

NEVER
ALONE
ELIZABETH
HAYNES

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Part One

Exile is a curious thing. It starts off and you think it's fine, you think you're not bothered, but at some point it starts to burn.

I kidded myself that this was what I wanted – I needed the space, I needed time to get my head straight; I needed to find myself. That's what they say, right? So I ran as far away as I could, and then I started to wonder what I was running from.

Running from myself? Running from my own mistakes?

Hard to admit that.

But it's impossible to sustain, exile, that's the thing. Because the feeling of home is too strong a pull, and sooner or later the cord snaps tight and you find yourself working your way back.

And that's when it starts to get really, really difficult.

When you realise that the people you left behind have changed.

When you realise that you should have stayed away.

Sarah

Not for the first time, Sarah Carpenter stands at the top of the hill and thinks that this would be a good place to die. It feels like the end of the world, so high up that even the trees don't bother to grow. It's just tussocky windblown grass, clouds racing overhead, drops of icy rain when you're not expecting them.

You could die here and nobody would notice. You could lie down, and nobody would ever find you. The wind would continue to blow and the sun, sometimes, would shine, and there would be rain and snow too, picking at your clothes and your flesh until there was nothing left but bones. Even in January, though, with the weather unpredictable and sometimes even dangerous, it's not just Sarah who comes up here. There are wildlife rangers, fell-walkers. Someone would find you, eventually.

But today – there is not a soul up here. Just Sarah and her two dogs, who have, for the moment, disappeared out of sight.

She is completely alone.

Below her, the slope down to the dry stone wall that marks the boundary of her property is steep and treacherous. There is a field, of sorts, patchy, rutted, the tough grass yellowing and breaking away at the steeper parts, earthy cracks forming uneven terraces. In the field, squatting like a troll, is the derelict croft that once sheltered shepherds, before the farm was built. Below that the gradient begins to even out

and there is her garden, stunted trees and a vegetable patch, nothing growing there now. Four Winds Farm huddles into the hillside as though the wind might rip it off its foundations and blow it down into the valley.

‘Basil! Tess!’ Sarah calls, and her words are stolen from her mouth by the wind. She can hardly feel her face now. Time to head back.

Whether she has heard or not, Tess the collie appears from behind her and Basil is not far behind, wagging his tail and looking overjoyed at the fact that he has found something foul to roll in. His blond coat has a long streak of something black from shoulder to flank.

‘Oh, Basil, you little sod.’ She doesn’t have time to give him a bath, not today. Stumbling over the tussocks, she debates hosing him down outside and leaving him out until he’s dried off. But it’s freezing, and, looking at the clouds overhead, it might even snow.

She checks her watch: it’s nearly half-past eight. Perhaps, if she’s quick...

She leaves Basil whining outside the back door while she dries Tess with a towel in the utility room. Out of the wind, her cheeks are stinging and her ears humming with the sudden quiet in the house. Tess looks at her with big brown eyes and raises one doggy eyebrow as if to point out that she should expect nothing less from a Labrador.

‘I know,’ Sarah says aloud, as if Tess had actually spoken. ‘He’s an idiot. What can you do?’

She gives Tess a biscuit and the dog scampers away to her bed in the kitchen. Doors shut inside for damage-limitation purposes, she lets Basil in. He’s not sure whether he’s pleased to be allowed in or anxious about what might be coming next, which gives her the advantage. She takes him by the collar and hauls him into the small downstairs shower room.

He hangs his head and gives out a little whine.

‘It’s your own fault,’ she says. ‘Today of all days, Basil, how could you?’

Still, she thinks, massaging him with lavender-scented, doggy-calming shampoo, *at least he’ll smell fresh for our visitor.*

He’s early. That’s good.

‘Basil, shush! That’s enough!’ It’s as though he’s never heard a car before: he’s barking, tearing around the kitchen. Tess, glancing up from her bed, isn’t as bothered. Sarah watches from the kitchen window as the dark blue Ford Focus pulls round in the turning circle outside the house and comes to a stop facing the garage. Her heart’s thudding. *Well, of course it is. Deep breaths, girl, come on. Be sensible about this.*

She opens the door and stands there, holding on to Basil’s collar, while he gets out of the car and she gets her first proper look at him. Tess is curious enough to get up from her bed and she stands next to Sarah, craning her neck to see what’s arrived.

Aiden Beck. It’s been over twenty years.

‘Hi!’ she calls, brightly, gives him a little wave.

The sun’s shining, and just for a change the wind has dropped. It’s not often you could call across the yard and rely on someone hearing you. She doesn’t tell him that, of course.

Basil’s tail is wagging and now the car’s parked it’s safe to let him loose.

‘It’s okay, he’s friendly.’

‘Hello, Sarah,’ he says. His smile is still beautiful. He’s rubbing Basil’s head, patting his side. The dog’s beside himself with joy. Tess has turned and gone back inside already; she’s not so easily impressed.

Aiden comes over to her, kisses her on both cheeks, a hand on her upper arm. He doesn’t look any older, and she’s

about to tell him so, but stops herself just in time. *Nothing personal*, she tells herself. *You thought about this.*

‘You look great,’ he says.

‘Thanks,’ she says, about to deflect the compliment with something disparaging about her jumper, but she’s promised herself that she will think before she speaks, and it seems to be working. ‘Did you have a good journey?’

He’s driven from somewhere, of course, but she has no idea where. There was no real planning, no time to discuss his complicated travel arrangements. She thinks he flew back yesterday. Presumably he’s been in a hotel somewhere; maybe he stayed with friends. It’s none of her business.

‘Yeah, it was fine. It’s good to see you again; it’s been too long...’

‘Come in, come in,’ she says then, not giving him a chance to finish. She’s trying not to stare at him, trying not to be obvious while she’s drinking him in, all the little details: the lines around his eyes, the stubble on his cheek and chin.

She leads him into the kitchen, which is spotless. She’s been cleaning the whole house since Friday, when this whole crazy idea started.

‘I – um – I thought you could go and have a look around the cottage while I make tea,’ she says. The key is on the kitchen table, next to the bowl of lemons and limes. She hands it to him. He’s looking surprised. It felt like a good idea, this: give herself a few minutes to recover. She knew she’d need it, and already it’s feeling awkward. Her face is burning.

‘Oh – okay. Are you sure?’

‘Yes, of course. I need to make a couple of phone calls. Take as long as you like; have a good look round. I’ll put the kettle on.’

He goes back out the way they came in. The kettle is full and has only just boiled, because she flicked the switch when she saw the car negotiating the tight bend into the

gate. She stands at the sink and watches him cross the yard, heading down the slope towards the cottage that had been an outbuilding and, before that, a piggery. They had converted it into accommodation for Sarah's father-in-law, but, as it turned out, James Senior had died two days after being admitted to hospital with pneumonia, and he'd never even seen it. She had been thinking about getting a tenant, or maybe advertising it as a holiday let, but her heart hadn't been in it. She didn't want someone she didn't know living on her doorstep, and the thought of having a random selection of holidaymakers didn't appeal either. So the cottage had been sitting vacant, pristine, for a long time. Sarah had visitors, of course, friends, family – but everyone always stayed in the house.

On Friday, everything had changed. It had taken her by surprise, a rare Facebook post from him, set to 'friends' only.

Coming home next week, been a while!! Anyone know of any nice one- or two-bed furnished flats to rent, preferably Yorkshire or North, let me know?

He had had few replies, mostly of the 'let's have a beer' and 'I'll keep my eye out, have you tried the paper?' variety. Then she'd added a comment: *You can always stay in my cottage. I've been looking for a tenant. Send me a message if you're interested.*

It had taken her an hour to come up with that. Not wanting to sound too keen, just the right level of nonchalance. Five minutes later, she heard a ping:

Hi, Sarah, great to hear from you, how have you been? Thanks for your kind offer of the cottage, I might just take you up on that. I could come to see it on Tuesday if that's any good? A x

She'd replied quickly:

Yes, that's fine, here's my phone number, I'll be in on Tuesday.

Yesterday, there had been a text from an unrecognised number:

Hi Sarah this is my new mobile number. Will be with you about 11am tomorrow if OK. Thanks again A x

She had been sure something would go wrong. He'd call again, tell her thanks but he needed to be somewhere less remote, or he'd decided to go back to Japan, or wherever it was, after all, or he was going to stay with friends until he found somewhere permanent. She shouldn't get her hopes up. All this cleaning, while it couldn't hurt, was pretty pointless and she was wasting her time...

And yet, here he is. She stares at the yard, still, although he has long since let himself into the cottage and shut the door behind him. She gets the teapot down from the shelf, warms it, fetches mugs and the tin of biscuits down and puts them on a tray. Should she put the biscuits on a plate? Or be brave, and get out the cake she'd made? This morning it had felt like too much, too obvious that she was making an effort to welcome him. Too desperate. She leaves the biscuits in the tin.

While the tea brews, Sarah calls Sophie. She answers immediately, as if she has been clutching the phone in anticipation. 'Well? Is he there?'

'Yes,' Sarah says. 'He's looking round the cottage.'

'You left him alone?'

'It's not a big place. I think he can probably manage to find his way around.'

'You should be chatting him up!'

‘He’d run a mile.’

‘I doubt it. The cottage is lovely, and you are too. I wouldn’t be surprised if he moves in today. Has he got all his stuff with him?’

Sarah looks across to the car parked outside the garage. ‘I don’t know – maybe. He’s not said anything.’

‘And? Is he just as gorgeous as you remembered?’

‘Oh, give over. It’s not as though I haven’t seen pictures of him over the years...’

‘Well?’

‘He’s not really changed much, put it like that.’ *And my heart’s not stopped pounding*, she wants to add. *And it’s as though the last twenty-four years haven’t happened. Do I feel the same way? No, it’s worse. Much worse.*

Sophie gives her girlish giggle, the one that makes you think she’s twenty-three, not forty-three. ‘It sounds as if it’s going well. I’m glad to hear it, and I can’t wait to meet him and see this man you’ve been obsessed with your entire life.’

‘You keep your paws off.’

‘Don’t worry, darling, I only have paws for George, you know that.’

Basil, who has been waiting at the door, starts barking again. Sarah glances up and sees Aiden crossing the yard towards the house. He is talking on a mobile phone, smiling.

‘Soph, I’ll call you later, he’s coming back. Basil, for Christ’s sake shut up! Bed!’

Basil whines and obliges, but then leaps up again as the door opens and Aiden comes into the kitchen. Sarah puts her mobile down on to the kitchen table. ‘What do you think?’

‘It’s great,’ he says. ‘I can’t believe how big it is inside.’

‘Cunning use of white paint, I think,’ she says, transferring the tray with the teapot on it over to the table. ‘Have a seat.’

She pours the tea while he watches her. There is some tension in the air already, or is she imagining it? Is it her? He’s

gearing up to tell her that he's just here to look, he needs to be nearer to London actually, nearer his friends. He has friends, of course. Even though he's been away for years.

'I wanted to say how sorry I was not to make the funeral.'

She stops, mid-pour. Looks at him in surprise.

'I meant – Jim's funeral, of course. Although I would have come to his dad's too, if I'd been here.'

'Oh. That's okay. I wasn't expecting you to come all the way back from abroad.'

'But I should have come. He was a good friend. What a shock to lose him so young.'

Sarah wonders if he's expecting her to be upset, or to cry. It's been three years since Jim died, and actually, when it happened – six months after the car crash that had put him into a persistent vegetative state – it had been almost a relief. Her grieving had been done slowly, painfully, beside a hospital bed. 'Yes, it was. He was... a great father.'

She can't quite bring herself to say more than that. And even when Jim had been alive and well, despite being happy and settled and everything else that came with a twenty-year marriage, it had been Aiden she'd thought about before falling asleep, Aiden she'd fantasised about when the mood took her.

He can never know that. Ever.

'Thanks,' Aiden says, as she passes a mug across the table towards him and carefully avoids his touch.

Basil has settled under the table, his large behind on Sarah's foot, which means his head must be resting on Aiden's. Tess is watching the scene from the sanctuary of her bed in the corner, her gaze wary.

'So...' Sarah begins, then stops, with no idea how to continue. Why does this feel so awkward?

'So,' he replies, and laughs. 'Tell me about the cottage. What about rent, bills, stuff like that?'

‘Oh, I wasn’t going to charge you anything. It’s on a separate meter, so I guess you could pay the bill for electricity. And you can stay as long as you like.’

He gazes at her across the table and she’s aware of his eyes, that they are green. Somehow she’d forgotten this detail, despite picturing him in her mind so often.

‘That’s a very generous offer, but not one I’m prepared to accept,’ he says.

It’s an oddly formal way of phrasing it, and the way he’s looking at her is almost cold. ‘Oh,’ she says.

‘You could probably make five hundred a week if you let it out as a holiday cottage. As a residential let, maybe eight hundred a month?’

‘Maybe,’ she says, ‘But I’m not keen on having a stranger living there, and I don’t like the idea of a long-term commitment. Your using it would be ideal.’ To give herself time to think, she changes the subject. ‘So what are your plans? Have you got a job? I don’t even know why you’re moving back.’

Aiden shifts in his seat, moves away slightly. Basil jumps up, then heads over to his food bowl in case something might have fallen into it since the last time he checked. ‘It felt like the right time. I was thinking of doing some freelance work for now, until I find something permanent.’

‘I’m being nosy, sorry.’

‘Not at all. It’s a valid question. What’s it like living here? Do you have good internet coverage?’

‘I’ve got broadband. The wireless even works in the cottage, but the signal’s not as strong. You might want to get your own router.’

‘I could work from home,’ he says.

Sarah’s heart beats faster again. *He said ‘home’. He thinks this place is home.* ‘Absolutely.’

‘What’s the village like?’

‘It’s great – lovely friendly people. It’s got a few shops, coffee shops and tea rooms, a post office, a Chinese, a chippy, but I steer clear of that one. The pubs are nice. The restaurant in one of them is particularly good, but you have to book. There’s a new village hall, lots of things going on... events... you know.’

He considers this, drinking his tea. At last he puts down his mug. ‘If you don’t like the idea of commitment, we can dispense with a contract. But I’ll pay you eight hundred a month, with a month in advance as a deposit. If you need me to leave, you can give me, say, a week’s notice. How does that sound?’

‘But we’re friends,’ she protests.

‘It doesn’t mean we can’t have a professional understanding over this particular issue. And I’m afraid I’m going to insist on it.’

He’s so serious that she finds herself breaking into a smile. ‘Are you really?’

‘Yes.’

And she gives up. ‘All right, then.’

He offers her his hand to shake, and the deal is done. Her heart is beating hard enough, she thinks, for him to hear it. *Eight hundred a month.*

He smiles, finishes his tea. Then looks up at her from under his brows. ‘You’re sure this is a good idea?’

‘Why wouldn’t it be?’

He doesn’t answer. She has a horrible feeling it’s because he knows quite clearly how obsessed she is.

‘I promise I won’t trash the place, or have noisy parties without inviting you,’ he says.

‘And I promise I won’t ask you to fix the septic tank,’ she replies. His hand is warm, his grip firm.

So it begins.