

Prologue

Dublin – 1988

It was Kate's most vivid memory from childhood, maybe her happiest. Her father, coming home, rain on his coat, the smell of cold from him, and in a small box he left by the fire, a dog already named; Patch. 'For you,' he said and she ran to look inside.

In the background, she could hear her mother's voice, low and gin-tainted. 'It is nowhere for a dog.' Kate did not care. Her very own puppy, a black and brown sheepdog. 'He's too big for the city,' the words were whispered on the far side of the kitchen. Kate stroked his shivering woolly-haired coat and brown eyes stared vulnerable and watery at her. His nose was wet, his tongue was soft and warm against her face. For a moment, Kate was oblivious to the conversation at her back. 'Typical, you just never think, Crispin, that's what's got us into the mess we're in. Thanks to your gambling, we can hardly afford food for the table, and you bring home every waif and stray you come across.' Her red lips turned down and Kate often thought how lovely her mother would be if only they turned up instead.

'Adaline, please. Not now.' Her father stood wearily at the table, Kate heard him unscrew the gin that sat there. 'What's done is done. I've brought you here, to this house, away from the debt collectors, let me be.'

'Yes, this house.' Adaline's words were spiteful jabs, 'living off your grandmother, even your own family don't want to know us now.' She sipped her gin noiselessly, she wore her bitterness close to her, malice spiked every interaction. 'You're a bad lot, that's what they produced; however they managed it between them.'

The smell of damp and faded wallpaper, ornaments her mother wouldn't choose and a pervading silence that both muffled and incised at once, this was Kate's childhood. They lived in St. Kiernan's, a faded Georgian pile on the wrong side of Dublin city; it was all they had. Bequeathed in a long forgotten will that the great-grandmother they didn't know had written. She had bypassed her daughters, Pamela and Iris – perhaps she knew that he'd need it more than them; she left the lot to her only grandchild; Crispin. They moved, Kate and her parents, to St Kiernan's when she was five. It was for the best; they were on the brink of divorce and financial ruin. They hoped Dublin was far enough away from where her father's gambling debts might find them. It was not far enough to mend the damage done. Her home was silent, the time for words had passed, and mostly, apart from that final night, with the dog her new

companion, she spent her time alone. An only child. A lonely child. At the time, they thought it for the best. ‘Not in front of the child,’ her mother said more often than anything. ‘Kate, go to your room.’

She held the puppy close as she padded up the stairs, the world better now than it was before. Beneath her, the sounds of their voices, vicious and low, rose as she ascended each step, until she closed the door of her room. They argued for hours, but the thick Georgian walls drowned them out so Kate did not hear their final words. Instead, she snuggled her face close to the soft coat in her hands and felt the comforting warmth of him in her arms. This was a night she’d remember for many years – the arrival of that little dog gave her something to love that would love her in return, unconditionally.

It was a starless night, the night her father left them. Before he went, he kissed her on her nose. She remembered that still, how it felt, warm and soft and light. She remembered the sweetened scent of brandy and green Irish tweed, as he stayed before her eyes for just one second. Perhaps he knew this was goodbye forever. There had never been a bond, not really. Not the way you expect with your father. Perhaps that’s why she remembered him leaving so vividly, it was because he kissed her goodbye and it was something he’d never done before or since. He didn’t kiss her mother. She slammed the door behind him and volleyed up the thick-carpeted steps of the house on Parnell Square. A second door slammed and Kate watched her father get into a Dublin cab in the street far below, from the silent house.

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Iris, 1956

It was a sunny spring morning in 1956, when their worlds would take an unexpected turn. Iris was making her way down O'Connell Street to buy a pound of imported coffee from Bewley's for the guesthouse. The city was heaving with its own self-conscious weight and, occasionally, Iris caught a glimpse of her purposeful movement in the shop windows. She was a young woman, tall and well-proportioned, her auburn hair caught flecks of sunshine in its glossy length, so its shine was more than arresting against her ivory skin. She cut a striking figure in her powder blue skirt and the matching coat Mrs Muldoon had made for her Christmas gift. Black fur, taken from a pelt long forgotten in the attic of St. Kiernan's, hugged her neck. Warm and soft, it collared the simple wool coat. She felt like a movie star and perhaps there was a passing resemblance to a precocious Lauren Bacall.

It seemed that with each passing day, the grey of Dublin was fading from sight. Fast receding was the importance of the war. 'If Dublin were not bombed it was only because it was hardly worth the effort,' her mother often said. It was still a mixed honour to have a father who died for the King of England. He had not returned from the war. He died a hero, in Sicily, which was meant to be something for them all to hold onto. The new Dublin, the city of this bright morning, was one of showbands, awkward liberals and pulpits vying for domination. It was a place of opportunity and a growing optimism that there must surely be good times ahead.

Iris stopped for a moment at Cleary's, examining the latest styles that were far beyond the few shillings her mother gave her each week for her work in the guesthouse. She couldn't stand for long, but it was hard to pull herself away. The shop fascinated her with the constant stream of people milling through its doors. Cleary's was the countryman's store. They came from all over Ireland to shop here. It had a reputation for quality and that did not compromise the style she admired in its huge gleaming windows.

Overhead, the clock ticked unapologetically towards lunch. Iris turned away quickly only to be bowled over by a young man with piercing blue eyes. Even as she fell backwards, she found it hard to wrestle her attention from their depths. She landed in an undignified heap on the path; her abuser quickly stood and held a hand out to help her straighten herself.

‘Forgive me, it’s not every day I fall for a good-looking girl so literally.’ His eyes danced and it seemed to Iris they animated his whole character.

‘You should be looking where you’re going; you’re not on a rugby pitch now,’ Iris said crossly as she tried to unhook her coat from the man’s jacket. Indignity made her defensive. Somehow, they were stuck together by virtue of one loose hook and a flapping grey lapel on the sports jacket the man wore.

‘I’m so sorry,’ the young man said, his accent slightly clipped. ‘I didn’t see you, we were rushing to...’ His long tapered hands hovered over the hook for a moment. ‘Here, let me.’ His fingers slid gently across the hook, unfastened it with an experienced slip.

When Iris looked up into his face, she thought she never saw eyes that held so much danger in their depths. Suddenly her temper subsided, overwhelmed by something new, something she’d never felt before. She felt her cheeks redden and stepped back from the man as quickly as she could.

‘Oh, it’s...’ Iris did not finish her sentence because, when she looked to his side, there stood Sir Clive Mornington-Hunt, surly and sour and condescending. ‘It’s okay, I’m fine.’ She shook out her skirt, picked up her purse from the path. ‘It’s my fault, I wasn’t looking. Sir Clive,’ she saluted him.

‘Au contraire, it was my fault, entirely.’ The man held out his hand, his voice more confident now they had locked eyes. ‘William Keynes, at your service.’ He clicked his heels and bowed elegantly and then looked to his companion. ‘Are you going to introduce us, Clive?’

‘Of course, this is Pamela’s sister,’ Clive looked away and, for a moment, Iris wondered if he knew her name. He had been staying in room five at St Kiernan’s, her mother’s guesthouse on Parnell Square, for weeks now, but he had never once made conversation with her beyond his requests in terms of his accommodation.

‘I’m Iris Burns,’ she felt bold saying it and holding out her hand, but when William kissed the back of her glove, she felt giddy with a kind of excitement that she thought only happened in books from the library.

‘Enchanted, I’m sure.’ He looked deep into her eyes, seemed to move indecently close to her and said, ‘I can see why Clive is so fond of your sister, if she’s anything like you...’

‘Oh, I’m afraid we’re not alike, Pamela is so much more...’

‘I don’t believe it, not a word of it; she couldn’t be lovelier than you.’

‘In the name of all that’s decent, Willie, can’t you see, she’s just a child.’ Clive sounded petulant, as though he wanted to be somewhere else, and Iris suspected anywhere else would do. ‘Come on, we have to make it back to Wynn’s Hotel in less than an hour.’

‘Ah, well. Duty calls, Miss Burns.’ William did a little bow, and somehow it seemed to suit him, as though only someone as handsome and charming as William Keynes could get away with it. ‘I have no doubt we will meet again, Miss Burns, and I will look forward to it.’

And so Iris made her way to Bewley’s; her imagination filled with thoughts of William Keynes and no real expectations beyond maybe dipping into her five shillings for a Dracula ice cream on the way home.

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Iris's mother described the trade as 'mainly commercial'. St Kiernan's, a grand Georgian red-brick had belonged to an aunt of her mother's, it was too large to be a family home and Mrs Burns had turned it into a respectable guesthouse while her husband had gone off to save them all from Hitler. It was true, their little guesthouse was home to a handful of 'permanents' – a few retired professionals who wanted to live out their days in domestic comfort without having to take on the running of a house alone. For as long as Iris could remember, Miss Peabody and Miss Chester had shared the large ground floor bedroom, facing onto Parnell Square. The two women were treated like elderly aunts. They had become part of an extended, disjointed family that shared all of the major events in the Burns family calendar. Mostly it was down to Iris to look after the permanents. Her older, more glamorous sister Pamela was front of house, booking in and dealing with 'the commercials'. What Maureen Burns wanted more than anything was a good husband for Pamela. Not just any of the weekly commercials, but Maureen had her heart set on a professional man, a doctor or a solicitor perhaps. When Sir Clive Mornington-Hunt booked in, neither Maureen nor Pamela could believe their luck.

When Iris caught a glimpse of Sir Clive, she couldn't quite believe Pamela was setting her cap at him. The second son of the Earl of Mayo, he was hardly five foot two and his words stuttered from him in a flurry of bashful smiles and spitting consonants. The only respite seemed to be when he was engaged in discussing the finer points of rugby or the state of Europe and how things might be remedied. Unbelievably, it seemed Pamela was smitten. Maybe not as she had been by the handsome English medical rep who'd brought her to the cinema four times last year. He had made her smile for weeks after, but then cry like her heart might break. Iris heard her sob in the little single bed opposite her own. Iris had a feeling Clive would never make Pamela cry, she had a feeling he'd never make her smile in the same way the medical rep had either. Clive was enchanted immediately, most men were. Quite apart from Pamela's silver-blonde long hair, she was blessed with eyes as bright as the Pacific Ocean and skin so smooth a baby might be envious. She managed to be demure and witty, all at once. Their mother had long ago drilled into both girls the importance of being a lady first and everything else long after.

Before very long, Clive was taking Pamela to all the major events in the city of interest to the great, the good and the seriously connected. 'We'll have an announcement very soon,' her mother whispered one morning as she double-checked the dining room was set out perfectly. They announced their engagement at Christmas. Now, Pamela was furiously planning a spring wedding in Clive's family seat in Mayo. Iris found herself promoted to the front of house; the hostess role that Pamela had once filled. Her mother was in no rush to find her a

husband, she was after all not yet twenty, compared to Pamela's twenty-two. They secured a girl to come in each day to look after the permanents, tend the fires and take on some of the heavier tasks that had once been Iris's domain. And so it was that Iris found herself serving breakfast one early morning to William Keynes. She had thought about him often, since that day on O'Connell Street. Once or twice, she'd asked Pamela about him; her sister supplied information sparingly. 'Clive says he's bad news, really, Iris, you don't want to waste your time thinking about him.'

'I'm certainly not thinking about him or anyone else for that matter,' Iris snapped.

'Good, because you could do much better than the likes of Willie Keynes. Clive says that he's from bad stock and you know what mother says.'

'The apple doesn't fall far from the tree?' Iris shook her head. It was typical of Clive to think that just because William was not a chinless pudding like himself, he must be trouble. She would put him from her mind. After all, they had only met that once and it was unlikely he'd thought of her since. An emergency at the embassy changed that, when Willie Keynes could not catch his usual tram home, Clive booked him in to St. Kiernan's late one night.

Iris's hand shook as she poured his tea. She only realized how nervous he made her when she returned to the kitchen with a hot breakfast for Miss Chester.

'You need to be minding your business,' the old lady said as she prodded her poached egg meaningfully when Iris laid the plate before her. Iris wondered if old Miss Chester's heart had ever flipped over because a young man was nearby.

'Don't be minding her; sure can't we all be a bit forgetful now and then.' It seemed to Iris that William stood unnervingly close to her, but somehow it wasn't unpleasant. He liked her, she just knew it. She felt him watch her as she made her way around the tables earlier and she caught his eye too often not to know he felt the same. 'Come on, we should make plans for a date,' he said as he was leaving. It was the first time they were alone and Iris felt intoxicated by the challenge in his eyes.

'Oh, my mother would never let me go on a date, I'm much too...' Immediately, Iris regretted the words falling from her lips. At nineteen, other girls her age were getting married, but more often these days her mother spoke as though Iris would be staying put. Perhaps Maureen thought she'd never find another Earl or maybe that Iris would one day care for her as she had for the permanents.

'Well, then, we better not let her know, I suppose.' He put a finger to her lip and Iris thought she might explode with excitement. 'What time is bedtime here?'

'I...' the hall was empty apart from themselves. Even still, just talking to William felt illicit, never mind that he thought she might sneak out to meet him.

'Say, ten o'clock? I'll meet you at the entrance to the square?' He winked at her as he made his way out the door, 'Don't leave me waiting too long.' He was gone before she could set him straight.

Iris spent the morning floating through tasks that normally took half the time. Their conversation going over and back in her head. She couldn't possibly sneak out of the

guesthouse without her mother knowing. Well, perhaps technically, she could. After all, her mother settled into her room just after eight. A decade of early mornings had set their routine in stone. The Burns household rose early and slept soundly.

She could not leave him standing in the square all night, could she? After all, he was a colleague of Sir Clive's. What would they think of her if she left him out in the cold for the night? She tossed every scenario over in her thoughts, but she knew, more than anything, she wanted to meet him.

By eight o'clock, she had made up her mind. She would go to the gate and tell him she couldn't possibly go on a date with him. She painted her lips in the ruby lipstick Pamela cast aside in favour of a timid pink and changed into her best clothes; just because she wasn't going dancing, didn't mean she couldn't look her best. Creeping down each step, she cursed as they groaned in loud creeks beneath her stockinged feet, she didn't dare make a sound, so she hugged her shoes tight to her chest. She would be coy and evasive. Perhaps, he would fall madly in love with her and wait until her mother could be as thrilled for her as she was for Pamela.

'I'm freezing, but you were worth the wait,' William pulled her close before she could say a word. But then she knew, she had wanted to come, really, even if she told herself she wouldn't. He hadn't needed to convince her. Then they were stalking down O'Connell Street, his arm tight about her, his pace fast and words sparse. He smelled of tobacco and beer; it seemed to Iris the most sophisticated aroma. From his coat, there was the tang of aftershave, or perhaps, a perfume worn by some woman, brushed too close to him before they met. She matched his purposeful strides; feeling like they owned the city, youth and beauty and illicit love. He did not say much until they turned into the basement steps of a hotel she never noticed before somewhere well past Trinity.

'You're with me, right. If anyone asks your age, just say nothing.' He bent and kissed her full on the lips. It was strong and sweet and it felt to Iris like he might have sucked her soul from her. Her whole body emptied for a moment. When she floated back to ground, she just knew she was in love with William Keynes.

Kate, Present

Sometimes crossroads appear in the last place you expect them. Kate Hunt knew, as the Atlantic winter air dug hungrily into her bones, that she was standing at one now. The beach was empty, save for an occasional reluctant dog walker; certainly, she was the only holidaymaker. Was she a holidaymaker? She was staying with her great-aunt Iris and her husband Archie in their quaint hotel as far away from her real life in London as it was possible to get. Even if it was only an hour by plane to the west of Ireland, Kate felt like she was in a different world. Iris was her only real family now, unless you counted her mother and well, she and Adaline had never been close.

Ballytokeep did not get many tourists outside the summer months; none at all at the end of December. Kate booked the break on Christmas night. It was a whim, she needed to get away, to jump off the treadmill her life had become, just to breathe. Since they met at Pamela's funeral, Iris sent a Christmas card each year. Just a card. *'Hope you're well, thinking of you, love if you had time to pop across,'* it was the kind of thing people said. Probably, you never took them up, but Kate saw it as a sign, a lighthouse in a vast ocean – maybe a place, or people, to call her own. Alone in her London flat, it felt like the whole world was sharing the holidays without her. The city outside twinkled with festive cheer. She convinced herself for so long that it didn't matter. It was a time for drunks, rows and disappointments and, for almost a decade, she managed to ignore the silly cheerfulness around her. This year, she'd cracked open a bottle of champagne, a gift from work, had it made her maudlin? Rumour had it; her boss, Lyndon Tansey had just bought a winery in South Africa. He brought in a crate of white and red for their Christmas drinks and they'd all got nicely sozzled. Maybe, Kate thought that Christmas night, as she eyed the half-finished bottle of champagne, maybe that was what had made her feel restless, as though she was missing something. While other people were buying vineyards, she was wading through divorce papers for the rich and famous.

She booked it on a whim. Now, she was pleased she'd come here to this antiquated little place that was too big to be a village, too small to be a town. Ballytokeep, for all the desertion of the summer trade, was a place like no other she had ever been to. It was built on a stony

hill, a picture postcard of gaudily painted shopfronts and houses looking down to where the powerful ocean swept up to the weathered promenade. The sea, with its rolling surf whispering slowly and determinedly up the golden sand, seemed to promise the cleaning rejuvenation she so badly craved. Far off in the distance, the towers of a Norman castle keep rose high into the skyline and Kate knew she would visit here again to sit beneath its stoic turret. She loved the little hotel; her room the only one with a guest, peeped out of the centre of the Victorian building. The view was spectacular, small blue and white fishing boats bobbed on the icy waves that beat against the old harbour.

In London, they'd call Hartley's Guesthouse boutique, shabby-chic or maybe bohemian. If the place was a little faded, its chintz too threadbare to be fashionable, its varnishes dulled with age, it was no less charming for all of that. Here, it was what it was; there was no pretension about the Victorian building with all its original features and impressive views.

On New Year's Eve they stood looking out across the harbour, just the three of them and toasted the year ahead.

'To family,' Archie said and Kate knew she had done the right thing in coming here. The night air was fresh, it seemed that every lighthouse in the distance might wink across the blue-black ocean waves. If Kate could wish for anything, it was that she could have these people close forever.

Iris and Archie were genuinely delighted to have someone to fuss over in the off-peak season, even more so because it was Kate. They made sure there was a dancing fire in the cast-iron grate for her every day and a hefty basket of turf that never seemed to empty. They offered hearty full Irish breakfasts and seemed relieved when she told them she was happy to muddle along with them and she did not want them going to any trouble. Even so, the aroma of freshly baked scones, a medley of fruit, cinnamon and malt seemed to waft through the hotel every day. Iris had a light touch and her warm scones tasted like heaven when Kate was ravenous after the fresh sea air.

'We can't have you fading away with all that walking you're doing, can we?' Iris said as she dropped a laden tray on the writing desk that filled the bay window. Here, they were facing the long promenade that kept the sea mostly at bay.

'There's no danger of that with you and uncle Archie about.' Kate knew she looked gaunt and pale compared to the locals in Ballytokeep. She'd spent a decade in London, working, sleeping, and going through the motions: lonely. She could admit that here. In London, surrounded by people she knew, surrounded by millions of people and possibilities, she was lonely. Here, she walked across empty beaches with only the curlews for company and she was quite content. It was time for her to move on. The only problem was, Kate was not certain there was anywhere for her to move on to. 'I'll go back to London refreshed with the sea air and two stones heavier thanks to your breakfasts and baking, Aunt Iris.'

‘You should think about coming here in the summertime, it really is quite beautiful.’ Iris’s eyes were wistful as she looked out at the promenade. There was a high tide and it energized Kate, as though it vibrated within some part of her she never knew existed before.

‘Oh, I don’t know, I like having it all to myself. I’m not sure I want to share it with crowds of noisy holidaymakers and ice-cream vans and loud music blaring from every pub and shop along the promenade.’ Part of her didn’t want to impose, but deep down she was longing to return.

‘I think you’d love it. Actually, I think it would do you the world of good. The tourists we get here aren’t the kind you get in your usual Brighton or Bangor. Most of our visitors have been coming here for years, some first came with their parents.’

‘Well, I can certainly see why they come back.’ Kate leant forward to give the little fire a shake with the thin poker that looked as old, if not older, than Archie. The turf moved and fell into a shaky pyramid with a satisfying hail of sparks and peaty smoke before she covered it over with another layer of fuel.

‘Oh, Ballytokeep is like that. People always come back – that’s the one’s that actually leave.’

‘How do you mean?’ Kate found it hard to keep the smile from her voice, she liked talking to Iris, even about mundane things. It felt like she was catching up on conversations that should have filled her childhood. Her great-aunt was a queer old thing, but there was genuine warmth to her mixed with a familiar emptiness that Kate couldn’t have missed even if she tried.

‘Well, look at me. I came here, just like you. I was meant to wait for a few weeks. I was making plans, just back from Paris and my life before me, who knows where I’d have ended up? And then I met Archie and well...’

‘The rest is history?’

‘Don’t say it like that, you make me feel old.’ Iris smiled and then straightened the little posy of snowdrops picked earlier in the day. ‘But, I suppose that’s what it is now, history.’ She sighed and, for a moment, a terrible silence descended on the room, as though the very fabric of the place was waiting for her to admit something. ‘It’s all a long time ago now.’ She looked at Kate, just for a moment, as though confirming that she was there and then she said goodnight.

There was no sign of Iris the following morning. Perhaps it was all too much for them; this place was a huge responsibility for anyone. She guessed they closed for the winter months as much to catch breath as to conserve profit. The Hartleys were in their seventies, if not their eighties and this was a big place to keep up and running.

‘Oh, in the summertime, we couldn’t do it on our own. We get help in. But, you dear, you’re no bother to keep. It’s a treat to have you here, you’re family,’ Archie assured her the next day. ‘You’ll have to make your way over to the castle before you leave. Well, I suppose, you probably wouldn’t call it a castle now, it’s an old keep – almost a thousand years old. It really is very beautiful.’

‘Of course, I’ve seen it, from my room and when I’m walking along the beach. I thought maybe when the sun was shining...’

‘We had a bathhouse there on the purple rocks. Well, my brother had at any rate, for a while. Robert was very popular with the girls, maybe too much so in the end.’ His eyes stretched their gaze into the distance and she had a feeling that he was very far away. ‘Sometimes, if you’re lucky, the porpoises will come right up. Of course, it’s all down to tides and weather and heaven knows how many other factors, but even without those scallywags, it’s worth a visit.’

‘A bathhouse?’

‘Of course, you probably wouldn’t get too many of them in London.’ When he smiled his eyes creased even further, but Kate could see he must have been very handsome when he was young. Even now, he stood tall and straight and his features had a distinct masculinity to them that made you think of dashing Hollywood leading men who might have been around when he was in his prime. ‘Bathhouses, like the one here, were all the go at one stage. Apparently, they’re making a bit of a comeback now. It’s the seaweed, you see. It’s full of all sorts of minerals and what we believed years ago was that it could cure anything from TB to gout and people came from miles around to bathe in it.’

‘In a pool?’

‘Oh, dear no. Nothing as fancy as what you’d have now, with your spa this and your therma that. No, the seaweed was harvested and we would fill copper baths with it mixed with hot seawater. You could move over and back between the bath and a steam press. It took out all the impurities and put back every vitamin you could name.’ He smiled at her. ‘Sounds a bit daft now, but we sweated out the bad and absorbed the good – they’re doing it again down in Strandhill. It’s running all the year through, with people coming from miles around.’ He shook his head. ‘Funny, when you get to my age, the number of things that go out of fashion only to come back again.’

‘I’ve heard of the purple rock, but I just thought it was the name of the amusement arcade?’ It was an unsightly place, boarded up now; Kate wondered if it would open for the summer months.

‘Oh, that place. No, they called *that* after the purple rock – and even that’s not going to be around soon, it’s been bought by a developer, making it into fancy flats, or whatever they’re called these days.’ Resignation gripped Archie’s eyes in a way that only comes with age. ‘Probably do the same to this place, when we’re gone.’

‘No, they’d never knock down somewhere so beautiful.’ Kate tried to soothe. ‘And you’re not *going* anywhere for a long time.’

‘Wouldn’t they? They went mad to get their hands on the bathhouse and it’s a little gem.’

‘Is it still running?’ Kate would have loved a real seaweed bath, now she’d heard about them. ‘The bathhouse?’

‘I’m sorry to say, it hasn’t been properly run in sixty years. We took it over for a while, but there comes a time when you know what you’re able for. Pity though, we closed the doors on

it at the end of the season, so everything in it is just as Robert planned it.’ Archie began to clear some imagined crumbs from the table. ‘He died. Tragically, young. I’m afraid that the heart went out of the both of us at that stage.’ Archie shook his head sadly. ‘Will I make you a nice fresh pot of that tea now?’ he said, placing his time-worn hands on the pot and finding it still warm.

‘Ah no thanks, Archie, like I said to Aunt Iris, you’ll be responsible for ruining my figure if I don’t call a halt somewhere.’

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It was nine o’clock before Kate set off walking towards the keep. It was hard to believe she had spent one precious week here already. Lyndon Tansey told her to take as long as she needed. Maybe he knew, maybe they all knew. Maybe everything she bottled up for the last decade had been blatantly obvious to the people around her while she remained blind to it. She had her heart broken long enough ago for her to have moved on. The public humiliation was harder to shake. Bad enough to be jilted at the last minute. It seemed to Kate that being reminded of it each time her ex-fiancé’s love life featured in the celebrity gossip columns made it into an ongoing nightmare from which there was no escape. Other people unfriended their exes on Facebook and cut their photos in half. That was not so easy when your ex was in the national newspaper every other week.

‘The important thing is that you come back safe and sound, old girl,’ Lyndon had said, patting her hand with sincerity. He had taken the helm of the law firm when he was almost fifty. He was old enough to have learned from the mistakes of others and he knew when someone was worth holding onto. Kate had raked in millions over the last decade for the practice. She had represented the spouses of rock stars, royalty and the ridiculously rich and managed to pull hefty and healthy settlements every time. People knew her in the divorce courts by reputation, and if they did not fear her exactly, they advised their clients that she was particularly adept in aspects of family law.

She looked around her now. This place with its vastness and intimacy cuckolded into the cold of the climate mixed with the warmth of the people, it was just what she needed. It was a five-mile round trip to the bathhouse and the keep, which would bring her along a track kept clean by a scurrilous pack of sheep and goats. She drank in the clean air greedily; the only sound here was the crashing of water to her right and the call of the gulls across the empty strand to her left. She walked slowly, surveying from her high middle ground the austere beauty of the place at this time of year. She stopped and sat on a rock that seemed to have moulded into her shape long before she ever knew she would be coming here. She knew now

that she would come here again, it was as sure as the air she breathed. Perhaps this was the first step on that crossroads.

In the distance, she watched as a middle-aged woman made her way across the strand. Even from here, she recognized her. She saw her many times walk through the town, always with a shopping bag in her hand, sometimes wheeling one behind her. Today, she was making her way energetically with a yapping dog in her wake. Her face was puce despite the cold that must surely be biting into her. She rounded towards the ridge where Kate sat and stopped short as she neared her, surprised to see anyone out on such a cold day.

‘Hi.’ Kate did her best to smile, remembering that she was not in London now. It was okay to make eye contact; people here wanted you to talk to them.

‘Hi yourself.’ The woman panted and seemed to take the greeting as an invitation to join Kate on her rock. ‘I’m wrecked,’ she said and she plopped her considerable weight down awkwardly. ‘Hot flushes,’ she said and she fanned herself with gloved hands. ‘Phew, who knew, hah?’

‘Your dog doesn’t seem to mind,’ Kate watched as the little black and white terrier skipped out after the tide and then scudded back towards them as each new wave arrived. He was yapping happily, enjoying the chase of something he’d never catch.

‘Ah, Barry. Yes, I got him from the rescue – best thing I ever did. I wanted one for years, but you know, you need to put the time into a dog and my Duncan is allergic to anything with a coat, so...’ the woman smiled enigmatically as if his discomfort might actually please her in some odd way. The dog, as though he heard his mistress, came running across the beach towards them, digging up sand as he came.

‘You’re a super little fella,’ Kate said and she rubbed his head affectionately as Barry licked her fingers and danced a greeting frenzy up around them.

‘You’re lucky, he likes you,’ the woman said, reaching out to the little dog. ‘Not everyone he takes to, he’s nipped my Duncan more than once when he’s not expecting it. He had to have a tetanus jab, the works, didn’t he Barry?’ She nuzzled into the dog’s neck. ‘You’re such a good boy.’ She looked across at Kate. ‘You can’t beat a terrier to judge character, no fooling our Barry.’

‘No, I suppose not,’ Kate said, thinking of the unfortunate allergic husband upon whom he’d been foisted.

She turned to study Kate now. ‘You’re not from around here?’

‘No. I’m just... taking a little break.’

‘Funny time of the year for it.’ She dug into her rain jacket, pulled out a pack of mints, flipped the lid in a practised move and popped two on her hand then offered some to Kate. ‘Smoking, I figured the mints were better than the fags.’ The words were philosophical. ‘I’m Rita, by the way. Rita Delaney.’ She stuck out a short-fingered chubby hand.

‘Kate Hunt.’ Kate shook hands with a lot more warmth than she used when she was in London. ‘I’ve seen you about,’ she nodded back towards Ballytokeep.

‘Well, you would, wouldn’t you?’ Rita looked out towards the ocean. ‘I’m always knocking about the town, retired, you see. Last year. It’s why I got Barry,’ she nodded towards

the terrier. She blew out, as though that somehow explained everything in life. 'It's a nice spot here, isn't it? I mean, you could sit here for the day with your thoughts,' she looked at Kate, 'not that too much thinking is good for you.' There was the hint of warning in her voice, as though she was scolding a child.

'I like it. It makes a change. Normally I don't get much time to think.' Kate smiled; this woman was easy to talk to.

'London?'

'How did you guess?' Her accent gave her away straight off. In London, they all thought she was Irish, here they thought she was English. The truth was she was a bit of both.

'It's a gift.' They both laughed. They sat for a while: strangers in companionable silence.

'It's a good place to lose yourself,' Rita's voice was hardly a whisper. 'If you need to.'

'Doesn't everyone at some point?'

'Does everyone? I don't know. I know that it's easy to lose your footing and feel that life is moving away from you.' Rita sighed. 'I think that's what I feel now I've retired.'

'Was it tough?'

'Two years.' She said it with the finality of death. 'Next June, it's two years.'

'Early days so.'

'You're trying to make me feel better.'

'Is that a bad thing?' Kate would love someone to come along and make her feel better.

'No, but I suppose it's that whole losing yourself thing. I need to get... something.' She looked out into the ocean, as though it might provide the answer. 'It feels like I've lost something and even if I can't have it back again, I'm sure there's something else out there for me to find.'

'That makes sense to me.'

'Yes, it does, doesn't it? It sounds simple too.' They both laughed at that.

'Come on.' Kate stood and shook the sand from her windcheater. 'I'm going to the old bathhouse; the walk will do us both good.'

'Right,' Rita called the little dog. He was playing at the water's edge and then ran obediently towards her. His coat was soaked and filled with sand, but his eyes shone bright with happiness at this unexpected excursion from their normal route.

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'I've never seen anything like it,' Kate said. It was her first thought as they turned down the cove and saw the bathhouse snuggled into the cliff face. It was a turreted, stocky grown-ups sandcastle. 'It could have been emptied from a child's bucket,' was her first reaction. It had been painted, white with a light blue trim once, then the waves and the spray had all but washed that away. It still sat proudly, if shabbily, on a huge flat rock, that upturned in a lip over the sea. It was a plate, large enough for any giant.

'Genesis Rock – it's a metamorphic rock, probably over a thousand million years old,' Rita said. 'Sorry, did I mention I taught geography and home economics, once upon a time.'

'No, but I probably should have guessed.'

‘I don’t remember the bathhouse even being open. I could imagine that I’d have spent all my days here if I had.’ Rita looked at the washed white walls that reached high into the cliff face.

‘Well, Archie said they ran it for a few years, but he didn’t say when it shut.’ This place probably held sadness for Archie, if his brother died here. Kate couldn’t feel it. Instead, it made her feel energized, as though the sea was spraying something like an invitation deep into her lungs. It made her heart pound with an expectation she hadn’t felt in years. Even the deserted castle keep that loomed up in grey stone at the tip of the headland seemed to carry a hopeful secret in its towers.

‘It must have been lovely once. Even now, you can see.’ Rita rested her hands on the thick window ledge, her nose pressed firmly to the cold glass of the windows. ‘It looks like they just closed up one evening and never came back.’

Kate walked to the back of the bathhouse; it dug into the cliff face, as though the construction of one depended on the other. Alongside the building, a small narrow road clung to the cliff for a couple of hundred yards before it feathered off onto what counted as a main road in these parts. Far below, the waves lapped serenely against the stone. It was low tide now; Kate wondered how close the water actually came to the rock. ‘I’d love to get a look inside.’ Rita followed her round to the front of the bathhouse. They peered through a sea sprayed window for a few minutes. Inside, Kate could see there were tables and chairs, a small stove and an old-fashioned counter where once someone had taken orders for afternoon tea. ‘It’s a little café, wouldn’t it be lovely if it was open for coffee?’ Kate mused, it was so much more than just a bathhouse.

‘I was thinking the same thing. Wonder if they left a key about.’

‘Wishful thinking, I’m afraid.’ Kate settled herself on one of the giant window ledges that ran along the front of the building. She could imagine this place in summer, flower planters laden with colours, the sun reflecting off the white and blue of the rounded walls and the gleaming window glass casting sparks of sunlight across the ocean.

‘Wishful thinking, is it?’ Rita smiled, she held a key she’d found tucked deep in one of the huge cast-iron planters standing sentry at the arched front door. The key was sturdy, blackened and ancient. When Rita slipped it into the lock, it turned as if it had been waiting for them all this time. ‘Oh, my...’ it was as much as either of them could manage. ‘Oh, my...’ Rita uttered the words again.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Kate said and she felt it as much as she saw it. The place had something. It was a real Edwardian tearoom. The cake stands on the counter stood dusty but still upright to attention, the china cups and saucers cobwebbed but delicate and lovely. ‘It’s such a shame. That it was just left, like this. It feels as if...’

‘It’s waiting for something or someone to come back for it?’

‘Yes, maybe.’ It was exactly what Kate thought. This place, it was like herself, and as she walked about the cast-iron tables, she had a strange feeling. It sent ripples through her. This

was happiness; she knew it, remembered it from before. As the sea breeze dashed through the little room, so too it seemed to rush into her heart, breathing in something close to hope.

‘I should probably be getting back.’ Rita looked at her watch, but her expression said she would prefer to stay. ‘Dinners to be cooked, husband to be fed and all that jazz.’ She lingered for a moment, lightly grazing her fingers across one of the wicker chairs. ‘It really is beautiful, such a shame.’

‘Yes, such a shame,’ Kate said absently.

‘Perhaps I’ll see you again,’ Rita said as she handed the key to Kate. ‘You will lock up properly, won’t you.’ She cast a reflective eye about the place.

‘I live in London,’ Kate said, ‘I double-lock everything.’ It was true, she lived in London, but now she was wondering, did she actually belong there anymore.

