

Then

Twenty-three years ago

This was Iluka. It began at the wooden gate, always closed, often padlocked. To get to Iluka, you needed to leave the sealed road leading to the golden sands of Fuller's Bay, take a left onto an unmarked gravel road and then veer off down a rutted dirt track that was only wide enough for one vehicle. You only found Iluka if you were meant to. People didn't stumble on it. That was always his plan.

Iluka's land was screened by giant pines which huddled in aromatic masses. The pines ran the length of the land to the left and right of that gate – one road in, one road out.

The family lived off the land and sea. It was the way they had been since his accident. He said he owed it to the sea for saving him. He said he bought this place for them – for all of them – to exist as one with nature, earth and ocean.

Past the pines, the ramshackle house that sat in the middle of the clearing, atop the cliff overlooking the Pacific, appeared to sway in the sudden gust of wind and then right itself. Hurley's Bay below could be reached by a ladder, a

descent not for the faint-hearted. On the beach this evening, as the sun sank and the darkness slowly began to creep in, changing the ocean from azure blue to inky black, there were two figures. One sat on the rocks, the cliff looming above her, and the other stood on the beach, shovel in hand, ready to dig. The shovel, at first, was like a spoon through a pile of sugar, but then he reached wetter sand and the pile to his left began to grow. She sat, the jagged rock digging into the back of her thighs. He had done this before: to scare her, to show her who was boss. A warning. The first couple of times she had tried to escape by climbing up the ladder, but he'd hit her so hard she had blacked out for a second and spent the rest of the time lying on the beach watching him dig. It was easier now to watch, play the timid wife, because the alternative was so much worse.

It took him almost half an hour to dig. He was putting in a lot more effort than usual, at one point hopping into the gaping hole to continue digging. The top of his head could be seen as he flung out wet sand that landed with a slap on the growing pile. He climbed out and walked over to her. Her stomach flipped, and she remembered a time when a glance from him caused her stomach to flip in an entirely different way.

'Come.' He held out his hand, a gesture that, if a stranger was observing, looked caring.

She rose from the rock but held back.

He grabbed her hand and she pulled, resisting. This felt different. Darker. More dangerous, his usual anger and ranting having been replaced with a silent determination.

But she was never any match for him. He was always going to be stronger.

She wasn't ready for the punch that came, his right arm swinging wide then landing on her cheekbone. She fell to the sand, just in front of the hole. And then he punched her again. And again. And again ...

She woke up shivering, teeth chattering a staccato beat in her head. She opened her eyes – the surf in front of her glowed white in the gathering darkness. How long had she been unconscious? She tried to raise her arms but couldn't move. She tried to lift a leg, but it felt like she was locked in concrete. It took her a moment longer to register. He'd finally done it, finally done what she never thought he would. Her breath came in gasps, the sand pressing in on every part of her body, squeezing. Every slight movement she made caused the sand to cling to her even more. She turned her head left and right. She could just make him out. He was almost behind her but not quite. He wanted her to see him. She knew that.

The tide was coming in. Small currents pushing towards her. How long would he leave her? Enough to teach her a lesson, she guessed.

She tried to stay calm because she knew that he wanted her to panic. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction, even though it felt like her heart was going to explode out of her chest. She strained to look back and up, the tendons in her neck pulling and burning with the effort. She could see a small figure up on the cliffs, or was it just a rock? It didn't matter, anyway – she'd lost her long ago.

She was caught unawares as a small wave lapped into her face. She took in some of the salt water, choking, coughing. The tide was coming in faster than she thought it would.

'Enough!' she said. 'Please!'

Seconds later another wave, this time bigger, smashed

into her face.

He came into view, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Her body ached from the pressure of the sand, like she was slowly being squeezed to death.

She waited for him to start digging around her, to release her from her prison. But instead, he walked a couple of metres away, speared the shovel into the ground, folded his arms across his chest and watched. Every now and then he stared out towards the sea. She noticed that look on his face, which he always got: reverence, like he was at peace.

‘No!’ she yelled. ‘No!’

Again another wave hit her. She was surrounded by water now, which was lapping at her chin, leaping into her mouth. She started whimpering.

Up until a year ago, she had never felt much towards the ocean. She didn’t love it. She didn’t hate it. But she had never trusted it – it was so vast, unpredictable. She had never liked the way it sucked at her feet as she paddled in the shallows, the way it seemed to go on, never ending, falling off the horizon. But for the last year, she had begun to hate it. The way it had a hold over him. It had ruined everything they had.

In that last minute, as she stretched her neck high, trying to avoid the water, she looked up to a sky that didn’t hold a single star and still thought he was testing her, threatening her, teaching her a lesson. But as the water entered her mouth and nose, and her legs and arms finally gave up the fight, in her final breath it became clear that, of course, this was it. He was never going to let her go, no matter what she did. He would make sure she was never found. Most of all, he had achieved what he had wanted from the beginning. He would get his wish. She would always be a part of Iluka.

CHAPTER 1

Ana

Now

The rock, worn smooth, fitted my back perfectly as I sat at the far end of the beach, able to see but unseen. The sun hung high in the sky, warming the top of my head as I watched the abandoned beach. It was too late in the day for dog walkers and surfers, and the spring weather wasn't warm enough yet for families to inundate Fuller's Bay, covering the golden sand in beach towels, umbrellas and picnic baskets, sandcastles, driftwood structures and deep holes dug with plastic spades pock-marking the beach.

Leaning to the right, I had an unobstructed view from my hiding spot. The man I'd seen in the distance had walked barefoot down from the carpark, skirting the concrete toilet block. He was dressed for the beach: blue boardshorts, white T-shirt. He looked right. Then left. I darted back, hidden. Counting to ten, I watched cautiously as he ambled towards the ocean. Ankle deep, he bent down and ran a hand through the water. Then standing, he brought it to his face, wiped it in one slow motion from forehead to chin, and gazed up

at the sky. He screamed, long and loud, his guttural voice breaking; the gathered seagulls, alarmed, took flight.

I moved further into the rocks, mindful of Anahita's words about visiting Fuller's Bay. *'No talking to anyone. You don't know those people. They could be anyone. Could do anything.'* Her words were designed, as always, to scare me enough to keep me safe.

The screaming had stopped. I poked my head out again, only to find him looking in my direction. Gasping, I withdrew, squeezing my eyes shut. He was still far enough away that I could leave my hiding place and run up the dunes to the pines. To Iluka land.

I took a deep breath and exhaled, opened my eyes and pulled myself up, my bare foot slipping into the rock pool, sending out a shimmer of ripples. Negotiating the rocks, eyes on the ground, I got ready to run. But it was too late.

'What ya doin' hiding in there? Spying on me?' His voice was deep, rough, sandpaper on wood.

I stepped back. He stepped forward. He wasn't much taller than me but had a thick neck and biceps that strained against his T-shirt; his wide frame blocked my way.

'What are ya doin', eh?' He rubbed his head, which was so closely shaved I could see his white scalp through the spikes of brown hair; a swirl of tattoos covered his left arm and both of his hands, blurry and crude, the pictures and symbols unidentifiable. They lent a roughness to him that scared me more than the screaming had minutes earlier.

'Can you even talk?'

I stepped back again; my heel connected with a rock. Feeling the skin scrape away, I winced. Anahita's voice was in my head again. *'These are the kinds of people I warn you about.'*

‘I asked if you were spying on me.’

I shook my head, unable to find my voice. It was better if I didn’t talk. Didn’t give anything away.

He frowned, deep lines marring his pale forehead. His blue eyes, even paler than mine, appraised me before stopping on my upper arms. I pulled at the short sleeves for more coverage.

‘I haven’t been back here in ages. Used to live round here. Hasn’t changed a bit.’

I couldn’t tell if this was good or bad. He stared out to the ocean. This was my chance to run.

‘You live around here?’ His demeanour had changed. He moved away, giving me more space, glancing at me sideways. I could make out an inked snake’s head sitting over his left collarbone, the serpent eyeing me from just above the rim of his T-shirt.

I cleared my throat, readying myself to speak, but then nodded, finding it hard to break my gaze away from the tattoo.

‘You know the people who live at Iluka?’ He indicated behind me to the next bay over.

I nodded again, knowing without a doubt that I shouldn’t tell him where I lived.

‘You know them? Friends with them? Are your parents friends with them?’ He was talking faster, his eyes narrowing as he threw the questions at me.

I answered all three questions with a nod.

‘Not very talkative, are ya?’

Can’t get into trouble if I don’t talk, I responded silently.

‘If you happen to see Hurley or Anahita, tell them Brent says hi.’ His eyes bore into mine. ‘Do you understand

anything I'm saying? You not right in the head?' He took a step towards me again, and I darted to the right, expecting a hand to grab me. I felt myself slip once as the sand gave way beneath my feet, making it feel like I was trying to run through soft butter. I made sure my second and subsequent foot falls dug in, which propelled me up the sand dunes. Before I let the pines swallow me up, I turned back, certain he was right behind me, but I was greeted with his retreating figure, walking along the beach towards the car park.

I ran through the pines which grew thick all around Iluka, and felt them crowding in, enveloping, protecting me. My eyes adjusted to the diffused light as I flew over the ground, a mix of pine needles, dirt and sand, and didn't stop until I reached the other side of the pine forest. I bent over, hands on knees, trying to calm myself. I stood, surveying Iluka, always happy to be back, not that I ever went far – Fuller's Bay through the pines was my limit these days.

I was the first and only person born at Iluka, eighteen years ago. Hurley said that made me special. I felt it. Believed it. This was my home and would be till the day I died. Just like Hurley. Just like Anahita. Just like Dylan.

The artist's cottage on my right was sitting squat, half hiding in the pines, away from the other two houses. Enough space for privacy, and like the other houses at Iluka, a sweeping view of the Pacific. The door and windows were flung open, preparing for the next guest.

With my heart rate returning to normal, I crossed the huge expanse of lawn, if it could be called that being a mix of sand and dirt, the grass doing its best to grow on the exposed cliff, and passed Marina and Dylan's small house. Uncle Dylan would be out the back tending the vegetable

patch or fishing down on the rocks. Marina would no doubt be in the small office organising the retreat or sales on Hurley's website.

I walked the worn dirt path to our house, the one I shared with Anahita, my mother, and Hurley, my grandfather. Hurley's shed was jammed into the far corner of the property, as far away from the other buildings as possible, the back of it exposed to the cliffs only a few metres behind, the left side hugging the pohutukawa and pines that grew so densely you could barely move through them to the neighbouring farm half a kilometre down the road. The shed was made out of pieces of wood thrown up on rusted steel framing, and a piecemeal corrugated-iron roof. I couldn't count the number of times the severe coastal winds had sent pieces flying. They were either collected and reattached or were lost to the winds altogether. Hurley always managed to scrounge up more pieces if needed. During my eighteen years, I'd never been inside the shed, but had often stood at the door, calling Hurley for dinner or lunch. It consisted of a dirt floor and a huge work bench, which held whatever project Hurley was working on, furniture mostly, bookshelves, dining-room tables, rocking chairs, and sometimes toys for kids, always made from the pine at Iluka, felled by Hurley and Dylan. Hurley spent most of his days in the shed, sawing, sanding, shaping. And if he wasn't there, he was out on the rocks fishing, or swimming.

At the back of the clearing, far from the cliffs and before the land gave way to the pines, were the vegetable beds, beehives and paddocks. This was Dylan's domain, screened from the harsh salt-laden winds by an eclectic mix of puriri, pohutukawa and cabbage trees. Everything that grew at

Iluka had a purpose, whether it was a tree that sheltered and protected, or an animal that provided us with milk or meat. There was no room for anything ornamental here.

I walked up to our two-storey house. Over forty years old, it had been ravaged by its close proximity to the sea. There was no screening here. Hurley had always been adamant that the view of the ocean would never be blocked. He said the first thing he needed to see in the morning and before he went to bed at night was the ocean. We had to put up with the wind buffeting the house, shaking it from side to side, making it creak and moan as if it were alive and in pain. I ran my hand along the worn timber cladding. Like everything at Iluka, it had a fine layer of salt crusted to its exterior, almost like a protective shell, like my skin after a swim if I didn't shower straightaway. Rusty nails protruded from some parts, others were covered with lichen, yellow-grey patches spreading like a rash. I often wondered how it was still standing. Like the people at Iluka, maybe the buildings too were built to thrive here. The windows at the front of the house, two on the second storey, a large picture one on the ground floor plus the glass-paned front door, always sported a sea-salt crust, like ice on a winter's day, so whoever was standing on the other side appeared like some kind of apparition. I stepped up onto the porch, avoiding the loose boards that would send my foot through, and walked straight into the kitchen-dining room.

Anahita looked up from the scone dough she'd just tipped onto the stainless-steel kitchen bench.

I crossed through the small dining room, skirting the table by the door and the long pine table that took up the whole space and into the kitchen.

‘Did you have a nice walk?’

I nodded, watching Anahita bring the dough together, transfixed for a moment by the two long scars, bright white on her tanned skin, that started at her shoulder and ended just above her elbow.

I sipped on a glass of water, eyeing up Anahita, trying to judge her mood, unsure if I should say anything about the man at the beach. Anahita was protective – *over*protective. I got it. And I was used to it. My family safeguarded each other. Hurley wasn’t fond of the outside world. Anahita felt the need to hold me near. That’s what mothers did. She had always told me there was an invisible string between us, which would be attached forever, that there wasn’t a pair of scissors or a knife sharp enough to cut through it. This had always made me feel safe.

‘Where did you go?’ Anahita was making conversation. I never went far.

‘Fuller’s Bay,’ I said, leaving the kitchen and sitting down at the dining-room table, the kitchen’s L-shaped bench between us.

‘Not too busy down there?’

‘No.’ I took an apple from the bowl on the bench and sat back in my chair. ‘Just the way I like it.’

Anahita nodded, her full lips pulling into a smile. ‘Don’t get too comfortable there. You’ve still got work to do, remember. There’s a guest arriving tomorrow.’ She tucked a loose strand of her long black hair behind her ear and cut the scone dough with a butter knife. Our hair was the only physical similarity I shared with Anahita: middle part, no fringe, falling halfway down our backs, often tied in a ponytail or pulled into a bun.

I put down my apple. The first bite left a sour taste in my mouth, and as I swallowed the small piece felt like a rock as it pushed its way through my throat. It was impossible. I wouldn't be able to stop thinking about it if I didn't say something. I didn't *have* to tell Anahita. How would she ever know that someone talked to me on the beach. But Anahita and Hurley knew everything. And this man, Brent, knew them. What if he visited us? That wasn't likely. But what if he did, and what if he mentioned seeing me? Or what if he was dangerous? Owning up straightaway was better than not telling them and then being found out later. It would seem like I was hiding something or keeping it from them.

'I saw a man at the beach.'

Anahita's head shot up, as if spring-loaded. Wiping her hands on her apron, she said, 'You didn't speak to him. He didn't see you.' The words were said as statements; as if I'd ever forget her instructions.

'I was hiding, in the rocks ... but he saw me.'

Anahita's lips disappeared as she crossed the room towards me. I rose from my chair, eager to get on an equal footing, noticing her change in demeanour, but she was at least a head taller than me. She stood close, looming over me.

'What do I always say, Ana? We only have one rule.'

'I can go to Fuller's Bay as long as I don't talk to anyone,' I recited, swallowing hard, feeling like the piece of apple was lodged in my throat.

'It's to protect you, Ana. What did he say?'

'He asked if I knew the people who lived at Iluka. And when I nodded he said, "If you see Hurley or Anahita, tell them Brent says hi."'

The look on Anahita's face scared me more than the

hand that shot out and grabbed my wrist, squeezing until it burned.

'You will *not* go back to Fuller's Bay,' she hissed, her grip tightening.

I winced, my skin stinging under the pressure of her hold.

'Do you understand me?' Anahita's tone was cold, controlled.

I nodded.

'I'll need to tell Hurley.'

'Anahita ...' I pleaded, already regretting my choice to reveal what had happened.

'No. You shouldn't be going there. Especially if you're going to allow people the chance to talk to you. I don't like you going there. It's too far away. Especially on your own. You always promise me you don't speak to anyone, but how can I trust you?'

'You can,' I said, begging, knowing it would do no good. I felt a slow burn of hatred form for this Brent. He'd ruined everything.

'It's been a long time,' Anahita said. 'I think you need to be reminded. Hurley will agree with me. You can't get complacent, Ana.' Her tone had changed, soft now. 'Everyone – out there,' she gestured wide, 'they're no good. No good for our family, or you. Understand?' She released my wrist, and I let my arm drop to my side, her touch imprinted on my skin like a hot iron even as the pain eased.

I nodded, rubbing my wrist, allowing the blood to flow again.

I never fought. There was no point. Anahita was stronger than me and rules were rules. This was the way it had always been.