

Dark bulky clouds, laden with rain, cause shadows to dance across the rockpool's surface, as strong southerly winds push them inland. Seagulls circle and screech, angered by the lack of beach goers. There are no salt covered chips being tossed in the air today.

The sky is as dark and stormy as her mood, he's close to thirty minutes late and she's convinced he's not coming. Why would he? She was mad to think enough time had passed, that wounds of this magnitude could be healed.

While she waited, she felt herself being drawn to the rock, *their* rock, and the familiar pool of water spreading out from its base. She looks down from it now, searching the pool's depths for signs of life. Thick clumps of kelp sway beneath the surface, providing protection to the sea creatures within.

In her youth the space between rock ledge and water seemed to stretch on forever. She remembers being afraid to jump; scared of what lay below the surface, of unseen dangers hidden with the kelp. But she did it anyway.

She never needed a nudge from a sibling, a tease from a friend, a dare from a bully to make her step out onto the ledge, to leap into the air, to take the plunge. She embraced the fear, used it to propel herself forward.

Hold breath.

Pinch nose.

Shut mouth.

Jump!

That was her mantra then.

Maybe it should be again.

She steps out and onto the rock ledge, worn flat by years of small feet, doing what hundreds of thousands of small feet have done before them.

Some belonged to brave boys and girls who stood firm, feet flat, arms outstretched, smiles a mile wide before pushing off and out.

Some belonged to nervous children, their feet hopping from side to side, head swivelling, checking someone is watching them, hoping the bragging rights will be worth the fear they are feeling.

Some belonged to the scared. The ones whose feet hung off the ledge, after they dropped to their bottoms and jiggled their way to the edge before ungracefully sliding off, leaving scratch marks on their butt cheeks.

And some belonged to the truly terrified. The one's whose toes curled, whose feet refused to move, whose knees knocked. These were the children who chewed their lip, wanted to cry, did cry. The one's that stepped back, away from the line of children waiting their turn, heads lowered in shame as they walked back to their towel, their family, with tears stinging their eyes.

Tears sting her eyes now, as she recalls the years of happy summers spent beachcombing with her siblings along this very shoreline, of hours spent building sandcastles, eating crunchy sandwiches, chasing waves, learning to body surf, and then surfing, first with a boogie board then with a longboard.

Happy summers spent jumping off the rock and landing safely.

Until she didn't.

She'd do it all differently. If do-overs were possible. If time machines were real.

Her hair whips at her face as the wind changes direction, knocking her off balance. She stumbles backwards. Losing her footing on the uneven surface, she falls.

Instinctively, she reaches out with her hands. They connect with the abrasive surface of the rock. Sharp edges slice through flesh.

She curses, loudly and clutches her hands to her chest. Blood soaks the fabric, forming tie-dyed-like patterns in the expensive cashmere knit. Her heart races and she's crying now.

Sobbing.

Tears running.

Snot bubbling.

Breath ragged.

It is no longer about her hands but about all that came before. About the love lost, the hurt caused and the silence that surrounds her.

It's the silence that hurts the most, that cuts the deepest, that causes her to drink too much, eat too little, think dark thoughts, work 'til exhaustion forces her to stop.

The sound of silence.

Her breathing settles. Her tears dry. Her blood clots. She wipes her nose on her sleeve.

The clouds part and a ray of sunlight shines through, bouncing off the rockpool's surface, changing its hue from grey to turquoise.

Is it a sign?

She's never believed in signs. Never been one to talk about fate or destiny.

But then, why did she come here, to where it all began, to where it all ended, if she wasn't looking for a sign? A sign for what?

Where to go?

Who to be?

What to do?

How to forget?

How to forgive?

The wind stills and for a moment there is only her, and this rock, and this moment. The gulls' search for food has sent them further afield and the skies are quiet. The storm that threatens is keeping the beachcombers away.

She speaks the mantra of her youth, then she lifts her head and screams the words at the sky.

Hold breath.

Pinch nose.

Shut mouth.

Jump!

Could she? Should she?

She takes a step back, sucks in air, pinches her nose and—

'Wait!'

The voice is familiar and yet it isn't. Age has deepened it, added gravel and tar to its smooth centre, roughening the edges of it.

The clouds move. The sun disappears. The sign is gone.

She turns towards the voice. Towards her past. Towards home.

'You came,' she says.

'You asked,' he answers.

She's asked before. He didn't come.

He looks at her sweater, stained red with blood, his eyes dart to her wrists.

'Not again.'

'No!' She raises her head. 'No. I fell.' She holds her hands out. 'On the rocks.'

He doesn't rush across the rock to check them or to offer kindness, but his stance relaxes and that is enough, that is an opening, a crack she can push through.

'I'm sorry,' she says.

‘I know.’

Hold breath.

Pinch nose.

Shut mouth.

Jump!

‘I miss you.’ Her eyes search his.

She waits.

The wind changes direction again but this time she’s ready for it. She plants her feet and holds her ground. She looks out across the bay and sees rain falling on the horizon, connecting sky to sea. The storm is coming their way.

Will they still be here when it reaches shore?

‘Why now?’ he asks.

‘I don’t know.’ She sees her brother in him now, behind the dark beard, thick brows, wary eyes. He’s wearing a blue coat and heavy boots. His hands are buried deep in his pockets, almost to his elbows. The scar he got when he crashed his bike into a fence is still visible above his left eye.

That he is wearing a Big Freeze beanie isn’t lost on her. She imagines he buys one every year, donates to Fight MND, probably even does the Walk to the ‘G.

So much of who she was as a child is because of him. Because of this man before her. She knew him well as a boy but as a man he is a stranger.

‘I guess it’s time,’ she offers.

‘Time for what?’

‘Time for us to fix what I broke.’

‘You didn’t—’

‘I know what you’re going to say. What you’ve all said. But I chose to bring her here when I was told not to. I chose to give her what she wanted, what she begged for, when I knew I shouldn’t. I was old enough to know what I was doing, to know better. I just never expected ... never thought—’

‘That’s because you never thought, you just did. What you wanted. When you wanted. No matter the risks, no matter who got hurt.’ His hands are out of his pockets now and he’s gesturing widely with them. ‘Even now. It’s still what you want. You come back here after all these years and ask me to meet you, *here* of all places, because you’re ready, because you want it.’

‘You know she wanted to jump one last time. Before she couldn’t. Before it was too late.’ She stops herself from pleading. They’ve been here before, not literally but figuratively, and it has never ended well. Honesty is her only hope now.

‘I’m lonely. I’m scared. I miss my family.’ Her voice breaks.

Hold breath.

Pinch nose.

Shut mouth.

Jump!

‘I miss my big brother. My life is too quiet, too empty. I will be forever sorry I brought our sister here, that she died that day, that I stole what little time we had left with her. I’ll never forgive myself for what I did, and I don’t expect you to forgive me either.’

‘I forgave you years ago. So did Mum and Dad. We know you meant well, that you thought you were doing what she wanted but then you left, you left us when we needed to be a family, to hold on to each other.

‘I lost two sisters, and my childhood that day. I was all Mum and Dad had left, and their grief was all consuming. I wished I could’ve run away too. That it wasn’t all on me but if I’d

left, Mum and Dad would never've survived. I had to quit school and get a job. I kept the fridge stocked, learned to cook, paid all the bills for a year.'

'You never went to university?' It hurts to look at him, but she doesn't dare look away. He's spoken more words to her today than he has in years. She has to keep pushing her way through the crack.

He makes a scoffing sound. 'What do you think?'

'And you stayed here, on the Peninsula? You didn't move to London to study like you wanted?'

'No. I never left. I couldn't.'

The air is thick now, the rain close. It is getting dark and its harder to see the definitions of his face, his features are hazy, his scar invisible.

'It hasn't been a bad life. I met Mandi, built a business, had my kids - you're an aunt by the way - I've been happy. I am happy. But it could have been different, would've been different, if not for that day.'

She nods. She's missed so much but it can't be too late. She needs this. She needs him. 'This beach, the rockpool, the surf, it meant so much to us growing up. We were happy here once; it was an easy life.'

'Until it wasn't.' His hands are back in his pockets. His posture erect.

'Yes, you're right, until it wasn't'.

The first drops of rain fall. A couple get caught in her lashes, more run down her nose.

'We'd better get in. There could be lightening.' He turns away.

She looks to the sky above. Lightening may hurt less than losing what may be her last chance.

Hold breath.

Pinch nose.

Shut mouth.

Jump!

‘Wait!’ She steps towards him, reaches for his arm, and pulls him back. ‘I want to come home.’ There, she’s said it. It’s out there. ‘It’s time I came home,’ she adds.

The rain is bucketing down on them now. It’s soaking through her layers of clothing, her hair sticks to her head, she blinks rapidly to clear her eyes.

‘Okay,’ he replies.

‘Okay?’

‘Yeah. It’s time.’ He steps out of his boots, removes his beanie and strips off his coat and jumper, dumping them carelessly on the rock.

This time she recognises the sign for what it is and follows it, removing her own boots and outer layers.

He walks to the edge of the rock and holds his hand out for her.

She places her hand in his and pushes through the crack, all the way to the other side.

Hold breath.

Pinch nose.

Shut mouth.

Jump!

Said in unison before they leap.

Away from the rock.

Away from their past.

Away from their pain.

And the silence is broken.