a flask? she wonders as she screws on the white top and lays the flask on the passenger seat. She savours that first sip, holding the cup between her hands, the steaming heat a comfort as she stares across the sea to where rain has blotted out Sandymount and Dun Laoghaire, a sombre impressionist painting that does not have the glorious light of a Manet or Monet.

Tessa sighs and nibbles on her biscuit. She should go home, she has spent longer that normal walking Blackie. Lorcan will be querulous on her return, annoyed with her for being gone so long, especially today of all days. But she needs this break from him. She is the only one he can take his frustrations out on now. Chronic arthritic pain has turned him into an angry, frustrated old man. He was so vibrant and vigorous, even into his late sixties, and then came the grinding pain – like ivy strangling a tree he'd once told her – and the slow, unremitting descent into decrepitude. Old age was the cruellest stage of all, the real test of "for better, for worse". She still loves her husband, and understands his frustration, but there are times now when she sometimes doesn't like him. She has pleaded with him for months to see a shoulder specialist

and he has finally let her make an appointment. He could have saved himself a year of pain, and made her life much easier if he had not been so stubborn. Men can be so *irritating*, she thinks.

She finishes her tea, wipes the crumbs from her lap and hesitates, hand poised over the key in the ignition. The rain has reached her little haven and spitter-spatters blur the windscreen. Tessa glances at the clock on the dash. She really should be going, she doesn't want to get stuck in traffic. People out for a Sunday afternoon spin, dog walkers like herself, parents with kids who still have homework to do, will head for home now that the rain has come. She can see mothers on the beach, urging children to hurry as the rain grows heavier. It is dancing in fury on the roof of her car, a steady tattoo that increases her sense of being in her own safe little world.

Her notepad is sticking out of her bag; she pulls it out and roots for her pen. She settles herself more comfortably, shifting her weight to ease her knee and flips over the cover to a blank page.

'My Darling Briony,' she writes, yielding to her reluctance to go home, oblivious to the rain battering the car.

'Today I think of you more than ever . . .'

Chapter Three

'Briony, there is so much you don't understand. We'll sit down and talk about it when we get home. Let's not upset Katie.' Valerie Harris laid a placatory hand on her daughter's arm, trying not to panic at the realization that one of her greatest fears had come to pass.

Briony shrugged it away. 'I'm booking a flight home,' she said coldly, busying herself with packing up the picnic things.

'Are you cross, Mom?' Katie paused from feeding her doll and glanced up at them, a little frown furrowing her brow.

'No, no. How about a last swing before we go back to the villa?' Briony suggested brightly.

'Yesssssssss! Valwee, will you mind Millie?' She thrust her doll into her grandmother's hand. Valerie looked down at her granddaughter and her heart contorted with love and pain at the sight of the innocent little face with cornflower-blue eyes and an adorable smattering of freckles across her nose, raised trustingly to her.

'Of course I will, darling.' Valerie stroked Katie's flushed cheek.

Katie danced gaily over to the swing. 'Come on, Mom,' she called over her shoulder.

'We have to talk, Briony, on our own. At least let me—'

'Are Gramma and Granddad still alive?' Briony was stony-faced. Valerie felt she was being punched in the stomach when she saw the contempt in her eyes. '*Are they*?' her daughter persisted.

'Yes,' Valerie sighed. 'As far as I know both of them are still alive, yes.'

'And Dad, did you lie about *him*, too?' Briony fixed her with a hard, cold stare.

'*No*! No, of course *not*, Briony!' Valerie's voice shook. She struggled not to cry, appalled that her daughter would think that she would ever lie about Jeff.

'I will never forgive you for this, Mum, *ever*. And I won't be coming out here again with Katie. Let's see how *you* feel, knowing you'll never see *your* granddaughter again!' She marched across the grass, bristling, and Valerie watched her go with a sickening lurch to her stomach, and had to sit down on the rug. Her heart had begun to pound and she felt faint. She adored Katie. Katie had given her more joy than any other relationship in her life had. Even her relationship with Briony could not compete with the absolute, unconditional love she felt for her only grandchild.

For years she'd worried about this moment of reckoning. There had been a few close shaves, notably when Briony was getting married and had wanted to try to reconnect with Jeff's family, but Valerie had managed to put her off, and Briony, caught up in the wedding preparations, had accepted all she'd told her at face value.

Over time Valerie's anxiety had eased, and she didn't give the past too much thought. Today, of course, was different, she thought sadly. What an irony that Briony

would discover her grandmother's letter on this, the anniversary of her father's death. It was so long ago, she thought distractedly. Twenty-six years today. Briony had been almost four and a half when her mother's life had been shattered.

She couldn't think straight. Valerie's mouth quivered and she had to stifle the sob that escaped as the memories of that dreadful day came roaring at her like a tsunami, enveloping her in wave after wave of grief and regret. Just when she'd finally thought life was good, and she could relax, the past had come back to confront her with a crushing intensity. The decisions she'd made, the lies she'd told, had returned to confront her and this time there was no avoiding them. Briony was so hurt and angry she would never listen to her mother's side of the story. And she *had* a side, Valerie thought sorrowfully. Everyone would think she was the worst mother in the world when it all came out, but she had her reasons, no matter what Tessa would say. And Tessa would have a lot to say, Valerie thought bitterly, remembering Jeff's mother.

Tessa had despised her. Behind the façade of motherly concern, Jeff's mother had only been nice to her because of Briony, not because she'd cared anything for Valerie. She had always known that Tessa had felt that she'd trapped Jeff by falling pregnant. Tessa had never felt that Valerie was good enough for her precious son.

It was partly thanks to Tessa that she had had to leave home with her young daughter and make a life for them far away from all that she had grown up with, Valerie thought bitterly. What would her life have been like if she had been able to stay in her home village with Briony? But Tessa had put paid to that, and when

fate had intervened that glorious September day when Jeff had been taken from her so cruelly and the future she had planned had been snatched away, all her dreams had been left in tatters.