

THE SAVED

By Liz Webb

The Daughter
The Saved

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'a' and 'b' in a white, elegant script font, positioned above a thin white horizontal line. This logo is centered within a solid black rectangular background.

a&b

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*For all my brilliant writer friends.
Especially my writing group: Jo Pritchard, Katherine Tansley,
Marija Maher-Diffenthal & Sarah Lawton.
And my writing mentor, Sarah Clayton.*

‘There is something at work in my soul
which I do not understand.’

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

NOTE ON THE LOCATION

There are 94 inhabited Scottish islands. I've made up a 95th island called 'Langer'.

Any positive things about Langer are based on the wonderful Scottish slate islands of Seil, Luing and Easdale, 'the islands that roofed the world' with their slate industry. Any negative things about my island or its people are entirely fictional and based on my warped imagination. While inspired by reality, I've taken creative license with the landscapes, buildings, ferries, weather, whirlpools, religion and churches.

CHAPTER ONE

I lean forward on the icy ferry rail, as the white coils of mist slowly unravel ahead of us.

And finally . . . there it is. The island of Langer. Our new home.

All the other passengers on this little ferry have stayed in their cars, safe from the intense cold. Calder and I are the only idiots watching the approach from outside, clearly newcomers. Well, I am. Calder was born here, but left twenty-odd years ago. I look up at him, his long black hair flapping in the wind, his cheeks ruddy and his forehead scrunched, with little lines puckering at the corners of his eyes. Is that from the cold? Or from memories of his childhood here?

‘You OK?’ I call, pitching up over the wind.

He nods, not taking his eyes off the island.

I glance down and notice a fat seagull bobbing on the

surging water below us. Aren't its feet freezing in that cold sea? Yet it looks totally unperturbed, all puffed up and full of itself.

The A4 typed timetable on the quay noticeboard said that the journey to this slate island off the west coast of Scotland would take fourteen minutes. That sounded short, but it feels much longer in this bitter buffeting. How can it be this sunny and yet still so brutally cold? Our rental car is parked in the base of this little ferry, cleverly packed in with five other cars by the burly man in a tight brown jumper who waved us on. But we've come outside to the metal ramp on the side of the boat, at my insistence. I want to enjoy every moment of our approach, however glacial it is.

The fat seagull abruptly dives down, instantly invisible in the grey depths. I wait for it to resurface, but it's nowhere to be seen. I keep on scanning the water, but it doesn't come back up.

'Where's that bird?'

'What bird?' Calder asks distractedly.

'A seagull. It was just there,' I say, pointing. 'I was looking right at it and it suddenly ducked under, and disappeared entirely.'

'Oh, Nancy, it'll be fine.'

'But how long can it survive down there? That water must be freezing.'

He turns to face me and raises an eyebrow. 'I sincerely doubt that some bird has decided to end it all just 'cos you were staring at it. Then again, you do have an impressive stare, sooo . . .'

'Yeah, all right,' I laugh. But as he looks back at the island, I drag my thin coat sleeves over my bitten

fingernails to grip the railing, then lever myself over it as far as I dare, to scan the water.

‘Hey, be careful,’ Calder yelps, pulling me back.

‘I’m fine,’ I laugh. But where is that bloody bird? The poor thing must be dead by now. Though if it is, why hasn’t its frozen carcass bobbed up yet? I inhale the cold briny air as I stare down at the ever-changing pattern of fine lines on the surface of the water. Can it have swum down deep, right under the ferry? I turn and look back. No sign of it. Only the furrow of white frothing water the ferry is leaving behind in its wake, just as we’re leaving behind our old lives. And everyone in them.

Oh please, come back up, you stupid bird. This is surely a bad omen for our move.

But there’s no sign of it. It’s dead. Of course it is. Life is so fragile. If you don’t stay alert, hold on really tight, boom, it’s gone in an instant.

Suddenly the bird pops up right in front of me, shaking itself free of water, all jaunty and smug. Oh, thank God. It cocks its head and locks its beady eyes on me for a moment, regarding my relief with a withering look. Then it merrily bobs off on the undulating water. Everything’s fine.

My breath puffs out into the icy air as I return to watching the island coming into view. The mist has now curled around and re-formed behind us, erasing where we’ve come from. But the white coils up ahead have completely cleared, to present the island to us in all its glory. Before I met Calder, I’d heard of the Hebrides, Skye and Mull but always assumed that there were only about twenty or thirty islands dotted along the coast of Scotland.

But I now know that there are over nine hundred. Ninety-five of them populated. Some with a few thousand people and some with less than a hundred, like this windswept beauty. It's long and tapering, comprised of endless curves and planes of different angles and painted with every gradation of grey, green and brown imaginable. It looks like a dappled sleeping monster, half submerged in the grey sea and basking in the sun. To the right of the small bricked dock ahead is a slate beach, which hardly fits any category of 'beach' I've ever known or imagined. It's an awesome expanse of glinting angles, endless jagged grey shards, as if this huge gunmetal sea all around us had risen up into the air, frozen, and then exploded all over the shore.

'It's amazing,' I whisper.

Calder takes a sudden breath as he snaps out of his strange trance and looks down at me. 'Excited?'

'Totally,' I laugh. 'No mortgage, no boss, no commute. Just . . . all this.' I gesture at the stunning rugged island. 'What's not to love.'

'We'll be our own bosses now, so I hope we're easy to work with.'

'Oh, I intend to be very lax indeed.'

He laughs. He's starting his own loft extension company up here having been an employee in one for years. I'm swapping the hectic stress of being a BBC radio drama producer in London for the hassle-free simplicity of being an online film script editor. He's asked me so many times if I'm sure about this move and I so am. More than he can possibly know.

The boat judders and goosebumps flare across me. I hadn't realised quite how bizarre it would feel to be

crossing a huge surging sea to get to our new home. Fantasising about moving to an island and actually moving to one are very different things. I'm only just now grasping that once these ferries stop running in the evenings, we'll be totally marooned here. Which is exciting. As if we're entering some magical guarded realm. I breathe deeply and the rush of cold air makes me dizzy. My giddiness is probably heightened by the fact that I haven't slept for about twenty-four hours: including seven and a half hours not sleeping on the sleeper from London to Glasgow, three hours not sleeping on the local train from Glasgow to Oban, where we picked up our hire car, and half an hour not sleeping on the drive from Oban to the coast. And now we're on the final leg, the fourteen-minute ferry ride to the island, and no one could possibly sleep in these arctic conditions. It was thrilling to get single tickets all the way. At first, I couldn't find the option on the Trainline booking site, only returns, as if the site was saying: *Single tickets to Scotland and not just to the mainland, to an isolated island, are you absolutely sure?* I was. And I am. This is a completely fresh start with the only person who really matters to me any more.

'Five pounds!' comes a shout. It's the burly man in the thick brown jumper who waved our car on. He's approaching us with a black shoulder bag of money and holding a grey card-reader.

'Of course,' Calder says, pulling out a note from his overstuffed wallet.

'Calder, isn't it?' the man asks.

'Yes, that's right. Hi Mr Mullins, I wasn't sure if you'd recognised me.'

The man snorts. ‘Aye, course I did. I wouldn’t forget you, you gobshite.’

I tense, but Calder laughs.

‘And anyway, we’ve been warned to keep a look out for you. You’re the talk of the island, coming back to take over your mum’s place. Not many of our lost children come back here. Welcome home.’

They share a knowing nod.

‘Oh, and this is my girlfriend, Nancy.’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ the man mumbles, then turns and his retreating footsteps clang on the metal steps.

‘Lost children?’ I ask, once the man’s out of earshot.

‘It’s nothing sinister. It’s just the dramatic way they talk here. Lots of the young people born on the island get bored by the time they’re teenagers and leave as soon as they can. But the islanders have to guilt-trip us by making it sound sad and suspicious.’

A blast of cold air buffets me and I shiver.

‘You OK?’ Calder asks.

‘Yes, just excited – and a bit cold.’

He pulls off his huge black coat and wraps it round me. ‘We need to get you a thicker jacket.’

‘But now you’ll be cold.’

‘Pah, I’m made of hardier stuff.’

‘Pah?’

‘Yeah, pah!’

I’ve only been here once before, on a flying overnight visit in the summer, to finally meet Calder’s formidable mum Isla. It had been endlessly sunny that day, warm with glorious clear blue skies, and I didn’t factor in how shockingly extreme the winter weather would be when

we decided on this move. But this bracing cold is oddly exciting, underlining how new and different this life will be. When Isla had an unexpected heart attack two months ago, her will insisted on an unattended cremation, but she left Calder her cottage here. We were burnt out with our pressured London jobs, struggling with high rent and mounting bills, and wondering if there could ever be more to life than our relentless rat race. So, we made the snap decision – crazy decision, according to all our friends – to move to this sparsely populated, inaccessible island off the far western coast of Scotland, with a population of eighty-three, one pub and one shop.

‘I can’t wait to go out on the water again,’ Calder says, pointing at a small white-sailed boat that’s slicing through the water in the opposite direction to us. ‘I used to love sailing, but I haven’t been out since I was sixteen.’

Oh. I hadn’t factored in him going out in boats. Stupidly.

‘Don’t worry,’ he says, patting my shoulder. ‘Sailing’s just like driving for me.’

Since I don’t drive and lost both my parents in an awful car accident, that’s hardly reassuring, but I guess Calder is an excellent driver, so . . . time for one of my resolutions for this move. To stop my ridiculous over-worrying. I will be a new improved me here: calm and meditating, eating healthily while doing Couch to 5K running, and . . . baking bread, probably in a headscarf.

Calder looks down at me and strokes a fluttering strand of hair off my face. ‘Nancy, I . . .’

‘Yes?’

He shakes his head. ‘Nothing. I’m just getting that weird

feeling you get when you return to where you grew up.’

‘I know what you mean.’ I move my hand along the rail and entwine my fingers with his.

He frowns. ‘Do you think there’ll really be enough of an appetite for my loft conversion business here?’

‘Totally. You said this place is all one-storey cottages. You’ll be a bloody fox in a henhouse.’ In London he was just a cog in a large glossy-brochured company. His best mate Hamish, who left the island with him, set up and was the smooth-talking, client-facing side of their loft extension company, gratingly named ‘Lofty Ambitions’. No, I mustn’t dwell on the past. Calder’s gruff honesty will work just fine here. His more prosaically named ‘Loft Rooms’ is going to do just great. I nibble at an annoying lump of hard skin down the side of my thumbnail. That’s the downside of love. Now Calder’s worries are my worries. Worse than mine. Whenever he’s stressed or hurt, I’m wounded and I’ll do anything to diffuse his worry or try to change what’s hurt him.

As we near the island, the little ferry overshoots the dock and slows, the engines straining, the boat juddering. What bad driving. Except . . . it’s on purpose, I realise, as the boat does an awkward little dance of turning and then backing up to the quay. I see that it’s actually a very skilled manoeuvre, requiring timing the engine thrusts with the distance to the shore and in relation to the speed and angle of the current. I was doing a similarly awkward little dance over my last few months in London, trying to keep my life together despite work pressure and rising anxiety. I bite the hard skin of my thumb again, then gnaw it right out of the nail bed. The stinging groove floods with blood.

There's a loud clanking of chains and I look up to see the boat's wide metal drawbridge being lowered. It scrapes onto the concrete as we clamber back into our car. The vehicles are waved off one at a time, and our car finally creeps forward and clunks over the metal lip of the bridge onto the concrete.

'We made it,' Calder announces. 'Welcome to your new home.'

'Hurrah!' I shout, staring at everything greedily as we drive up the steep slope and round to the top of the beach. I touch Calder's hand on the steering wheel. 'Can we stop for a moment, so I can get a piece of slate?'

He laughs, turning off the engine. 'Yeah, sure, it's not as if it's in short supply here, since all the mining's moved to Wales.'

I get out, bow my head against the wind, and step onto the slates. They knock together with a strange, woody, Jenga block sound under my unsteady feet. I pick up a long shard. But it's freezing and sharp in my numbed hand, so I throw it down and it bounces and rolls.

'Are you trying to smash it?' Calder calls as he gets out of the car.

'No. This stuff looks unbreakable. No wonder they use it on roofs.'

'Every piece has its weak point, however big and sturdy-looking,' he says, pointing to the boulders at the curve of the bay. 'That's how they cut it, by making a little groove and tapping along it, till they find the fault line.' He picks up my piece and throws it. This time it splits in half. 'See.'

I reach down for the two pieces and fit them back together again. 'Two halves of a whole. Like us.'

‘Ah. That’s a bit cute,’ he laughs. ‘But look, some bits have sheared off. Smashed slate can never be mended they say.’

‘Who’s they?’

‘*They* do,’ he says, lifting his hands like a ghoul. ‘Ooh.’
I laugh.

‘So, d’you want to explore the beach some more or shall we drive straight to the cottage?’

‘Let’s get to our new home.’

After ten minutes driving along glorious coastal views, we’re crunching down a stony track. Isla’s squat, white block of a cottage hunkers alone on a cliff edge, above an even more dramatic slate-strewn beach. It looks out on a stunning, shortbread-tin-lid bay, and has the majestic arch of a steep hill behind it. Calder fumbles with the keys, but finally unlocks the door and pushes. It creaks open, straight into the kitchen, which smells musty and feels even colder than outside. It’s hard to see much, as the small deep windows in the thick walls give so little light.

Suddenly, there’s an ungodly growling from the gloom.

‘What’s that?’ I yelp, backing out.

Calder picks up a chair and pokes it towards the sound.

There’s a creaking in the blackness.

A snarl.

And then a large black cat shoots past us and out the door.

‘Christ.’

‘It’s OK, it’s a good omen,’ Calder laughs. ‘Black cats protect fishermen at sea.’

I thought a black cat crossing your path was a bad thing?

He flips the switch for the overhead light.

We both gasp.

The room is like something in a horror film. Chairs are knocked over. The old gas cooker is caked in grease. And there's debris, cobwebs and thick dust on every surface.

'God, look at this place,' I say, as I step in.

'It's OK, don't panic. Just needs a good brush-up. We knew there'd be work to do after it being left empty for a while.'

'Yeah, course,' I say, trying to hide how appalled I am. 'I guess we just need to gird our loins.'

'Let's get our bags out of the car and I'll pop back to the village for cleaning stuff and supplies.'

'Sure,' I nod uncertainly.

'Then more of these loins of which you speak,' he grins.

I laugh and recalibrate my expectations for our first days here. I put my slouchy shoulder bag down on the kitchen table. Next to a dusty wooden box. 'What's this?'

Calder wipes the dust off the slate lid, narrows his eyes, then jolts back. 'Oh, for God's sake.'

'What?'

He shakes his head. 'It's Mum.'

'What d'you mean?' I say, peering over to read the engraving he's uncovered.

ISLA CAMPBELL 1956–2022

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,
and I will give you rest.*

Matthew 11:28

'It's her actual ashes?' I ask.

He's frozen for a long moment, staring at the box.

'Calder?'

'Guess so.'

'That's a bit of a bleak quote. Who . . .'

He swipes the box up. 'I'll put it . . . her, away,' he mumbles, shoving it into a low kitchen cupboard and slamming the slatted door.

'There? Shouldn't we find somewhere more meaningful?'

'Once we're settled,' he snaps. 'I'll find a proper place for her then.'

I touch his arm but he shakes me free. 'I'm fine, Nance. Let's get unpacked. We've got lots to do.'

I glance at the slatted cupboard door as we unpack. I know it's only Isla's ashes in there. Literally dust. Yet although Calder's busying himself lugging in our stuff, I can feel his inner bristling and sense his body turning imperceptibly away from her presence.

But of course, that was weird for him, discovering her like that. What sadist left her ashes there, for him to find? He's just a bit wrong-footed. He'll be all right. I need to get on with organising our new life. I stride towards the door, but trip over a dirty mud-scraper that's bolted to the floor. God. I must watch out for that. It's lethal. I walk out, shaking myself into action and out of my silly sense of foreboding. I'm just indulging in my usual habit of catastrophising.

Aren't I?