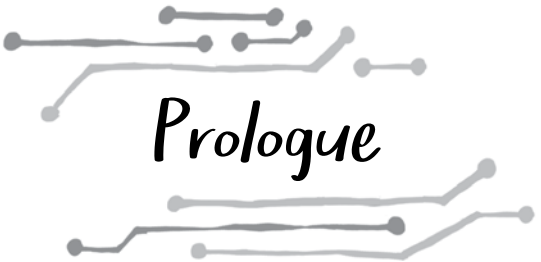

Prologue

I'm watching the videos again. I'm supposed to be doing my German homework, but twenty minutes ago I picked up my phone to find the word for watermelon, got distracted by a notification from the Sekkon app, and now I'm watching my sister serenade our cat.

On the screen, Flora sits cross-legged on her bed, singing into a hairbrush. When she gets to the chorus, she holds the pretend mic out to Sìth. The cat lets out a long meow that's so perfectly in tune with the song that Flora jumps back and falls off the bed. The video has over twenty thousand views, 132 comments. I can see a few of them at the bottom of the screen.

Too cute!

Omg your cat is channelling Ariana Grande

Rest in peace, Flora. We miss you.

The video ends and rolls on to the next one, then the next. There are 389 videos on Flora's Sekkon account. I've seen them all a million times before, but I keep watching anyway. I watch Flora unbox an American snack pack that a friend sent for her birthday and dance to a K-pop song with three girls from her swim team. I watch her try to copy

a make-up tutorial, then crack up when it goes horribly wrong. (That one's my favourite. I snuck into her room to watch after I heard her giggling hysterically and had to press both hands to my mouth to stifle my own laughter.)

The playlist reaches the end and loops back to the most recent videos – the ones that Flora took when she was bored in hospital, and a tearful update after the doctors told us there was nothing more they could do. I skip those. I like seeing Flora laughing and joking around, being silly and carefree. That's the way I want to remember her: my loud, funny, bossy big sister.

Mum comes into the kitchen carrying a stack of mugs and plates. I put my phone face down on the table and turn back to my German grammar exercises. Bringing up Flora around my parents is always a risk. Some days we end up laughing about happy times or funny things she used to say, but on others it plunges them into darkness. I can tell from the cloudy look in her eyes as Mum walks to the sink that today is one of the bad days.

"Do you need a hand, Mum? I can wash those up, if you like."

"Hmm?" Mum looks round at me. Her voice sounds faraway, like she's talking from the bottom of a very deep pit. "Oh. No thanks, Isla, it's fine. You carry on with your homework."

She falls silent as she washes the dishes, lost in her memories. In the living room, Dad is watching an interior design show while my little sister Ùna lies on the carpet, reading. Everything looks quiet and calm but the atmosphere is heavy as a storm. Great big thunder clouds of grief rolled over our house when Flora died.

A year and a half later, they still haven't cleared.

Of course I knew I'd miss her. But I didn't know how much, or that I'd even miss the way she hogged the bathroom and snapped at me for borrowing her pens. I also hadn't expected how much I'd miss Mum and Dad. That sounds strange, since they're still here in the house with me, but they're not the same. Especially Mum. She doesn't sing along to the radio or quote old TV shows like she used to. It feels like forever since I saw her smile – her real smile, not a quick turn-up of the lips.

Dad is a little better. He has his down days but lately he's started cracking his terrible jokes and puns again. Hearing them is like a ray of sunlight slipping through the dark clouds, even if they still make me groan. He keeps suggesting that we sort out the things in Flora's bedroom for charity shops, or that we finally scatter her ashes, but Mum always finds an excuse not to. Those things are all we have left of Flora.

She's not ready to say goodbye yet.

And that means none of us can.

Mum leaves the plates and cups to dry and goes back to the living room. When I pick up my phone again, an advert has popped up on the screen.

Sekkon is full of ads but I've never seen one like this before. They usually show me football boots or cat T-shirts, whatever I've searched for recently. My friend Murdo's dad is always going on about how big tech companies are tracking us and selling our personal information to advertisers. This feels different, though – it's almost like they've read my mind.

I click on the link. It takes me to a really basic website with a short description about how the group is open to anyone who has lost a loved one, and a form to enter your contact details. Maybe this is what Mum needs. We live on a tiny island in the Outer Hebrides, just 163 inhabitants. There are no support groups like this nearby. We all did online sessions with a grief counsellor last year but Mum and Dad gave up on theirs pretty quickly. They said it was too expensive, and that it wasn't helping much either. A group would be good for them. They could meet other people who have lost a child. People who really know what they're going through.

In the living room, my parents' faces are lit up blue in the glow of the TV screen. Without asking their permission, I type Mum's name and email address into the form and click send. The thought of scattering Flora's ashes, boxing up her things … it makes me feel sick with sadness. But nothing is going to bring her back. We need to be brave and start taking steps forwards, like the ad says. Maybe this will be the first.

Eighteen months later

One

Almost everyone on the island comes out to see the boat arrive. They stand in two uneven lines along the harbour walls, whispering and nudging each other as they look towards the water.

Mum parks the car opposite the wee shop and sighs. "I told them not to come tonight. The guide says to act normal. Not to throw a welcome party."

Behind us, Ùna unclips her seat belt and checks her reflection in the rear-view mirror. "They're excited, Mum." She pats down a few flyaway strands of hair. "This is a big deal for the whole island, not just us."

"You're right." Some of the tension leaves Mum's shoulders. "I'd rather have kept things quiet, though. This is overwhelming enough as it is."

Outside, the crowd is still growing. My best friend Adhiti and her older brother Suresh step out of the tiny post office that their dad runs and cross the road towards the harbour. Adhiti stops to talk to Finley Graham, who's in the year above us at school. As usual, Finley has his phone out. He slowly moves his arm to film the scene, then scowls when Adhiti jumps in front of him

and pulls a face for the camera.

Mum touches my arm, and I remember with a jolt of nerves why we're here. "Are you ready, Isla?"

I want to say no. I thought I was helping Mum move on when I signed her up for that support group. Instead she's taken ten giant steps in the wrong direction. Dad's moved out, and our family is even more broken than it was a year and a half ago. But it's too late to say no now. The papers have been signed, the money is in our bank accounts. We are part of this project, whether I like it or not. And it's all because I saw that advert on Sekkon. It's all because of me.

I bite my tongue and force a smile. "Ready. Let's go."

The cool air nips at my skin as I climb out of the car. It's July and the sun won't set for another few hours but the overcast sky and dense sea fog have shed a murky twilight over the island. Heads turn towards us as we walk to the harbour. Reverend Jack is standing by the door to the church, his hands clasped behind his back as he looks out to sea. Next door, Georgie Campbell is sitting on the front step to her house, absent-mindedly stroking her dog Lola's ears. Her mum comes outside wearing a bright orange anorak and waves at us. "Good luck, Sarah!" she shouts to Mum.

Georgie looks up at her mum and cringes. Annie blushes too, as if worried she's said the wrong thing. What do you say in a situation like this? There are no ready-made phrases, no greetings cards.

Mum smiles and nods back at her. "Thanks, Annie. We're feeling very lucky indeed."

The tide is low this evening, so Mum walks down

the stone steps to the jetty where the boat will come in. Ùna and I follow, pulling our coats tight round us. Curious stares and whispers fall down from the high harbour walls. It reminds me of a funeral, when the family are ushered to the front of the church after everyone else has taken a seat. That uncomfortable, unwanted spotlight.

"I feel sick," Ùna whispers. "This is too weird."

Weird doesn't even cover it. I could read the English and Gaelic dictionaries back to back and I still wouldn't have enough words for how mind-bogglingly bizarre this all is. No wonder Dad wanted out.

"It's way too weird," I agree. "But at least we're in it together, right?"

I nudge my glasses up my nose with the knuckle of my index finger. Ùna gives a small smile and does the same to hers. It's a thing we started doing last year, when we were caught between our fighting parents or stuck in some strange, intense training session about the trial. It became our way of checking in – a subtle means of telling each other "I'm here, I get it" when we couldn't say anything at all.

"Right." Ùna lets out a long breath and flattens her dark brown hair again. "Besides, weird is OK. Weird can even be good."

She skips forwards and takes Mum's hand. I cast a glance up the harbour steps, towards the big house on the left of the church. That's where my other best friend Murdo lives. The lights are on in the rooms upstairs. Murdo might be watching from his bedroom window but his dad is dead set against the trial – there's no way he'd let him come out to see the boat arrive. I wish he

was here. Murdo is like a lighthouse, big and bright and secure. Being around him always calms me down.

As I turn back round, Ùna lets out a gasp that makes me jump. "I think I see them!"

Slowly, a light emerges from the fog. An engine's whirring grows steadily louder and closer and then a boat comes into view. It's a flashy white yacht, small but at least twice as fast as the old ferries that chug between here and the bigger islands. Behind us, one of the wee kids lets out a gasp of delight. The sight of a fancy boat is enough to provide a few bars of staccato in the sleepy rhythm of life on Eilean Dearg.

"It's time." Mum presses a hand to her mouth. "Finally."

The low evening sun bounces off the boat's metal railings as it curves neatly into the harbour and comes to a stop at the long wooden jetty. Behind the cabin window is a man I don't recognize. He's white, probably early thirties, with a thick beard and red hair a shade lighter than my own. Sitting beside him is a striking Japanese-American woman with dark hair in a neat bob: Marisa Ishigura, our Family Liaison Officer at Second Chances. She waves at us through the glass before disappearing to the back of the boat.

"Oh my gosh." Mum's voice is thin, trembling. "I can't believe this is really happening." She reaches for our hands and takes a few steps forwards, right to the edge of the water. My stomach is turning cartwheels, Mum's entire body is shaking and I can hear Ùna's breathing coming fast and shallow. The red-haired man turns off the engine, and a moment later Marisa climbs down the small ladder at the back of the boat. The buckles on her

shiny black ankle boots jingle as she steps on to the jetty.

"Hey, there!" she calls in her high-pitched American accent. She glances up at the overcast sky and shivers. "Bit colder than California, huh?"

The boat rocks slightly as the man follows her down the ladder. He smiles briefly at us, then turns back and holds out his hand towards the last passenger. My pulse pounds in my wrists, my ears, behind my ribs. This is it. After months of planning, the time has finally arrived. I stare at my trainers and take a deep breath, preparing myself for … for what? Not disappointment. Like Dad, I never had any faith in the trial. Not even fear, though there's definitely a bit of that churning in my gut.

It's change. I'm steeling myself for yet another change.

But then I look up and everything disappears. Gasps and muffled cries in English and Gaelic ring out from the crowd above us. Mum takes a sharp breath and squeezes my hand so tightly the tendons crunch but I barely notice. The sun, the sky and the island itself could melt into nothing and I wouldn't even flinch. Right now, the only thing in the world that matters is the girl climbing down from the boat.

She's small – shorter than me now – and thin, dressed in skinny black jeans, white Adidas trainers and a denim jacket. Her dark blond hair is tousled from the sea breeze and her pale cheeks are flushed pink with cold. She looks up at the crowd, nervously twirling the pearl stud in her right earlobe with her thumb and index finger.

Marisa puts a hand on the small of the girl's back and gently steers her forwards. "Here we are," she says. Her voice sounds distorted in my ears, as if we've been

plunged underwater. “Home at last.”

Turning her gaze towards Mum, Ùna and me, the girl’s eyes widen. For a moment she stares at us, her lips open. Then she pushes them into a shaky smile and echoes Marisa’s words. “Home at last.”

If I hadn’t known from looking at her, the voice would have confirmed it. This isn’t the cheap fake that I’ve been dreading for months. She’s not some imposter. Along with my parents and Ùna, this is the person I’ve known longest and best, someone so familiar I could recognize her in the dark. She has the same small grey-blue eyes that we all inherited from Mum, the same sharp jawline as Dad, the same wobbly smile she’d always put on when she was trying to hide her nerves. It’s really her.

It’s really Flora.