Prologue

Two Years Earlier

‘Leo!’ The scream catches the wind and flies eastwards, outwards, over the sea.

But he is nowhere.

‘Leo!’

Thick, foetid, clogged blood; sticky, soaking.

‘Leo! Leo!’

Ben is alone. Rainwater runs through a hole in the tent; the tarpaulin ripped, broken; and he lies drenched, red and wanting. His hands, shaking, fumble with the zip.
The horizon lies flat, hazy with morning mist.

Leo is gone.

Secrets swim. Even buried – beneath rocks, rubble, sand – they find their way. Minutes, weeks, years... burying them papers over the cracks, a temporary fix. At some point they float upwards, looking for the light. Once out, frying in the sun, their form changes, and they blossom.

They bloat.
The earth is hard. The garden parched; cracked and faded, its colours leached and bled.

Every morning, too early, the sun wakes her, burning in from the east. Will not be ignored. They’re both thirsty from the run. Jam with her tongue hanging out. Ana feels like doing the same.
Bare feet on the yellow grass, it’s barely 7 a.m. and already the ground burns like coals. The light is hot on Ana’s face; she closes her eyes to it, turning towards it. So many hot days without a break. She’s already singed.

There had been a storm last night. She was sure there would be some sign of it but it barely registers. The wind is the only force to leave a trace. The dry leaves have been knocked from their branches; the bins are tilted or fallen, rubbish splayed and rotting. A glass left out on the patio has smashed. Its shards catch the light of the morning sun. Their edges flash with the early heat; Ana shivers.

Jam barks at her feet, then runs to scratch at the compost heap. She’s Ana’s shadow on her morning run. The dogs all get their walks early now, their paws burning on the ground once it approaches midday. Jam has been shorn, like a sheep. Her golden coat is cropped close. Her
tongue lolls and pants, and Ana imagines she can see the steam rising from it.

‘Kettle on?’

The voice of her mother rattles through the windows Ana had opened on coming downstairs. The pub smell, with its morning belch, is too much for her first thing. Coming home, an unwanted surprise in itself, offers its familiar scent without request, telling of weariness, of one drink too many, like an uncle with bad breath in an unwashed jumper.

‘Coffee? Here.’ Her mother lands a mug on the bar as Ana ducks under the low stone doorway. Her mother is pushing up her sleeves in her faded tartan shirt. She’s wearing Marigolds.

‘Mum, the cleaner is starting this morning. You don’t need to do in here.’

‘Ana, love. I’ve cleaned this bar at 7 a.m. for thirty years, and a bit of—’