

Prologue

‘Quiet! Your footsteps are too loud.’

‘I’m being quiet, and my footsteps are no louder than normal. Do you remember what to do?’

‘Yes. I remember. Don’t worry. I’ll do exactly what I did last time.’

They started along the moonlit alleyway that would lead them past a series of dilapidated houses, rickety fences, and sheds until they reached a rundown apartment block.

The cold winter wind carried arguing voices, from further down, towards them.

A siren sounded.

Pressed up against a damp brick wall, hidden by its narrow shadow, they waited – for the arguing to cease, for the siren to drift away.

Silence finally returned. Not another soul was present in the alleyway, and why would there be – it was well after midnight and too cold to be out, even in this part of the city.

‘Just stick to the plan.’

‘You don’t need to keep telling me. Remember to grab that toy; you know the one.’

‘And *you* don’t need to keep telling me. Of course, I know. Let’s go.’

The two figures manoeuvred their way along the alleyway, staying in the shadows, watching each footstep, and scanning the buildings on each side, checking for lights that might suggest they could be seen.

Reaching an unlocked back gate, they entered. The back courtyard was used more as a rubbish dump than a place to relax. Broken furniture from drunken fights laid scattered about, the plants, like the occupants of the building, were struggling to survive.

It would be the fire escape ladder that would give them easy access, this time to the second-floor window that they needed to enter. Carefully climbing it, stepping in unison their pace quickened, their breathing became heavier.

The bedroom window, they knew, would put up little resistance due to its rotting state and the fact that no one would’ve had taken care to lock it. They worked their gloved fingertips under the bottom of the frame. As they inched the window open it groaned, the splintering paint drifted down, the cracked glass threatening to break.

They were soon inside.

The small, unkempt bedroom smelt musty, as the walls, like the windows, were also rotting. They had been in this room before, a few weeks ago, during the daytime,

memorising its layout, mentally planning their entry. Even though they knew where everything was, they took care to watch every step, just in case something unexpected had been left on the floor. The last thing they needed, after weeks of planning, was for something to go wrong.

A flicker of moonlight had followed them giving them the light they needed to carry out their plan. They did not speak.

One moved carefully to the door, closing it slowly, silently, then pressed against it, ready to resist anyone who approached, if anyone tried to stop them.

No one would come.

The other moved to the crib and looked down at the sleeping baby. A soft stroke of a hand touched its cold, damp skin.

From a black backpack came a clean, warm blanket, and a soft hand knitted beanie with matching booties.

Gently, ever so gently, on went the beanie and the booties before the baby was lifted and wrapped warm and tight in the blanket. For the briefest of moments, the baby was rocked, a soft coo was released, the coldness of the room seemed to evaporate.

From the door the other came over, taking from the corner of the crib the toy. It was patted, releasing the dirt that it had gathered, and placed in the backpack. The sound of the zip seemed louder than normal in the silent, cold room.

A nod was exchanged. A kiss placed on the forehead of the sleeping baby.

Back to the window. Carefully down the fire escape, through the courtyard, and out to the alleyway.

No one saw them. No one heard them.

The quick, soft padding of footsteps fled along the damp concrete, leading them to their car that waited around the corner.

Once there, one got into the driver's seat and started the engine, turning the heat to full. The other got into the passenger seat, still holding the baby, put the seat belt around them both, and let out a sigh of relief.

Through all of this, the baby had not made a sound, had not stirred or resisted. It had nestled into the warm blanket, it seemed comforted in the cradling arms that now surrounded it.

The driver turned on the headlights, indicated and gently pulled out from the curb.

A moment later, they were gone.

Chapter 1

Adelyn stood beside the grave, not daring to stare down into it but rather at the damp patch of grass just in front of her feet.

She studied the tips of her new black shoes. She should have worn them in, like her mum had told her to. She could feel the side of the right shoe rubbing against her little toe. Experience told her that by the end of the day the small blister that was already there would burst and be painful, raw.

Her left hand gently held a smaller hand, its fingers tapping a slow rhythmic pattern on the side of her palm. To Adelyn, this once annoying habit had become, over the past few months, a comfort.

‘Adelyn.’

She recognised the voice that came from just behind her right shoulder. The moment had arrived, but she didn’t move. The tapping continued.

‘Adelyn?’ the voice again. Her grandfather.

This time the tapping ceased. The small hand dropped from hers.

Lifting her head, only enough, Adelyn took a half a step forward, then another so that she was right at the edge, where the green grass met the side of the deep hole in the ground.

Her right hand that held a long-stemmed deep purple iris, her eyes followed as her hand raised the iris to shoulder height and then watched as her fingers slowly unfurled from the stem.

As the world was now turning in slow motion, her eyes followed the slow falling iris as it softly descended into the grave, landing without a sound, just a flutter, on the top of the casket.

Adelyn stepped back. She winced as the shoe rubbed the growing blister, not that those standing around the grave would have known. They would have seen the wince as an outward sign of the sadness that had been dwelling inside of her for months.

She returned to her original spot and let out a shallow sigh. The small hand re-joined hers. The tapping recommenced.

More words from others. More irises. All purple.

‘There won’t be any left in our garden,’ the small voice, that belonged to the small hand, said.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Squeeze.

Adelyn looked down.

‘There won’t be any left in our garden.’

‘It’s alright. More will grow. She would want them with her.’

A small nod.

The clouds that had been hovering, keeping the warm spring sun at bay, started to drift away. Adelyn could feel the sun's warmth spread across her shoulders, like the beginning of a hug, the type that makes you want to collapse back into it. Her body swayed.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Sway.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Adelyn lifted her head and turned her face towards the sunshine. Closing her eyes, she felt her body lighten.

Sway.

Tap. Tap. Tug.

The hardness of the tug snapped her back.

'It's time to go,' the small voice said.

'Yes. Alright.'

'Adelyn. Are you ready?' Her grandfather.

Adelyn looked at his face. He tried to smile but his smoky grey eyes, swollen from the tears, revealed his pain. A pain she understands, a pain they shared.

His hand is outstretched to her, and she takes it. The three of them are joined together. On one side the tapping continued, on the other side the softens of an ageing hand. For a moment more they stood, looking down.

There was nothing to say. Goodbyes had already been done. Many times. The reality was here now, laid in front of them, deep in the ground.

The crowd that had gathered for this final farewell moved slowly, respectfully away. There were murmurs of condolences, offers of food that would be delivered, some nods and quick glances. Her best friend, Stevi, in the distance, gave the smallest of waves, just as they had planned.

The trio moved on together, their steps falling into a perfect rhythm. Adelyn held her head up.

'Walk away with your head held high,' her mum had said. 'Once it's done, you will need to be strong, for yourself and for her.'

Adelyn had nodded then and obeyed now. The gentle spring breeze toyed with her long dark hair, flicking it across her face. She tossed her head from side to side and her hair fell back into place.

When they reached the waiting car her grandfather dropped his hand from hers, opening the car door. Reluctantly Adelyn let go of the small hand, just for a moment, as they climbed into the back seat. Once in, she sat on one side, her grandfather on the other and each gently held a small tapping hand.

Unexpectedly a loud laugh escaped from Adelyn's throat. She felt it coming but couldn't stop it, not entirely. She gulped the rest of it back down, almost choking on its strength. Her eyes, large from embarrassment looked to her grandfather.

He smiled.

'I know,' he said. 'It's okay.' A tear escaped from his eye.

Adelyn let out a long sigh and pushed back into the soft leather seat.

'I just want to go home,' she said, closing her eyes.

'One more stop and then you can. You both can. We all can.'

As the car slowly left the cemetery, Adelyn promised herself that she would never return here. Ever.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

‘You know they can’t stay here; you know that don’t you?’

Adelyn watched her grandfather move slowly, purposefully around the kitchen, her mother’s kitchen. After a long day, first at the cemetery and then the church hall, surrounded by the kind people of the town of Port Kinsale, the one thing that kept her going was knowing that the peace and quiet their home was waiting for them – for her.

It was their neighbour, Renee, who had inserted herself into their lives, breaking through that peace and quiet. Adelyn could feel a frustration build.

Her grandfather stood at the kitchen sink, putting water in the kettle, and looking out over the small but well-kept back garden. With the kettle three quarters full, he moved to the side counter, placed it on its stand and switched it on. Adelyn watched every movement, listened to every word.

Despite trying to escape her, Renee had returned with them from the church hall. She had been a difficult presence in their home over the past few weeks, the final few weeks. Each time she arrived a whirlwind of organisation and endless instructions followed.

No longer did the sofa have half a dozen mismatched cushions and an old grey blanket strewn over it. Instead at each end a small, floral cushion sat primed. A soft peach coloured throw rug had been strategically placed on the back on the sofa, almost connecting the two cushions. The sofa now sat, unused.

Her mother had not been there to defend it from its makeover – too frail to leave the hospital bed that had been set up in the study. When Adelyn reported the transformation of the sofa, and other parts of the home, her mother only chuckled, took a sip of water, and laid back into the pillow. ‘It’s only a sofa, Addie. It won’t change who we are – who you are.’

‘But mum, she isn’t a *real friend*. She’s just a bossy neighbour who thinks she knows everything.’

‘Who means well... and with everything that’s going on, I don’t think we should get too worried about Renee. I’m sure someone else in the town will create a new drama and we’ll be forgotten. Replaced.’

Adelyn let the sofa remain transformed however resisted other changes. When Renee tried to reorganise their bedrooms, Adelyn objected, slammed her door shut, leaned up against it to stop Renee from entering. When the linen closet was being sorted to Renee’s standards, Adelyn took what was going to be discarded and later, in the quiet of the night, returned them, restoring the closet to its original state of disorganisation.

Finally, it was her mother who intervened, whispering to Renee to let it be, let the girls be. Even though Renee came over less, much to everyone’s relief, that didn’t stop her from commenting about them at the supermarket, or the bakery.

Stevi overheard her at newsagents, telling Mrs Van Dene, from the gardening group, how Adelyn left her hairdryer pugged in ‘all the time’ and that ‘he is too old’ to recognise the

danger. Mrs Van Dene had nodded in agreement, but Stevi knew she wasn't really agreeing – that's how everyone responded to the town's busy body.

'They can't stay here long term, you know that. I know Cora had some grand idea that they could continue living here in this house, with you, but well let's face it, you're not getting any younger. I have everything set up for them to move in – today if we decided.' Renee was not one to keep her thoughts to herself.

'I'm more than capable of looking after them, at least for the next few years,' Adelyn's grandfather replied. 'Look, I have no doubt you're all organised, but I agreed, *with Cora*, that they could stay here in her home, their home. I've already had some offers on my place – I'll be staying here too.'

Adelyn looked from the kettle to her grandfather, who now stood with his hands resting on the back of the kitchen chair, his shoulders slumped, a soft resigned smile on his face. 'We'll be okay here for a while, won't we, Addie-girl.'

Adelyn nodded.

When Adelyn was younger, she would plant seedlings with her grandfather in the veggie patch he had built for them along the back fence of their garden. Every time her small hands pressed the damp dirt around the base of a tomato plant or a lettuce seedling, she would turn to her grandfather for acknowledgement. 'Atta-girl' he would say.

She thought he was saying 'Addie-girl'.

It soon became her nickname.

'Well, then, as long as you both know the *reality of this situation* and what has to happen, eventually. Thankfully, and I said this to Cora several times, I'm only two houses away, so I will keep an eye on things.'

Her grandfather had turned his back on Renee, reaching to the cupboard above the kettle to take out a mug. Without a word he held it towards Adelyn, who shook her head. He placed the single mug on the counter and closed the cupboard.

'In five years, Addie will be eighteen and will be more than capable of looking after herself and her sister,' he said.

Renee was not convinced. She put her hands on her hips and let out a loud, disapproving tsk-tsk. 'I don't know any eighteen-year-olds who want to give up their life to raise a sibling.'

'Then you don't know Addie.'

Adelyn stood up and gently pushed the chair in. She brushed down the front of her dress, the dress she and her mother had picked out together when they knew this day was coming. Her shoes were by the front door, having pulled them off in the car on the drive home.

'I think I... we, are *more* than aware of the *reality of this situation*,' she said, trying hard to control the tremble she could feel developing in her voice. More than ever Adelyn wanted Renee to see her as grown up, like her mother had, like her grandfather does. She didn't want her voice to give her away.

She stood tall, pushed her shoulders back and nodded at her grandfather. Without another word, Adelyn turned and left the kitchen. ‘*The reality of the situation,*’ she thought.

Adelyn needed to find Laney. Having had that small hand in hers for most of the day, she felt lost without it. Knowing where she would be, in their mother’s bedroom, Adelyn walked via the lounge room to the sofa. She picked up one cushion and tossed it to the other end, making a small untidy stack of two, then she pulled the throw rug and let it half dangle from the edge of the sofa and onto the floor.

The reality of the situation.

For a moment she stood and looked at the now dishevelled sofa and felt a small smile arrive. ‘That’s better.’

She turned, headed to the hall, her hand gliding along a well-worn path that had appeared, until it stopped at the door of their mother’s bedroom.

‘Laney?’

‘I’m here.’

Adelyn pushed open the half-closed door and there on the bed, sitting up on the layers of pillows sat Laney, wrapped in their mother’s dressing gown. ‘I can smell her, you know.’

Taking four deliberately large steps and a small jump, Adelyn landed her on the side of the bed, upending some of the pillows and enticing a squeal of joy from her younger sister.

‘Is *she* still here?’ Laney asked.

‘Uh-huh, they’re in the kitchen. Do you need anything?’

Laney shook her head. ‘I ate so much at the hall. I just want to stay here. Can I sleep here tonight, Addie?’

‘Sure.’

Adelyn gently moved Laney’s fringe from her eyes. Laney had slept in their mother’s bed for the past week. Adelyn had occasionally joined her, but most nights slept in the reclining chair in the study, next to their mother.

Laney nestled down into the pillows and pulled the remote control from under the doona. With a click of a button the television on the wall lit up and soon the room filled with the sound of late afternoon cartoons.

Adelyn watched as her younger sister’s eyes struggled to stay open. The comfort of being wrapped in their mother’s smell, the warmth of the bed, the softness of the pillows soon became too much for Laney to resist. Within a few minutes she was sound asleep.

Pulling the sleeve of her mother’s dressing gown to her face, Adelyn snuggled down further into the bed. Laney was right. Their mother’s smell was there, strong, comforting. She closed her eyes and pictured her, in the kitchen, filling the kettle with water, wearing the dressing gown.

Adelyn drifted away with her sister. Neither of them heard the doorbell ring.

Chapter 3

It was dark when Adelyn woke. Laney was still asleep, thumb firmly in her mouth. Adelyn slid slowly out from the under the doona and tiptoed out of the room, the light from the lounge room filtered along the hallway floor. Before venturing down to see her grandfather, she turned in the other direction and headed to her own room.

She hadn't been there since getting dressed for the funeral earlier that morning. Now she wanted to get out of the sad dress and pull on some comfort clothes, her pyjamas.

Whilst the spring days were warm the evenings were still cool enough for slippers. Adelyn inspected the burst blister then pulled a band aid from the end of her sports bag. With the blister wrapped up, she manoeuvred her foot carefully into the slipper and stood. 'Not too bad,' she said, sliding her other foot into the remaining slipper.

Her grandfather had moved in over the last few weeks and it was Cora who asked him to stay on – not that he needed convincing. His house in the city would sell quickly, so the real estate agent had said. And besides, he had often talked about moving to Port Kinsale, to be closer to them.

'You're up,' he said, as she entered the lounge room.

'Just needed a nap.'

'Laney?'

'Still asleep.'

Her grandfather nodded. 'Well, she will either sleep right through or you and I are going to be up at midnight.' He chuckled.

Adelyn moved to the sofa and propped up the two cushions behind her. 'When did Renee leave?'

'Around five thirty. She had to get home to do something – thank goodness. Are you hungry? There's plenty to choose from in the fridge.'

Adelyn shook her head. She didn't have an appetite. A quick glance at the clock over the mantelpiece told her just after seven.

'She only wants the best for you both, you know that.'

'I know. She just doesn't have to be so bossy about it.'

Her grandfather nodded.

'I was thinking that tomorrow, when you girls are ready, maybe we can start to get a few things sorted. From the list.' As he said it, he pointed to the study.

Adelyn smiled at him. 'Sure.'

Several months before, after the diagnosis had been given, a small parcel had arrived and in it was a notebook. Its cover was a photo of the dark purple irises that grew in nearly every aspect of the garden. Inside the spiral bound notebook were lined pages and, every now

and then, a page with a photo of Adelyn or Laney, their house, grandfather, the garden. Their mother had made it online – especially for one purpose.

As the days passed, she had written lists of things to do, reminders of what needed to be done at the house, ideas for gifts, where to get Laney's birthday cake, random thoughts. Sometimes, when Adelyn was with her, she would read aloud what she was writing. However, towards the end, Adelyn had to take over the writing as her mother had only enough energy to say the words.

Then, when there were no more words to be said, no more words to write, Adelyn had closed the iris covered notebook and carefully placed it on her mother's desk. And that's where it stayed. Waiting. Her mother's instructions had been that it was to be opened the day after the funeral, so Adelyn knew that her grandfather was right. They would start tomorrow.

'How about ice cream?' her grandfather asked. 'Vegetables are overrated on days like today.'

Adelyn smiled. 'The extra-large bowls?' Her appetite had instantly returned.

'Are there any other sort when it comes to ice cream?' He raised himself out of the armchair and stretched. 'Why don't you head to the kitchen, and I'll get Laney. Can't have her missing out.'

He returned a few minutes later carrying Laney, who was slowly stirring from her sleep. 'Popsicle said we are having ice cream for dinner, Addie. Isn't he the best!'

'We are, in the extra-large bowls and with topping.' Adelyn had two tubs of ice cream out, the toppings and the scoop in hand, ready. 'Okay Laney, you go first, what do you want?'

As her grandfather lowered her to the ground, Laney lent over and looked at the selection before her. 'Two scoops of vanilla, two scoops of chocolate, raspberry topping on the vanilla, chocolate topping on the chocolate and where are the sprinkles? Have to have those.'

'That's a lot of ice cream,' Adelyn said. 'Are you sure?'

'Mum said I could. She said I could eat whatever I wanted today. You check. It's in the iris book.'

'No need to check. I have no doubt that your mum would have said it,' their grandfather said. 'I'll have what Laney's having, expect maybe not the raspberry topping and not too many sprinkles.'

It wasn't long before all three were back in the lounge room, spoons clinking against the bowls. The television was still on, but the news programs had finished and there was a home renovation show on. As the presenters talked about the current trend in paint colours and tile choices for the bathroom, the trio kept eating, Laney making the occasional slurping sound as she almost inhaled the melting dessert.

It was their grandfather who conceded defeat first. 'I can't finish mine,' he said, plonking the bowl onto the coffee table and sitting back in the armchair. He rubbed his stomach and bloated his cheeks with air, making Laney laugh.

'I'm nearly done mine,' she said. 'Then I can finish yours if you want Popsicle.'

‘If you manage to finish yours then I think that will be plenty for one night,’ he replied. ‘And since you had that nap, we might just stay up late and watch a movie – what’d you think? Addie-girl? What about you – interested in a movie?’

‘Nah, I think I might go for a run. It’s dark out but I feel like it.’

‘We can wait for you to get back.’

‘Don’t wait – I’ll be fine joining in wherever you’re up to.’ She stood up and picked up her grandfather’s bowl as she went towards the kitchen. Laney was stirring hers creating a melted ice cream and topping soup. The sprinkles had become small rainbow streaks of colour.

‘You better get changed then,’ said Laney with a giggle. Adelyn looked down at her pyjamas and slippers.

‘Good idea.’

A few minutes later, having changed into her jogging gear and runners, adding an extra bandage to the blister, Adelyn slipped out the front door and into the cool evening air. The house was set back from the street behind a tall brick fence with a wooden gate. Her mother had said when she saw the fence and the gate, she decided to buy the house. *‘I didn’t even bother to look inside,’* she had said. Adelyn knew this story well.

The gate clicked shut behind her and she turned to the right, heading along the footpath. *Just a few times around the block,* she said to herself. She felt like a good run but didn’t want to be too far from home, just in case.

If Adelyn hadn’t been thinking about Laney, about her grandfather, the notebook with the iris cover, her mother’s words about the tall brick fence, if she’d had none of those thoughts swirling around in her head then she might have noticed the car parked on the other side of the street.

She might have noticed it and its driver, sitting there in the dark, watching her.

Chapter 4

Adelyn woke early. Sunday. Friday's funeral felt like it had happened in a dream rather than two days ago. Yesterday she, Laney and her grandfather had all agreed at breakfast to open the iris notebook and begin the list. By the time they had got to the door of the study they had all changed their minds.

'It can wait until tomorrow,' he had said.

'But we promised mum,' Laney said.

'She would understand, wouldn't she Addie-girl.'

Adelyn nodded in agreement. 'Yes – it's okay Laney, she wouldn't want us to do it if we really didn't want to. It can wait.'

The hospital bed that had taken up most of the room in the study had been taken away. As the removalists were loading the bed into the van at the front of the house, Adelyn and her grandfather had arranged the study furniture to its rightful place. Her mother's desk and chair once again faced the window, and the two armchairs were returned from the spare room. Photos were put back to where they should be and finally Adelyn gave the whole room a vacuum.

In the middle of the clean desk, remained the carefully placed iris notebook, ready for the day after the funeral. Now, it would have to wait another day or maybe even two.

'Can we go out somewhere?' Laney asked, breaking the silence. Adelyn knew that it wouldn't take Laney long to convince their grandfather to take her to the beach, or the park or the bird sanctuary or maybe today, all three.

'Anywhere in particular?' he asked, gently placing his hand on Laney's shoulder.

'Hmm... How about the sanctuary, Popsicle? We haven't been there in ages; I mean really ages.'

'Sounds like a plan. How about it, Addie – the sanctuary?'

'On any other day, Adelyn, but I just have to finish this work, you understand...'

Her mother's voice, her mother's words.

'On any other day...' she began. 'But Stevi is coming over. I haven't seen her since the funeral, you understand...'

'Sure, sure,' her grandfather replied. He gave her a wink – she knew he understood.

Stevi and Adelyn had been friends since they began high school together the year before. New to town, Stevi needed to find some friends and decided the tall girl at the locker next to hers was a good place to start.

Adelyn had plenty of friends at school, most of them had known each other from primary school, the surf club, Port Kinsale wasn't a very big place – everyone knew everyone. Like Stevi, Adelyn was looking for someone new and decided the new girl, the one with the fiery red hair at the locker next to hers was a good place to start.

By recess, having been allocated the same classes, they realised they had a shared sense of humour, taste in music, and played in the attack end at netball. Stevi had moved from the city to this coastal township with her parents as a ‘sea and tree change, they can never make up their minds which one it is,’ she had explained. At first, she had been so annoyed with them that she stopped speaking for three days.

As Adelyn got to know Stevi and her parents she learnt that the three days was three hours – the car trip from their old house to the new one. It was hard enough for Stevi not to speak for a whole minute, let alone for three days.

Now, nearly two years later, Stevi had made it clear to Adelyn that the thought of returning to the city for anything other than a shopping trip was the furthest thing from her mind. They lived a block away from the beach, she and her dad were surfing every morning, her mum had taken up jogging with her, and she had Addie – her best friend.

For the last week, at Adelyn’s insistence, Stevi had stayed away. Adelyn knew that Stevi would have sent her messages; not that she saw them. Adelyn had left her phone at the bottom of her school bag.

On the day of the funeral, Stevi stood between her parents on the other side of the grave. Adelyn knew she was there but didn’t have the energy to talk to her – not then. Later, at the church hall they had hugged, however there wasn’t much to say and Stevi had soon left.

Now, today, as previously arranged, Stevi was going to come over. Adelyn wished things to be as normal as quickly as possible – but was more than aware of the reality of the situation. Stevi would bring her up to date on everything to do with school, why the netball team didn’t make the finals, and whatever else Stevi could think of.

With everyone’s plans made, Adelyn helped Laney get her backpack organised, with some snacks and a water bottle while their grandfather opened the driveway gates and backed out his car.

‘Remember, stay close to Popsicle won’t you,’ Adelyn told Laney as pushed the water bottle into the side pocket.

‘You don’t need to tell me that, Addie. I’m nearly nine – I know how to not get lost.’

Adelyn smiled. ‘I know, I know, it’s just...’ her voice trailed off. It’s just that I promised mum that I’d always look after you.

The car horn sounded. ‘Popsicle’s ready – I better go,’ said Laney, grabbing the straps of her backpack and heading for the front door.

‘Wait! Hat!’

Laney turned and rolled her eyes. ‘You sound just like mum, you know. Laney – hat. Laney – sunscreen.’ In an instant Adelyn saw the sadness reappear on Laney’s face. Just the mention of their mum.

‘Well, I’m sure you’ll sound like her to when you are bit older, you already have her smile.’

Laney nodded, blinking the tears away. ‘She said I’m a lot like her, did you know she said that?’

Adelyn didn't but pretended otherwise. 'Of course, she said it to me lots – now go – before Popsicle leaves without you.'

'He won't leave without me, Addie,' she said, rolling her eyes and shaking her head.

Laney held out her hand and Adelyn didn't hesitate. Tap. Tap. Tap. They walked to the waiting car.

Once she was sure Laney was secured in the back seat, Adelyn closed the car door and tapped the roof. 'Have a great time, you two.'

'We will,' her grandfather replied. 'See you in a few hours.'

Adelyn slowly walked down the driveway as the car slowly reversed, waving to an overly excited Laney. As she watched her grandfather and sister drive away, Adelyn looked up and down the street, hoping that Stevi wouldn't be far away.

It was then that she saw a car that she didn't recognise, pull slowly away from in front of the house across the street, following her grandfather and Laney. She shrugged her shoulders. With the summer approaching, just about everyone in the town would get people visiting on weekends. City people. As much as she loved the beach, she didn't like it when the summer crowds arrived.

'Tourists,' she muttered as she watched the unknown car get to the end of the street and turn the corner. With no sign of Stevi, Adelyn turned and headed back inside.

Chapter 5

Stevi sat on Adelyn's bed and watched as Adelyn rearranged things in her wardrobe. 'Are you coming to school tomorrow?' she asked.

With Adelyn away, school hadn't been the same for the last few weeks. Stevi had other friends, it wasn't like she was lonely – it just wasn't the same.

'Not sure. There's things to do here,' said Adelyn.

There was an awkward silence.

When Stevi first arrived, just over an hour ago, she had hardly stopped to take a breath. She had missed Adelyn so much that she just blurted out every thought she had stored for the past week, every story they would have shared. Adelyn had listened – laughing at times, doubting some of the detail, but overall enjoying having Stevi back again. However now, they seemed to have run out of things to say – which left only topic unspoken.

Stevi moved from the bed, stood next to Adelyn. 'Do you want to talk about it?'

Adelyn shook her head, blinking her tears away, shuffling the coat hangers from one place to another and then back again. 'There's nothing to talk about. It was horrible. It is horrible.'

Stevi nodded. For the next few moments, the only sound in the room were Adelyn's soft sobs and the clunking sound of coat hangers.

'Okay, okay,' Adelyn said, stepping back from the wardrobe and wiping her face with the bottom of her t-shirt. 'Sometimes there's nothing, then it's a small wave but at night it's...' Her voice trailed off.

Silence, again.

'What about a walk, get out of here for a bit?' Stevi said.

Don't lock yourself in the house, Addie, remember – head high, stay strong...

Adelyn nodded. 'Yep, let's do that.'

Sunday was another perfect spring day with only a slight breeze. Their steps fell into line as they headed away from the house. At first, they were silent however Stevi was not one to be quiet for long and she was soon telling Adelyn about the training she was doing for the surf comp at the end of the summer.

'And mum wants me to do the coastal run with her – all twenty-five kilometres, I said I'd maybe do ten and then the rest on a bike. Dad said he would be the support person – which of course means he gets to drive the car the whole way.'

Adelyn listened but didn't listen. She caught enough of what Stevi was saying to ask a question every now and then or make a comment, but she couldn't stop her mind drifting.

At the end of the street, they turned left and headed down the small hill towards the next block. There was a path that would take them towards the beach and then join with the popular coastal path that stretched from town to town. Adelyn and her mum

had walked parts of it and made plans for doing the whole path one day – walking, not running like Stevi’s mum wanted to do.

Sunday mornings on this path were busy. After being at home for the past two weeks, Adelyn felt uncomfortable in the growing crowd.

Stevi was still talking.

They walked on.

To get to the beach they would need to cross the main road, the one that weaved from the city right along the coast. Today Stevi said it reminded her of the city peak hour. People out for a Sunday drive, tourists heading for a morning swim or to find somewhere for a late breakfast. ‘Let’s go up there,’ said Stevi, pointing to a small row of shops that had a pedestrian crossing.

Bringing the flowing traffic to a stop, the two friends crossed and continued.

Don’t leave things for ‘one day’.

If it wasn’t for that small blister, Adelyn would have suggested they jog for a while. She’d never been a jogger until about six months ago when her mum encouraged her to try it. Stevi took her on her first jog, just around the block a few times. Now she felt walking wasn’t quite enough anymore.

‘Let’s get off the path,’ she said to Stevi.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Too many people *and* kids *and* dogs. And I’ve got this blister.’ Only a half lie, or a half truth.

Stevi nodded.

There was an exit path not far ahead that would take them back towards the shops and they could then head up the hill towards Stevi’s home. This time there was no crossing to halt the traffic, they just had to wait for an opportunity.

‘This is going to take forever,’ moaned Stevi, as their heads turned left then right, then left again, as if watching a tennis match.

‘Now!’ said Adelyn, and the two sprinted across. The quick burst of energy brought a flush of red to Adelyn’s face. Once on the other side she burst into laughter. ‘That felt good.’

Stevi laughed too. ‘Too bad about that blister – we could’ve just kept running.’

The place where they had crossed put them in front of a small art gallery. Adelyn knew it well. Her mum had ‘dabbled’ with paints for the past few years and had sold several paintings here. There had even been a showing of her work. Immediately Adelyn saw the window display.

‘Look,’ said Stevi, seeing it too.

They stepped closer to the window. One of Cora’s paintings was perched on a large easel with two others hanging on either side. Underneath the easel was a small table with a

framed photo of her mum at her exhibition opening, and leaflet from the funeral placed beside it.

It took Adelyn's breath away. The central painting was of their front brick wall and gate. Spilling over the top of the wall, the purple wisteria, in full bloom. The wooden gate was half open, catching a glimpse of purple irises lining the brick path that Adelyn knew lead to the front door.

The smaller painting on the side was at the beach, two children running long the water's edge. 'There's you and Laney,' Stevi said. The beach was empty and in the distance was a kite, sailing out over the sea. 'And is that when...'

Adelyn chuckled, 'Yeah, when I let go of the kite.'

The final painting was the back of three people who Adelyn knew were her mum, Laney, and herself, holding hands as they walked away, along a path that Adelyn recognised as the one she and Stevi had just been walking on.

She hadn't seen any of these in completed form before, just in sketches.

'Which one are you thinking of buying,' came a voice from behind them.

The girls turned to see a tall woman standing a few steps behind them. Adelyn knew she wasn't a local. She dressed like a Sunday tourist. 'I quite like that middle one,' the woman continued.

'They're not for sale, just on display,' said Stevi. 'Her mum did them.'

'Really? Well, she's very talented. And that must be you, with a younger brother or sister – it's hard to tell.'

'Sister. And it's 'was'... was talented,' Adelyn said, having turned back to the painting. Adelyn was so focused on the paintings that she didn't notice that the woman standing behind her was no longer looking at the display but at her.

She didn't notice. But Stevi did.

'I'm sorry,' the woman said as she took a step closer to Adelyn.

'Come on,' Stevi said, leaning into Adelyn. 'Let's go.' She pulled gently at Adelyn's arm and led her away. When they got the corner of the shops to head back up the path, Stevi turned and looked back.

The woman was still there, watching them leave.

Chapter 6

‘I’m thirsty. Let’s stop at my place.’

The path that would lead Adelyn home went right past Stevi’s street.

Stevi and her parents lived only a block away from the beach, not far from the shops. Behind a small garden of natives, a garden that requires little maintenance, stood their house – built on stilts to accommodate the rising hillside, and to make the most of the view.

On the front veranda watching as the friends walked up the driveway laid Plod, a large, ageing golden retriever, who had been part of the family before Stevi was born. Whilst his ageing body made it difficult for him to run and play like he used to; his tail had not stopped working.

Under the veranda, in a lock up cage, was a growing collection of surfboards Stevi and her dad had been gathering. Different boards for different weather conditions. When they had time, and weren’t surfing, they both watched online videos on how to repair old boards. Stevi’s dad was getting so good at it he thought he might open a surfboard repair business, ‘Just to fill in some time,’ he had said.

Her dad had been a financial adviser in the city, working for a large firm. When the pandemic had shut down nearly every major city a few years ago, he had to work from home. Once the restrictions lifted and he was able to head back to the office, he realised he just couldn’t do it. So, they moved – and he still worked from home.

Stevi’s mum Bronnie, had also relished the change in lifestyle. She used her managerial skills from years of running the HR department for a legal firm to become to new manager of the Port Kinsale Golf and Country Club. Shorter hours, less travel, ‘and a lot more fun’ Stevi had heard her mum tell her city friends.

Adelyn knew this story, of course. Stevi had told her all of it on the very first day of school. The pandemic had come to Port Kinsale too – but not like in the city. Apart from the tourists not coming, Port Kinsale continued on. Some of the shops that relied on the summer tourists closed for a while but gradually, as things returned to normal and the tourist began to return, shops reopened, holiday rentals started up and weekend golfers required looking after.

‘Hey, you two. Want some lunch?’

Leaning on the veranda rail, already halfway through a salad roll, stood Stevi’s dad, Matt. He held it up as evidence of what he could make them.

‘Sure thing,’ replied Stevi, heading up the flight of stairs, two at a time. Adelyn was close behind.

‘How are you doing, Addie?’ he said, as she landed at the top. Adelyn shrugged, as she knelt beside Plod and rubbed his ears. ‘Yeah. Dumb question. Come on, I’ll make you a roll or a wrap, you can choose.’

Stevi was already in the kitchen gulping down a large glass of water and holding, in her other hand, a similar glass for Adelyn.

‘So where have you too been? The beach track?’ Matt asked.

‘Yeah, then we stopped by the gallery,’ Stevi said. ‘There’s a display of Cora’s work – it’s great, you should have a look, Dad.’

‘Might stroll down there later – take look. What’d you think of it, Addie?’

‘It’s okay, I guess. No one told me about it.’

‘Hmmm...’ Matt murmured, nodding gently as he piled lettuce, tomato, and cheese onto the slices of bread.

Sometimes no words are the right words. And Adelyn had certainly had enough of sad words in the last few weeks.

‘Here you go,’ he said, handing each girl a plate with a freshly made salad sandwich. They all returned to the veranda and sat at the outdoor table. From there they could see across the trees tops and out to sea. The street, shops and tourists had become hidden from the view.

‘When we were at the gallery, this woman started talking to us,’ Stevi said, just before taking a large bite into the roll then peeled part of the crust from the bread and tossed it to Plod.

‘What do you mean, a woman? A local?’ Matt asked.

‘A tourist,’ Adelyn said. ‘They’re everywhere this weekend.’

‘There was something about her,’ Stevi said, this time tossing part of the slice of cheese. Plod was not fussy.

‘What did she say to you?’ Matt asked. He had finished his lunch and was brushing of the wayward crumbs that had landed on his t-shirt and shorts. He’d saved one piece of crust for Plod who had watched every mouthful disappear, knowing, with Matt, he would have to wait until the end.

‘It was nothing, Stevi,’ said Adelyn, trying to recall the woman. She had caught a quick glimpse of her but not enough to recall what she looked like.

‘Yeah. You’re right. Just a tourist. Probably looking for some art she can take back to brag about.’

‘Right, well I have a few things to do before your mum gets home Stevi. Don’t forget to clean up the kitchen will you,’ he said with a wink to his daughter.

‘Why is it always me who has to clean up,’ she retorted, but Matt was already back inside and probably not listening.

‘I better get home. Pa and Laney will be home soon, and I want to be there.’

‘I’ll walk you home, just to be safe.’

‘That’s an odd thing to say – safe from what? This is the safest place in the world, Stevi. Sometimes it’s like you still think you live in the city.’

Stevi picked up both plates and stacked the glasses. As Adelyn headed down the stairs Stevi said, ‘Let me know when you get home.’

Adelyn let out a laugh, 'What are you, my mother?' It had come out so quick, so naturally, that it stopped her dead in her tracks. She turned and looked back up to Stevi, who immediately ran down the stairs and threw her arms around her friend. 'I forget, you know, just for a moment - I forget, and then...' Adelyn wiped her face with the back of her hand.

'I don't know what to say Addie.'

'It's okay. Mum said it would be like this. She told me. It's just, knowing is one thing, having it happen is...' again Adelyn's voice faded away.

She didn't need to finish the sentence, not with Stevi.

'Let me walk you home,' Stevi said in a whisper.

'Thanks, but I need some time to myself - before Laney gets back. I'll be all right.' With another wipe of her face, this time with the other hand Adelyn headed down the driveway and towards the path that would lead her home.

The walk up the hill was always harder than the walk down, but Adelyn was used to it. One foot in front of the other and then halfway up she decided to power up the remaining hill. Out of breath at the top she turned the corner towards her street.

As she got closer to their house, she noticed the wooden gate was half open, just like in the painting. The wisteria was in bloom too. Closer to the gate she scolded herself for not shutting it properly, a rule her mum had always had.

Stepping through, she pushed the gate fully open and looked along the path, now bare of the purple irises that had been blooming there only a few days before.

It was then that she noticed her. Standing at the front door about to ring the doorbell.

'Who are you?' Adelyn said, her heart telling her to flee, her feet frozen to the ground.

The woman turned. She smiled. Adelyn recognised her. The gallery.

'Adelyn,' the woman said, taking a step towards her. 'I'm your mother.'