

Past Secrets

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Published by HarperCollins

Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

If a road could look welcoming, then Summer Street had both arms out and the kettle boiling.

Christie Devlin had lived halfway up the street for exactly thirty years in a small but exquisite red-bricked house that gleamed like a jewel in a necklace of pretty coloured stones.

Summer Street itself was curved and ran for half a mile from the crossroads where the café sat opposite a house which had once been a strawberry-ice-cream shade and was now a faded dusky pink.

From the moment Christie had seen the graceful curve of the street, where maple trees arched like kindly aunties over the pavement, she'd known: this was the place she and James could raise their family.

Those thirty years had gone in a flash, Christie thought on this beautiful late-April morning as she went about her chores, tidying, dusting, sweeping and wiping.

Today the sun streamed in through the windows, the house seemed filled with quiet contentment and Christie didn't have to go to work. She loved her job as an art teacher at St Ursula's secondary school, but she'd cut back her hours recently and was relishing the extra free time.

Her dogs, Tilly and Rocket, miniature dachshunds who had clearly been imperial majesties in a previous life, were sleeping off their morning walk on the cool of the kitchen tiles. The radio was playing quietly in the background and the old steel percolator was making the rattling death throes that signalled the coffee was nearly ready. All should have been right with Christie's world.

And it was – except for a niggling feeling of disquiet. It had been simmering in her subconscious since she'd awoken at six to the joyous chorus of birdsong outside her bedroom window.

'Happy Anniversary,' James had murmured sleepily when the alarm went off at a quarter past and he rolled over in the bed to cuddle her, to find Tilly squashed between them. The dogs were supposed to sleep on their corduroy beanbags on the floor, but Tilly adored the comfortable little hollow in the duvet between her master and mistress. James lifted the outraged dog and settled her at his other side, then moved closer to Christie. 'Thirty years today since we moved in. And I still haven't finished flooring the attic.'

Christie, wide awake and grappling with the intense feeling that something, somewhere, was

wrong, had to laugh. Everything was so normal. She must be imagining the gloom.

‘I expect the floor to be finished this weekend,’ she said in the voice that could still the most unruly class in St Ursula’s. Not that she had ever had much trouble with unruly students. Christie’s love of art was magical and intense, and transferred itself to most of her pupils.

‘Please, no, Mrs Devlin,’ begged James, in mock-schoolboy tones. ‘I don’t have the energy. Besides, the dog keeps eating my homework.’

Panting, Tilly clambered back defiantly and tried to make her cosy nest in between them again.

‘The dog would definitely eat the homework in this house,’ James added.

Christie took hold of Tilly’s warm velvety body and cuddled her, crooning softly.

‘I think you love those dogs more than you love the rest of us,’ he teased.

‘Of course I do,’ she teased back. Christie had seen him talking adoringly to Tilly and Rocket when he didn’t think anyone noticed. James was tall, manly and had a heart as soft as butter.

‘Children grow up and don’t want cuddles, but dogs are puppies for ever,’ she added, tickling Tilly gently in her furry armpits. ‘And let’s face it, you don’t run around my feet yelping with delight when I get home from work, do you?’

‘I never knew that’s what you wanted.’ He made a few exploratory barking noises. ‘If I do, will you whisper sweet nothings to me?’ Christie

looked at her husband. His hair was no longer a blond thatch. It was sandy grey and thinning, and he had as many fine lines around his face as she had, but James could still make Christie smile on the inside.

‘I might,’ she said.

From the bedroom floor, Rocket whimpered, wanting to be included in the fun.

James got out of bed and scooped her on to the duvet beside her mistress, whereupon Rocket began to smother Christie in kisses.

‘I hope I get to come back as one of your dogs in my next life,’ he remarked, heading to the bathroom for his shower.

Christie shivered. ‘Don’t even speak like that,’ she said, but she was talking to a closed door.

Thirty years in this house. How had the time passed so quickly?

‘I love it,’ she’d told James that first day, as she stood, pregnant with their second child, Shane, outside number 34, a house they could only afford because it required what the estate agent hilariously described as ‘a wee bit of renovating’.

‘You’re sure you don’t prefer the mock-Tudor heap seven streets over?’ asked James, holding tightly to little Ethan’s hand. At the grand old age of three and a quarter, Ethan’s current favourite hobbies included trampolining on his bed and wriggling out of his parents’ grasp to fling himself in danger’s path.

Christie had arched a dark eyebrow at her husband.

The heap's front garden had been tarmacked while the back garden contained two fierce dogs who hadn't responded when Christie instinctively reached out her hand. There was a sinister brick-sized hole in one of the upstairs windows and when James had casually asked the estate agent why there was no gun turret complete with AK47 peeking out, Christie had had to smother her laughter.

'Call me old-fashioned,' she told James, 'but I somehow prefer Summer Street and this house.'

Despite the obvious dilapidation, the very bricks of number 34 seemed to glow with warmth, and the stained-glass oriel window over the graceful arched porch was in its original condition.

From where they stood, the Devlin family could see the Summer Street Café with its aqua-and-white-striped awning and paintwork. On the pavement outside stood white bistro chairs and three small tables covered with flowered sea-blue tablecloths that looked as if they'd been transported from a Sorrento balcony.

On the same side of the street as the café there were terraced houses; then a couple of slender detached houses squeezed in; eight small railway cottages, their classic fascia boards traced with delicate carvings; then a series of redbricks including theirs; five 1930s bungalows and, finally, a handful of one-storey-over-basements. The other

side of Summer Street was lined with more terraced houses and cottages, along with a tiny park: two neatly kept acres with a colonnaded bandstand, an old railway pavilion and a minuscule fountain much loved by the pigeons who couldn't bear to poop anywhere else.

The maple trees that lined the street were flanked by colourful border plants, while even the doors to the dizzying variety of houses were painted strong bright shades: cerulean blues, poinsettia scarlets, honeyed ambers.

Christie would always remember how James had responded when she'd said she loved the house. He'd put the hand that wasn't holding on to Ethan around hers and squeezed.

'Then we've got to have it,' he'd said.

They hadn't even looked inside.

When Christie told astonished people afterwards that they'd decided to buy 34 Summer Street without crossing the threshold, she'd explained that you knew when you were in the right place. Homes were about more than actual walls.

'You can't go far wrong with a well-built redbrick,' James's brother said sagely, put out by all this talk of feelings.

And indeed, the house was beautifully proportioned even though it was sadly down at heel, like a genteel lady who'd fallen on hard times but still polished the doorstep every morning even when she could barely afford milk for her tea.

But James and Christie knew it was more than

decent proportions or the welcoming width of the copper-coloured front door that had made up their mind. Christie had simply known it was the home for them and James had learned to trust his wife's instincts.

When she, James and Ethan moved in a month later, they were the proud owners of a ramshackle four-bedroom pile with one bathroom, nothing resembling a usable kitchen and a butterfly sanctuary for a garden.

In those days, there was no three-storey apartment block at the bottom of the street and no unneighbourly huffing about parking since most families were lucky to own just one car. But it was also before the park was given the primary-coloured playground equipment where small children roared with both delight and temper, depending on how the arguments were going over whose go it was on the slide.

Christie used to take Ethan and Shane to the park to play. Now, she walked Rocket and Tilly along the neatly trimmed pathways. Her two beautiful granddaughters, Sasha and Fifi, had been wheeled into the park in their buggies, and Sasha, now two and a half, loved hurling herself at the fountain as if she was about to leap in. Just like her dad, Christie thought fondly.

Ethan had always had so much energy. He'd thrown himself into life at full tilt from his very first breath. And he'd adored Summer Street.

'We'd better get the mower out,' James had

observed that first day as Ethan ran into the garden, whooping with excitement, his blond head almost disappearing in the long, wild grass. The van they had rented to move their belongings was parked on the drive and a few friends were due round to help shift all the heavy stuff. But for the moment, the small family were alone. 'It's like a jungle out there.'

'It's like a jungle in here too,' Christie had said wryly, looking up at the corner of the kitchen where a particularly murky black bit of wall stood out amid the peeling cat-sick-yellow plaster. 'Please tell me there wasn't that much mould on the walls when we viewed. We should have got the infectious diseases people to survey the house instead of an architect.'

'You think we'll be eaten in our beds by a noxious house fungus?'

Christie smiled affectionately at her husband, who'd given their son both his blond hair and sunny disposition. The pride of finally owning their own house shone in James's eyes, noxious fungus notwithstanding.

'Probably. Now, are you going to rescue Ethan, or am I to shift my five-months-pregnant bulk out after him?' Tall and normally slender, she'd carried Ethan easily with a neat little basketball of a bump that was unnoticeable from behind. This time round, her slender figure was a distant memory and she felt like a giant stretch-marked pudding, equally enormous whichever angle she was viewed from.

Her sister Ana reckoned it was second baby syndrome, where all the muscles gave up the ghost. But Christie knew that her inexplicable cravings for huge bowls of deep-fried banana with ice cream hadn't helped.

'I'll go and rescue him, o Massive One,' James said, laying a hand on her swollen belly. 'I don't want you so tired out that you don't have the energy to christen the house with me tonight.' He grinned suggestively.

A laugh exploded out of Christie. The exhaustion of pregnancy meant she was asleep by nine most nights and not even a vat of aphrodisiacs could rouse her. But then she relented, seeing the look of hope on her husband's face.

'Back massage first,' she bargained. Why her back should be an erogenous zone, Christie didn't know. But feeling James's supple hands kneading away her aches always got her in the mood for love.

'Deal.'

The upside of living in such a wreck of a house was that Christie didn't have to worry about Ethan crayoning on the walls, though he was an intrepid mountaineer so she spent much of her time rescuing him from various pieces of the second-hand furniture which was all they could afford. The downside of the house was that it seemed to take for ever before the damp was banished and they could eat a meal without a bit of ceiling falling on to their plates.

* * *

Now, a lifetime later, Ethan was thirty-three, Shane was almost thirty and Christie was a grandmother twice over.

The long dark hair she'd worn in a loose ponytail all those years ago was now cut to jaw length and waved, its cool silvery white highlighting the warmth of her olive skin and dark, winged eyebrows.

She still wore a delicate flick of eyeliner, which gave her eyes a magical tilt at each olive green corner, but had swapped the block of cake eyeliner she'd grown up with for a modern miracle liner pen. She liked embracing new things, believing that living too much in the past made a person look their age.

The kitchen wasn't showing its age, either. Currently on its third incarnation, it had been decorated in brightly coloured chic, then antique pine and was now showcasing modern maple. Many woman-hours of hard work had turned the garden into a honeytrap for lazy bees, which moved from one variety of lavender to another in the height of summer.

Now, in the last days of April, the old French rose that Christie had been nurturing to sweep over the pergola had produced its first decent crop of antique white flowers with a musky, amber scent. Her garden was so sheltered that her roses bloomed at least a month before they should and she could smell their fragrance from the open window as she stood rinsing the breakfast dishes at the sink.

Scrubbing at some stubborn crumbs of toast glued to a white plate, Christie tried to rationalise the niggling anxiety in her head.

Anniversaries brought up old memories, that was all it was, surely.

Christie had been so lucky these past thirty years. Blessed, almost. There had only been that one time in her married life when it had all nearly gone wrong, and, like catching a falling glass before it hit the floor, Christie had averted the disaster. There was a tiny crack left behind from that time, but nobody except Christie could see it. That couldn't trouble her now, could it?

No, she decided firmly, as she slotted the clean plate into the drying rack. That was all in the past.

She knew she was blessed. James was as good a husband as he'd been when she married him. Better, in fact. They'd grown closer as they'd grown older, not apart, like so many others did. Christie knew plenty of people her own age who'd stayed married and had nothing to show for it except spite and old wedding photos. They bitched and bickered and made everyone around them uncomfortable. Why bother? Christie wondered.

Wouldn't it be better to be happy on your own instead of coupled off in sheer misery? She liked to think that if she and James fell out, God forbid, they could end it with dignity and move on.

'I bet you wouldn't,' her sister Ana had pointed

out mischievously once, at the end of one long night on the small terrace in the garden when the wineglasses were empty and the conversation had turned to what-ifs.

‘There wouldn’t be a bit of dignity involved. I bet you’d stab James with your secateurs one night, bury him under the rhubarb and act delighted when it turned out to be a good crop!’

‘Ah, Ana,’ said James, feigning hurt. ‘Christie would never do that.’ He paused for effect, looking round the garden his wife adored. ‘The lilac tree needs fertilising, not the rhubarb. That’s where she’d bury me.’

‘You’re both wrong,’ said Christie amiably, reaching out to clasp her brother-in-law Rick’s hand. ‘I’m going to bury James right here, under the flagstones, then Rick and I are going to run off into the sunset together.’

‘As long as I get this house,’ Ana said, getting to her feet, ‘the pair of you can do what you want.’

It was a beautiful house, Christie knew. One of the loveliest on Summer Street. Christie’s artistic talent had made it just as beautiful inside as outside.

‘If Mum and Dad could see this place,’ Ana said wistfully as the sisters hugged goodbye in the hall where Christie had black-and-white photos of the family hung alongside six watercolour paintings of irises of the kind that she used to sell to make money during the early days of paying the Summer Street house mortgage.

‘Dad would hate it,’ laughed Christie easily. ‘Too arty farty, he’d say.’

‘Ah, he wouldn’t,’ protested Ana, who at fifty-four was the younger by six years. ‘He’d love it, for all that it’s nothing like the house in Kilshandra.’

Kilshandra was where they’d grown up, a small town on the east coast that was never a destination, always a place cars drove past en route to somewhere else.

‘No, it’s not like Kilshandra,’ Christie murmured and the fact that it was nothing like her old home was one of the best things about it.

Thinking of the past made the anxiety tweak again. She didn’t want to think about the past, Christie thought with irritation. Get out of my head. She’d spoken out loud, she realised, as the dogs looked up at her in alarm.

The dishes done, she poured a cup of coffee to take into the garden while she went through her list for the day. She had groceries to buy, bills to pay, some letters to post, a whole page of the by-the-phone notepad filled with calls to return . . . and then she felt the strange yet familiar ripple of unease move through her. Like a thundercloud shimmering in a blue sky, threatening a noisy downpour. This time it wasn’t a mild flicker of anxiety: it was a full-scale alert.

Christie dropped her china cup on the flagstones. Both Rocket and Tilly yelped in distress, whisking around their mistress’s feet, their

matching brown eyes anxious. *We didn't do it, we didn't do it.*

Automatically, Christie shepherded them away from the broken china.

'You'll cut your paws,' she said gently, and shooed them safely into the kitchen. Dustpan in hand, she went outside again and began to sweep up.

Her whole life, Christie had been able to see things that other people couldn't. It was a strange, dreamy gift: never available on demand and never there for Christie to sort out her own problems. But when she least expected it, the truth came to her, a little tremor of knowing that told her what was in another person's heart.

As a child, she'd thought everyone could do it. But there was no one in her deeply religious home whom she could ask. Something warned her that people might not like it. Her father prayed to centuries-dead saints when things went wrong, ignoring them when all was well, but he disapproved of the local girls having their fortunes told and hated the Gypsies' gift of sight with a vengeance. Her mother never ventured any opinion without first consulting her husband. Opinions that Father didn't approve of meant his black rage engulfed the house. So Christie had learned to be a quiet, watchful child. Her six elder brothers and her baby sister made enough noise for nobody to notice her, anyhow. And as she grew older and realised that her gift

wasn't run of the mill, she was glad she'd kept it quiet.

How could she tell people she'd known the McGovern's barn was going to burn down, or that Mr McGovern himself had set fire to it for the insurance money?

The first time she even hinted at her gift was when she was nineteen and her best friend, Sarah, had thought Ted, handsome with smiling eyes and a blankly chiselled face like Steve McQueen, was the man for her.

'He loves me, he wants to marry me,' said Sarah with the passion of being nineteen and in love.

'I just have this feeling that he's not being entirely honest with you. There's something a bit two-faced about him,' Christie had said. It was a flash of knowing that Ted didn't love Sarah and that there was someone else Ted made promises to.

'I don't believe it,' said Sarah angrily.

Christie noted the anger: there was a lot of truth in the cliché about shooting the messenger.

It transpired that Ted had indeed been seeing another girl, one whose family had money, not like Sarah or Christie, who came from a world of hand-me-down clothes and making do.

'How did you know?' asked Sarah when her heart was broken.

'It sort of came to me,' Christie said, which was the only way she could explain it.

The closer the person was to her, the fuzzier it became. For herself, she could never see anything.

Which was probably as it should be. Except that today, for the first time ever, she'd had a horrible feeling that the premonition of gloom was for herself.

In the pretty kitchen with its bunches of herbs hanging from the ceiling, a place where Christie always felt perfectly happy, panic now filled her. Her family. Something awful must be about to happen to them and she had to stop it. Yet, the feeling had never been like this before. She'd never, ever seen any harm coming to her sons or James.

There was the day thirteen-year-old Shane had broken his collarbone falling from a tree, and Christie had been on a school trip to a gallery, explaining the gift of Jack B. Yeats to twenty schoolgirls.

When the frantic St Ursula's secretary had finally reached Christie, she'd cursed her own inability to see what mattered. How could she not have seen her own son in pain? What use was her gift if it only worked for other people?

This morning, within ten minutes, Christie had phoned her two sons to say a cheery hello, she was thinking about them and her horoscope had said she was going to have an unfortunate day, and she thought it might extend to them, so not to walk under any ladders.

Finally, Christie phoned James, whom she'd only said goodbye to two hours before as he headed off to the train station for a meeting in Cork.

‘Is everything all right, Christie?’ he asked carefully.

‘Fine,’ she said, not wanting to transmit the intensity of her fear to him. ‘I felt a bit spooked, that’s all. It’s thundery here.’ Which wasn’t true. The sky was as blue and clear as the single oval sapphire in her antique engagement ring. ‘I love you, James,’ she added, which was entirely true. And then the signal on his mobile phone went, the connection was severed and Christie was left with her feeling of terror still beating a tattoo in her chest.

She left a message on her husband’s mobile phone: ‘I’m fine. Off shopping now, phone me later and tell me if you’re able to get the earlier train. I love you. Bye.’

James worked for a government environmental agency and had worked his way up the ranks so he now held a senior position. He travelled round the country a lot, and Christie worried that the endless trips were getting too much for him. But James, still fired up wanting to be busy and to make sure that everything was done properly, loved it.

By ten, Christie was on her way along Summer Street with her shopping bags in her hand, trying to put the fear out of her mind. On the three days a week when she worked at St Ursula’s, she turned left when she walked out of her garden gate. Today, she’d turned right in the direction of the Summer Street Café.

It was a pleasant time of day, with not much traffic. The stressed morning drivers were at their offices and Summer Street belonged to the locals again. Many of Christie's original neighbours were gone, but there were some who'd lived on the street nearly as long as the Devlin family.

Like the Maguires, Dennis and Una, possessors of a series of clapped-out cars and gloriously oblivious to the outrage of their current next-door neighbour who clearly felt that a car with that many dents in its paintwork should not be parked beside her gleaming BMW. The Maguires had one daughter, Maggie: a good kid, Christie recalled. Tall, shy, always polite, hiding her prettiness behind a heavy veil of carrotty red curls as if she needed a retreat from the world. She'd never been in Christie's art classes but, like many of the girls on Summer Street, she'd had a crush on Shane. Lots of girls had. It was that combination of tousled blond hair and a slightly cheeky smile. He was a few months older than Maggie – extraordinary that they could both be thirty now – and indifferent to her pubescent longing.

'Just say hello to her,' Christie said, exasperated that Shane couldn't see that even a few words from her idol would make a difference to this shy girl.

'Ah, Mum, she'll only think I like her. Get real, would you?'

'What does that mean?' demanded his mother. 'Get real? I am being real. I'm saying show a bit

of kindness, Shane. It doesn't cost you anything, does it?' Her voice had risen up the scale.

'OK,' he muttered, realising his mother was off on her high horse about how goodness and kindness filled your soul with happiness. It was a sweet idea and all, but it didn't work with girls, did it? 'I'll say hi, right?'

'And be nice.'

'Should I propose as well?'

Maggie lived in Galway now and Christie hadn't seen her for ages.

But the adult Maggie had lived up to the early promise Christie had seen in her. She was truly stunning-looking, her hair darkened to glossy auburn, her face a perfect oval with silvery cobalt-blue eyes, wide expressive lips and the translucent skin of the pure redhead. Yet she didn't appear to be aware of her beauty. Rather the opposite, in fact. Christie sensed that Maggie Maguire was still hiding her real self.

'She's doing so well,' Una Maguire said every time Christie asked. All those years ago, Una had been red-haired, too, but now the red was a faded strawberry with fine threads of grey. She was still beautiful, though, with the fine-boned face her daughter had inherited. 'Maggie's going out with this fabulous man. He's a lecturer in the college and she's in the library research department now. They're made for each other. Living together for three years and they have a beautiful apartment off Eyre Square. No sign of them getting married,

but young people don't bother with that these days.'

'No, they don't,' agreed Christie easily, who understood quite plainly that Una longed with all her heart for her only child to be settled down with a husband and children.

They'd gone on their separate ways, Christie sure that Una had no notion of what she'd really seen in Una's heart.

Along with learning about her odd gift, Christie had learned that mostly people didn't want you to know their deepest, darkest secrets. So she kept her insights to herself unless she was asked.

Ten yards ahead of her, Amber Reid shot out of her gate at number 18, long tawny-gold hair bouncing in the telltale manner of the newly washed. Amber was seventeen, in her final year at St Ursula's and undoubtedly one of the stars of Christie's class.

Amber could capture anyone or anything with her pencil, although her particular gift was for buttery oil landscapes, wild moody places with strange houses that looked like no houses on earth. Even in a large class, Amber stood out because she was so sparky and alive.

An unfashionable pocket Venus shape, with softly curved limbs and a small, plumply rounded face, her only truly beautiful feature was that pair of magnetic pewter eyes, with the ring of deepest amber around the pupils. She'd never have been picked as one of the school's beauties, the

languorous leggy girls with chiselled cheekbones. Yet Amber's vivaciousness and the intelligence of those eyes gave her an attractiveness that few of the teenage beauty queens could match. And the artist in Christie could see the girl's sex appeal, an intangible charm that a photographer might not capture but an artist would.

Christie knew that unless St Ursula's had been evacuated for some strange reason that morning, Amber should be in school. And yet here she was, trip-trapping along in achingly high heels and a colourful flippy skirt that flowed out over her hips – unlike the institutional grey school uniform skirt that jutted out in an unflattering A-line. Amber was holding a mobile phone to her ear and Christie could just overhear.

'I'm just leaving now. Has anyone noticed I'm not there? MacVitie's not got her knickers in a twist over the absence of her best student?'

Mrs MacVitie was the maths teacher and Christie doubted that Amber, who was typically left-brained and hopeless at maths, was her best student. Favourite, perhaps, because it was hard to resist Amber, who always paid attention in class and was a polite, diligent student. But not best.

She must be speaking to Ella O'Brien, to whom she was joined at the hip, and Ella obviously told her that no, the St Ursula's bloodhounds had not been alerted.

'Sweet. If anyone asks, you think I was sick yesterday and it must have got worse. I phoned

in earlier and told the school secretary I was sick but, just in case, you back me up and say I'm puking like mad. It's true,' Amber laughed. 'I'm sick of school, right?'

Christie wondered if Faye, Amber's mother, knew what her daughter was up to.

Faye Reid was a widow, a quiet, businesslike figure who'd never missed a school meeting and was utterly involved in her daughter's life. Even though they lived on the same street, Christie didn't see much of Faye. She kept herself to herself, head down, rushing everywhere, clad in conservative navy suits and low-heeled shoes, with a briefcase by her side. There was such a contrast between the butterfly beauty of Amber who had the best of everything and caught people's eyes, and her mother, who always appeared to be rushing to or from work, trying hard to keep the mortgage paid and food on the table. A person didn't need Christie's gift of intuition to see that Faye's life had been one of sacrifices.

'She's one of the most gifted students I've ever taught,' Christie had told Faye two years before, shortly after Amber arrived in her class. 'Any art college in the world would love to have her.'

And Faye's face had lit up. Christie had never seen a smile transform a person so much. Faye was defiantly plain beside her daughter, overweight to Amber's curved sexiness and with her brown hair pulled severely back into a knot that only someone with the bones of a supermodel could

get away with. Faye Reid didn't have the super-model bones. But when she smiled that rare smile, she suddenly had all the charm of her daughter and Christie caught herself wondering why a woman like Faye, who could only be forty, lived such a quiet life. No man had ever been seen kissing Faye a wistful goodbye on the doorstep. Her clothes, the discreet earrings and low shoes that screamed comfort – they were like armour. It was as if Faye had deliberately turned her back on youthful sexiness and hidden behind a façade of plain clothes.

Christie wondered if she could see more . . . but suddenly, it was as if Faye Reid had abruptly closed herself off and Christie could see nothing but the woman in front of her.

'Thanks, Mrs Devlin,' Faye said. 'That's what I think too, but I love her so much, I thought I was totally biased. Every parent thinks their kid is Mozart or Picasso, don't they?'

'Not all,' replied Christie grimly, thinking of some of the parents she'd met over the years with no belief in their kids whatsoever.

Her comment apparently touched a chord with Faye and the smile vanished to be replaced by her more usual, sombre expression. 'Yeah, you're right,' she said, nodding. 'There are always a few who don't appreciate their kids. Nothing that twenty years of psychotherapy wouldn't cure.'

Up ahead, Amber said a cheery 'bye' into her phone. Christie knew that the correct teacher

response at this point would be to catch up with her and ask what she was doing out of school. But suddenly Amber broke into a run, high heels notwithstanding, and was gone down the street before Christie could move.

Christie shrugged. Amber was a good student, hardly a serial absentee. She and Ella had never been part of the school's wilder cliques and had both managed to move from adolescence to young womanhood without any noticeable bursts of rebellious behaviour.

There might be a perfectly good reason for her absence today. And Christie herself knew that you could learn plenty of things outside school as well as in.

When she'd been young, she hadn't done everything by the book either.

Yet again, Christie thought about the past and the places she'd lived. The house in Kilshandra with bitterness and misery engrained into the wallpaper so that she'd barely been able to wait till she was old enough to leave. The bedsit on Dunville Avenue where she'd met so many friends and learned that she didn't have to hide her gift. And Summer Street, where all the best things in her life had happened.

She could remember what the young Christie had looked like when she'd moved to Summer Street – long dark hair drawn back in a loose ponytail, always in jeans and T-shirts – and she could remember how lucky she'd been, with a kind

husband, enough money so they weren't in debt, with one beautiful, healthy child and another on the way. Yes, the years on Summer Street were the ones she liked to remember.

But there were other times she'd like to forget.

The strange feeling came through her again and despite the warmth of the morning, Christie shivered.