

*It's the right decision*, Addy Topic told herself as the *Spirit of Tasmania* berthed at Devonport at the criminally early hour of 6.30 am.

'You've got this,' she said as she drove off the ferry and immediately found a café with a five-star coffee rating. Never a morning person, she sculled her espresso fast then sipped a latte, taking her time to savour the brew while she scanned *The Advocate*. Not a lot had changed since she'd last read it—it was still a mix of odd crimes, agriculture wins and losses, and ongoing housing issues.

'Anything to eat?' the waitress asked.

'Why not?' Moving house was why not. Addy ought to be maximizing her time and getting settled before starting her new job. But knowing she should seize the day didn't touch the part of her that was in no great hurry to reach Rookery Cove. 'I'll have poached eggs with the avocado cup, thanks.'

Three hours later, after taking a detour through Penguin and dodging phone-wielding tourists snapping photos of the decorative penguins that now lined the Esplanade, she eventually drove into the cove. Then she turned away from the main drag and up the hill before pulling into her parents' driveway.

My driveway.

Addy shrugged the words away. Four years after Ivan's and Rita's deaths, the house still felt very much theirs.

She turned off the ignition, took a deep breath and got out of the car. Despite the weeds on the path, the bulging orange rose-hips and the peeling paint—travesties her mother would never have allowed—she still expected Rita to step out onto the veranda, give her sadness-tinged smile and say, 'Aida, you are home.'

But Addy hadn't called the cove or the house home in twelve years; and since Rita's death, no one had called her Aida.

After her mother's funeral—six months to the day after her father's—Addy had left the fully furnished house in the care of a real estate agent and flown back to her life in Victoria. When people had asked if she'd ever live in Tasmania again, she'd replied 'possibly Hobart' while privately thinking *not the north-west coast and never the cove*. But the universe was wily and the gateway job for a long-awaited career jump had turned up two towns away.

Leaving her boxes and suitcases in the car, she walked up the steps and fished a bunch of keys out of her handbag. As she slid the old key into the front door, she got a flash of a brass key on a piece of orange wool that had once hung with great weight around her neck.

‘Tell no one,’ Ivan had sternly admonished each time he gave it to her.

‘No, Papa.’

It wasn’t until Addy was nine and had been visiting friends after school that she learned no one in Rookery Cove locked their houses. But Rita and Ivan had escaped a civil war that had turned security into something ephemeral and not to be trusted.

Turning the door handle, Addy got another flash. This time she was fourteen and standing on the porch watching Rita turning the door handle left, then right, then left, after having previously checked eight times that the windows were closed and locked. Knowing they were already late and that all eyes in the school auditorium would turn to them when they walked in, Addy had screamed, ‘For God’s sake, Mama! It’s locked!’

The memory faded and regret tightened her chest. Addy wished she’d understood more about obsessive-compulsive disorder and post-traumatic stress when she was a teen. Although her parents had talked of their childhoods in Dubrovnik, they’d never dis-cussed the war. Whenever she’d asked about it she’d been told, ‘It’s not important. We are Australian now.’ But the kids at the local primary school, with their white-bread Vegemite sandwiches, had disagreed when they saw Addy’s lunch of salami, cheese and olives.

The glass front door swung open and the cloying artificial scent of gardenia hit her nostrils. She gagged. Beating down the nausea, she took another breath and got a lungful of the sweet smell of marijuana with a fried food chaser. So much for the reliable tenants the real estate agent had promised.

Stepping inside she girded herself for anticipated filth, but apart from the walls being brown and sticky with nicotine, everything looked much the same as it had when she’d left at eighteen eager for a different life. The same wide rust-brown velvet couch sat on its rotund feet, although minus Rita’s crocheted doilies. The same framed photo of the old walled city perched on a shimmering bay hung on the wall, except instead of being fastidiously straight it tilted to the right. Addy automatically straightened it as she’d done each week as a child when it was her job to dust.

Her gaze slid to the upright piano, but with its closed lid and mahogany sheen dulled by layers of dust it lacked familiarity. Despite rising reluctance, her hands overrode her head and she pulled up the lid. She stretched her fingers, struck a chord and flinched at the off-key sound. The piano had been Rita’s pride and joy and it had never been allowed to fall out of tune.

A stubborn streak of teen rebellion filled her and she played a honky-tonk riff from The Entertainer. The defiance evaporated and she dropped the lid.

‘Sorry, Mama.’

She inspected the rest of the house. The kitchen’s exhaust fan was coated in grease, the shower was host to a colony of mould, and there was a stain of unknown origin on the carpet in the mas-ter bedroom. Nothing that sugar soap, bleach, eucalyptus oil and elbow grease couldn’t shift. By the end of the weekend, the house would still be stuck in its nineties-decor time warp but it would sparkle.

Addy paused in the narrow hall outside her childhood bedroom and stared at the single bed, remembering its ruffled pillowcases and detested quilt cover. At fifteen, she’d begged for a surfing design but had instead been given a grand piano cover. With it had come the full weight of Rita’s expectations. From that moment, her mother’s hopes and dreams, which had already cloaked Addy all through the day, became inescapable at night.

Stepping into the room, she opened the freestanding wardrobe Ivan had built for her, including a special wooden box to lock away her ‘treasures’. She was surprised the tenants hadn’t torn down the smiling face of Layne Beachley and the other surfing posters she’d pinned there between thirteen and seventeen.

Was her board still in the shed? Her gaze slipped to her belly and she sucked it in. If it was, she was probably too heavy to use it.

*If you lost some weight ... If you drank less ... If you were nicer to me ... tidier ... worked less ...*

‘Go away, Jasper.’

She released the catch on the window, threw up the sash and leaned out, stretching her arms wide. Cool salty air tingled her nostrils and she gazed down at the half-moon bay with whitecaps flashing across a moody and unwelcoming grey sea. An unexpected shaft of sunshine suddenly pierced the heavy cloud and golden rays lit a narrow band of water, taking it from steel grey to translucent tropical blue.

Addy smiled, savouring the water’s familiar pull. How many times had she climbed out of this window and run to the moonlit beach? To parties at the surf club? To surf at dawn? Triple the num-ber of times her parents had discovered her gone.

If Rita and Ivan still lived, what would they make of her return to the cove? Would they be pleased? Confused? Frustrated?

Addy was still coming to terms with it herself. When she'd accepted the teaching job at the regional vocational training and pathways college two towns away, the plan had been to live close to campus and get fit by cycling to work. After all, the point of living in a small city was to incorporate exercise with lifestyle. The plan didn't include living in tiny Rookery Cove—population three hundred—and making an eighty-minute round trip each day. But she hadn't anticipated the tenants moving out and no one else moving in. After weeks of no activity, the agent had suggested she turn the place into a holiday rental.

Although a good idea, it wasn't without on-costs. When she factored in the seasonal nature of holiday rentals, it made financial sense to live in the house for three months and redecorate it on the weekends. She could still get fit, drink less and eat better living here. She'd get up earlier and exercise with a run along the beach before leaving for work. She'd carve out an hour from her weekend redecorating schedule to prepare tasty and healthy lunches, dinners and snacks for the week ahead. She'd sleep better with the tang of salt in the air. Living here was the change she both needed and wanted.

Addy's fingers itched to crack open her first bullet journal. So far she'd only got as far as caressing the leather cover and smelling the crisp clean pages. She'd bought it, along with washi tape, markers, coloured pencils, paints and stickers, to help her plan each week so her new job, her new healthy lifestyle, the house renovations and herself all got the attention they deserved. This was her year of living intentionally. No more floundering. No more wasting time—she was taking charge of her life. But first, all the windows needed throwing open so the sea breeze could blow through and freshen the house.

She'd just reached the bedroom door when her phone rang.

'Addy, it's Grant Hindmarsh.'

Surprise tumbled with anxiety—Grant was her new boss for her new job. 'Oh! Hi! I've just arrived on the island.' Did that sound accusatory? She quickly added, 'I'm really looking forward to Monday.'

'Excellent! I'm calling to touch base and to say again how thrilled we are we tempted you back from the mainland. The students are lucky to have someone of your calibre.'

'Thank you.' A flutter of appreciation warmed her. 'I'm looking forward to meeting them.'

'That's what we want to hear. I know Lyn's already been in touch. Thanks for uploading your course work before your official start date. Others in the department could take a leaf out of your book.'

She smiled. Grant had just given her more praise in two short sentences than she'd received in three years at her previous job.

The line was suddenly silent. Given the cove's sometimes iffy mobile phone reception she said, 'Grant, are you still there?'

He sighed. 'Yes, sorry. I'm a bit distracted. Our media lecturer was in a car accident yesterday.'

'Oh, no. Are they okay?'

'Sienna's fractured her pelvis so she's off for the semester.'

'That sounds nasty.'

'It is.' Grant sighed. 'As you can imagine, it's thrown us into a spin. She teaches social media marketing and touches briefly on website design. Her class has a waiting list and it's one of our biggest earners so we're loathe to cancel it.'

Addy knew all about the pressures of funding and the appeal of courses that generated income. 'It all sounds very tricky.'

'How would you feel about taking it on?' Grant asked.

The question caught her by surprise. 'I, um ... I've never taught it.' 'But everything's new the first time, right?'

'That's true—'

'And you're a digital native so a lot of it's intrinsic,' he said. Addy doubted it—she knew enough HTML to be dangerous and almost nothing about SEO. What she did know was that she'd spend the entire semester barely staying one step ahead of her students. She already had a full teaching load, but was saying no to her new boss the best way to start?

She sought some clarification. 'So this would be a load reshuffle? Which subject am I handing off to someone else?'

Grant sighed again. 'Ah, no, which is why I'm asking you. Going on your interview and referees, I get the impression you're the type of person who steps up. Am I wrong about that?'

She thought about her employment conditions. Three months probation, and if she aced that, permanency and a shot at the promotion she'd been chasing for a couple of years. 'Not wrong at all.'

'I didn't think so.' His tone was reassuring. 'Obviously it's not ideal and it's a big workload for you, but as we say here in the north-west, there's no "I" in "team". I promise we'll give you all the support you need. Lyn will get Sienna's teaching notes to you asap, so really it's just a matter of delivering ready-made content. So what do you say? Can you help us out?'

Addy's previous job had been fraught with never-ending budget cuts and infighting. The idea of being surrounded by a committed team all rowing in the same direction was as exciting as it was reassuring.

'Absolutely, I can help you out,' she said.

'Excellent,' Grant said. Addy heard the clicking of a keyboard as he added, 'Just be sure to send me through the unit of competency and performance criteria by four o'clock Sunday.'

Her hand tightened around the phone. 'I thought you said that had already been done.'

'I'm sure Sienna has it all ready to go. Talk to Lyn. She'll sort it. Meanwhile, thanks so much, Addy. See you on Monday at eight.'

He rang off, and an email immediately pinged onto her phone. She opened it, scanned the brief contents and rang Lyn.

'Thanks for the email,' Addy said.

'No worries,' Lyn said. 'I've sent you everything Sienna gave me.'

'Right.' Addy focused on channelling calm. 'The thing is, this reads like an ideas list rather than course content.'

'That's why the students love her,' Lyn said. 'Sienna prefers participation learning rather than setting out specific content.'

Addy's stomach clenched, but there was no point having a pedagogy discussion with the administrative clerk. 'What about the online platform? Has Sienna uploaded the learning, assessment and marking guides there?'

'I'll check.' Addy heard the click of keys and then Lyn was saying, 'As anticipated, it's not here.'

*Stay calm. Breathe.* ‘Why not?’ Addy asked.

‘It’s a new course,’ Lyn said breezily.

*What?* Addy’s brain froze at the full implication of four small words. She finally managed to splutter, ‘That’s not what Grant told me.’

‘That’d be right.’ Lyn sounded sympathetic. ‘He probably thought it was the same as last semester. He focuses on the budget and enrolment numbers and leaves the teaching to the teachers.’

Addy knew it was a sensible management style, but it didn’t help her today. ‘Can you put me in touch with Sienna so I can ask her some questions about the course?’

Lyn tsked. ‘The poor thing was airlifted to Hobart. She doesn’t need any more stress.’

It appeared Addy’s stress didn’t count. ‘So just to clarify, I’m devising and teaching a new course. Please tell me the first class is on Friday.’

Lyn laughed. ‘You’re funny. No, it’s nine o’clock Monday morning, straight after the staff meeting at eight. See you then.’

The line went dead and Addy stared at her phone, completely nonplussed. What the hell had just happened?

Anxiety rose in a wave, swamping all her plans for a weekend of washing walls and steam-cleaning carpets. Move!

She ran outside to the car, grabbed her emergency supplies box, slung her laptop across her shoulder and returned to the kitchen. First, she lifted out a cloth and the antibacterial spray and wiped the sticky residue from the chunky pine table and chair. Next, she opened a large bag of almonds, popped out two protein balls, sliced an apple and refilled her water bottle. Healthy brain food and staying hydrated was key to concentration.

Bypassing the pristine bullet journal, she plugged in her laptop then transferred the documents Lyn had sent her from her phone to her computer. She reread them carefully. Calmly. Mindfully.

Addy cut and pasted Sienna’s headings into a new document, numbered them, stared at them, then swore. She needed to consult the government training website.

She opened a browser, typed in the URL, then cursed the spin-ning rainbow ball of death as her computer valiantly tried to find her phone's hotspot. While she waited she ran through a list of her former colleagues, wondering who might be able to help her.

*The internet is not available* appeared on her screen.

'Are you freaking kidding me?'

She checked her phone. One bar. She walked around the house seeking a stronger signal, finally finding it in the bathroom.

Dragging a chair down the hall, she held her breath while a blue line crawled inexorably across the top of the screen. She typed in the URL and the rainbow ball appeared again. Every part of her clenched. This would take forever.

She dumped the computer on the chair and marched straight to the kitchen and her emergency box. She pulled out a notepad, pen, a plastic glass and the bottle of red she'd been saving as a treat to drink with dinner. A quick twist of her wrist and the seal broke with a reassuring click.

Addy poured half a glass, took two big gulps and refilled it. Opening the wine early was not only easy, it was absolutely necessary.