

Closer *than* Ever



LISA ELLIOT

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ALSO BY LISA ELLIOT

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The Light in You

Up Against Her

Louder than Words

For Cat

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One

June 2013

Anna glanced up at the departure board. Hayley's flight number was moving up the schedule nauseatingly quickly. Their time together was disappearing. Her chest was tight. It was the end of an era. Hayley was leaving. Forever. She still couldn't believe it even though she'd known this day would come. Even though she understood that Hayley had to go it didn't make it any easier.

BA1441 changed to Go to Gate. Anna felt sick and lightheaded. They were out of time.

Sitting beside her on the cold metal chairs, Hayley reached out and held Anna's hand. Her touch was reassuringly warm and comforting.

Would Anna ever see her again? Would things be the same? How was she going to live without her?

They searched each other's eyes. The enormity of the moment was suffocating. Hayley's eyes were glassed over and red. Anna could feel her own eyes stinging. But she wouldn't cry. Not yet.

"I guess I'd better go through security," Hayley's voice cracked.

Anna swallowed. They stood and faced each other for one last time. This sucked so much.

"Come here." Hayley held out her arms.

Their whole bodies pressed against each other. Anna got lost in Hayley's embrace, still not used to holding her this closely. The euphoria and sadness of last night was still reverberating around her body. Hayley's taste was still fresh on her tongue.

"I'll miss you so much," Hayley whispered over Anna's shoulder. "It'll be okay. We'll talk all the time." She planted a

soft kiss on Anna's cheek. Anna leant into it with her eyes squeezed shut. They lingered cheek to cheek for a moment.

Hayley's words lacked their usual conviction, but it was sweet of her to try and make the situation easier. She always made things okay. Anna wanted to believe her. But would Hayley really miss her? Especially after the fuck up that was last night?

Anna forced herself to keep it together as her eyes welled up. "This is it then."

"Only for now."

Anna took a photograph in her mind, not wanting to forget this moment, wanting to always remember Hayley as she was now: ready to take on the world.

Hayley glanced up at the screen. She was cutting it fine, as usual. Anna was anxious Hayley was going to miss the flight she didn't want her to catch. The whole situation was the absolute worst.

Hayley threw her backpack over her shoulder with a sombre expression and a hint of distance creeping onto her face already.

Their hands entwined, one last time, before Hayley slowly pulled away. Their hands dropped. It was only a few steps, but it felt like the entire world.

"Goodbye, Anna."

Words felt thick in her throat, not wanting to come out. "Goodbye, Hayley."

Anna watched, rooted to the spot, as Hayley drifted through to departures, willing the tears not to fall. Not yet.

Hayley turned around and looked back, giving one last, final, sad wave. Anna returned it before Hayley disappeared around a corner.

Hayley was gone.

Anna bent over, dropping her hands to her knees, as the tears fell.

Present day

Anna studied the arrivals information screen in Balbuinidh's empty train station, remembering the pain of the last time she saw Hayley ten years ago. They'd been so close then, but it felt like a lifetime ago.

Hayley's train would be here in less than twenty minutes. Anna's heart pounded. Her palms were sweaty. She had to get herself under control because she was about to be spending a lot of time over the next week or so with her first love, the girl who had left her heartbroken, the girl of her dreams.

Anna pulled her phone out of her pocket and checked the last messages Hayley had sent earlier this afternoon. Knowing they were coming from inside the country was strange. Thrilling, even.

Landed! Oh how I've missed these orderly queues and accents!!

Everything feels weirdly familiar. It's like being back inside a dream wtf!!!!

Am on train. Nearly missed it lol. New York already feels like a million miles away. Can't wait to see youuuuuu!!!

OMG I forgot how good Irn-Bru tastes!!

She shoved her hands into her coat pockets, gripping her phone in one, unsure how she was going to feel when Hayley stepped off the train. Nerves mixed with excitement ran through her. Her heart was racing. Her anxiety always threatened to take over in situations like these. It usually did. It was.

Thoughts swirled around her head as she paced the platform from one end to the other and back again. She couldn't wait to see her friend again; there was no doubt about that. But it was complicated. Would Hayley remember the things they'd shared all those years ago? Would she remember how close they'd been?

The years had added distance between them, which was sad. Experiences. Relationships. Things they no longer had in common. Would Anna like this more adult version of Hayley? How much of the Hayley she had known was still in there?

It was a ridiculous amount of time to hold onto these feelings, if that's what they were. They'd been inseparable for a year at university. That was hardly long enough to warrant this turmoil a decade later. One night they'd got as close as it was possible to get, but that was it. Sleeping together the night before Hayley left had been a terrible idea, Anna had concluded over the years.

Anna cursed that train of thought, annoyed at herself. She should not be thinking about that night right now. This was about Hayley taking a time-out from her real life in the US, and the two of them catching up as old friends, nothing more. Anna didn't want anything more, anyway. She didn't want to be feeling so mixed about seeing Hayley again. All she wanted was for Hayley to have a nice trip and then they could go back to their normal lives across the ocean from each other and she could get rid of these feelings once and for all. Her desire for her straight former best friend would be cured. The mystery between them would be diffused once and for all.

Anna was ready to settle down. She wanted to meet her future wife, the person she would share the rest of her life with. She did not want to drag up old feelings from the past for the one woman she'd never really got over.

Mrs Cairns from the newsagents walked onto the platform. They exchanged a brief hello, and Anna went back to pacing.

Why was Hayley coming here, really? Why now? She hardly knew Hayley any more. She was definitely not still in love with her. She was a friend. That was all. A friend that had let her down in the past. Anna was over it, but she'd be lying if she said it didn't still grate on her a little.

The train approached. Anna stopped racing around the platform. Her thoughts didn't. She held her breath. Her heart rate skyrocketed. The train doors pinged loudly and rhythmically. The sound lasted forever with no sign of Hayley.

Maybe she had got on the wrong train? Mrs Cairns and her daughter were already heading for the exit.

Hayley appeared at the end of the train, gliding off the carriage, so out of place in Anna's sleepy little town in the middle of the Highlands. The top of a large backpack was visible above her head. There was an expensive-looking handbag on one arm and a couple of shopping bags on the other. Hayley looked around the pretty station before noticing Anna further up the platform.

Anna waved, aware that a massive smile had broken out on her face.

Hayley started running towards her, waving her arms and bags, grinning widely.

Anna broke out into a run, too.

"Oh my god!" Hayley called out, as they neared each other.

"Hi!"

They collided into each other. Before Anna knew it, they were hugging tightly. Anna held onto Hayley's backpack as Hayley's bags dug into her back. Pulling apart, they were all smiles and wide eyes, taking each other in.

Seeing her. Smelling her. Touching her. She was really here. In person. Face to face. Not just a picture on her phone. There was so much information to process at once. It was overwhelming.

Hayley's eyes sparkled. "It is so fucking incredible to see you, Anna, this is like, what the fuck, am I really here? It's surreal."

Her American accent was spacious, open and relaxed. Anna enjoyed Hayley's voice and hearing it again was like a gentle caress to her ears. She'd missed it. The phone didn't do it justice.

"So surreal. It's amazing to see you, too." Anna smiled, hiding how nervous she was.

"You look"—Hayley studied Anna's face, eyes wide, openly searching it—"so great."

“So do you.” This, of course, was an understatement. Hayley was like a movie star. Her eyes were beautiful with dark and perfect make-up that set off her smooth skin and pinkish, full lips. Her hair was longer now, flowing just below her shoulders, with soft bronze highlights giving it a gorgeous depth. Anna’s head was spinning. Seeing Hayley in person again was throwing her off balance. She was different, yet the same. Alien yet familiar. Older and very definitely hotter. Anna scanned her whole body, aware that she was hardly saying anything. “How was your journey?”

“Long. But I slept a little on the plane.”

“And you got all of your connections okay?”

Hayley laughed. “As practical as ever, I see. Yes, it went very smoothly, thanks.”

“And how was it carrying that huge thing?”

“Oh, this?” Hayley turned her head to the side. “This is my whole world from now on. It’s heavy but it’s fine. You get used to it.”

“Here, let me take it while we walk back to mine. Give you a break from it.”

“It’s okay. I got it.”

“No, come on.” Anna gestured for her to take it off.

Hayley’s eyes had a flirty glint in them. “So chivalrous of you, Anna.” Hayley conceded and unclipped the bag from her waist and handed it over. Anna hoisted it over her shoulder. It was even heavier than she expected, but easy enough to carry. Anna clipped on the backpack at her hips, not needing to adjust the straps.

Hayley rubbed her arms, almost bouncing on the spot. “Oh my god it’s so cold! I’ve been freezing ever since I landed. Can’t get warm. What was it you used to call this type of weather again? D— something?”

Anna smiled. “Dreich. Cold, wet and miserable. Weather that makes you forget what the sun looks like. The true Scottish experience.”

Hayley's eyes lit up. She always did appreciate the language. "I love that word! I don't even mind this rain, so maybe I am a Scot at heart!"

"Maybe you are."

Hayley nodded, as if thinking. "I'm so happy to be here, Anna. I can't tell you."

Anna smiled. Holding eye contact with Hayley was intoxicating. She had missed her. "Come on, let's go. Let's get you warm."

They headed out of the station, turning right past the old-fashioned stone wall towards the town centre. Anna was far too aware that the backpack she was carrying had previously been flush against Hayley's back.

"It's so pretty here. It's so different from back home."

Anna wondered what Hayley would make of Balbuinidh. It had to be a culture shock coming from New York. "Yeah, it's not bad. It's centred around a few main streets next to the loch. Most of it is countryside, estates, farmland, and a nature reserve. There's some protected forest, and the distillery, of course. Glenbuinidh is the heart of it all."

"It's lovely."

They crossed the road onto the main street. It was quiet, even for Balbuinidh.

"Oh my god, look at that cute pub! Can we go in? I've missed British pubs so much!"

Anna would have preferred to go back to hers and cosy up with a bottle of wine and chat, but it was sweet how excited Hayley was about the pub. It was her holiday after all. "Sure."

It was nearly empty inside except for Arthur sitting in his favourite corner nursing a pint and reading the newspaper. Anna imagined what The Crofters would look like to Hayley. The fire gave a warm glow making it feel cosy. Thick wooden beams held up the relatively low ceiling.

Hayley dumped her bags by a table in the centre of the room. She scanned the pub with reverence. "This place looks

like it hasn't changed in a hundred years."

Anna shrugged. "It probably hasn't, much."

"What's that saying you have again? 'I could murder a pint'?"

Anna smiled, greatly appreciating that Hayley had remembered that. It was something Anna must only have said once or twice years ago. "Yep, you're right. Great memory, by the way."

"How could I forget that gem?"

Anna took off the backpack, conscious that Hayley was watching her now. Anna had no idea what she might be thinking. It was almost like meeting a stranger for the first time but there was this powerful sense of familiarity from the past and from a lot of recent digital interaction. It was an odd feeling, but not an unwelcome one.

"Drink?" Anna said, still nervous and awkward.

"Absolutely! This is a celebration, my friend."

Anna nodded, wishing the word 'friend' was all that had transpired between them in the past. "That it is."

Hayley's eyes lit up at the well-stocked bar. "I think I'll have a pint of the local beer. No, wait, a Glenbuinidh. Fuck, I want them both."

Anna laughed. "Then have them both."

"I like your thinking. You know, I love it here already. This pub and the small amount of the town I've already seen are exactly what I imagined. It's magical."

Anna inhaled, thrilled that Hayley's first impressions were good. "I'm glad you think so. It's a special place."

"Hey Anna. What can I get for you both?" Jamie said behind the bar. He did a quick double-take at Hayley.

Hayley put her hand on the counter. "This is a gorgeous little pub you have."

“Thanks,” Jamie said. He put one hand on the tap of the nearest draught and leaned against the counter. “I spent so much time here I thought I might as well make myself useful.”

“How’s your knee?” Anna asked.

“Still duffed.”

“Ah. I’m sorry.”

“How did you hurt it?” Hayley said.

“Playing five-a-side football. My own fault. I can’t twist and turn like I used to.”

“I hope it gets better soon and we see you back at the running club.”

“Believe it or not I really miss our Tuesday night hill-sprints.”

“You’re a glutton for punishment then.”

Hayley laughed.

That laugh. It reverberated around the room and in Anna’s head, soothing something within her and making her feel more relaxed. She loved the sound of it.

“I’m taking it you’ve just arrived from somewhere?” Jamie said, glancing over at the bags at the table.

“Yep.” Hayley smiled. “From the US. I’m visiting Anna.”

“Awesome.”

That Hayley would describe her trip like that was a surprise. Wasn’t she here to travel and live her best life? Wasn’t seeing Anna the secondary reason?

“And I’m going to travel around. I love Scotland.”

“Well, I hope you have a great time.”

Anna ordered the same as Hayley and carried their drinks back to their table.

Hayley leant forward and smiled at Anna. “Do you remember that time we drank a bottle of Glenbuinidh?”

Anna could remember it like yesterday. They were in their student flat, in Hayley's room, on her bed, listening to music and not going out because it was raining and freezing outside. "Yes."

"You described the taste of every sip. You were so stoked. It was cute."

Anna felt her brow furrow. Hayley calling her cute was not helpful. "It was the first bottle of Glenbuinidh I'd ever owned. I was excited."

"We drank the whole thing, didn't we?"

Anna recalled how they'd eventually taken to drinking straight from the bottle, passing it to each other in turn. Anna had savoured every sip, knowing that it had just come from Hayley's lips. It was so erotic, and it really shouldn't have been. It was the first time they'd ever done anything like it. "We did."

Hayley smiled. "And now you work at Glenbuinidh. I still can't get over how amazing that is."

Part of Anna felt like she hadn't achieved that much with her life compared to Hayley. But she was happy here. She liked her life. That had to count for something, right? "Me neither. You should come in and see the distillery sometime. I can show you my bar."

"I cannot wait to see it, Anna. I've been on the website and looked at all the pictures. It's just wonderful that you work there, I'm so excited to come and visit."

Hayley held her whisky glass up to do a toast.

Anna did the same.

She looked directly into Anna's eyes. "To old friendships and new beginnings."

Two

December 2012

Sitting cross-legged on Hayley's bed, Anna tore the golden foil from the neck of the bottle and twisted the cork until it opened with a low pop. The chunky bottle felt luxurious to hold. The world-famous Glenbuinidh 12-years smelled delicious. Anna poured some whisky into the glasses resting on one of Hayley's textbooks. The glugging of the amber liquid alone had Anna transfixed.

"It suits you," Hayley said, lying on the bed across from Anna, with her feet crossed at the ankles and her hands clasped across her front, staring at her.

"What does?"

"Pouring that. You look hot doing it. Passionate. The skin between your eyes furrows like you're some high-end bartender in a classy bar. I can just picture it."

Anna froze, mid-pour, at Hayley calling her hot. Friends said that to each other all the time, right? So why did it feel different coming from Hayley? She was probably reading too much into it, as usual.

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind," Anna said, handing her a glass. Their fingers brushed as Hayley took it, making Anna all warm and fuzzy inside. She loved spending time with Hayley so much. Like, couldn't get enough.

Hayley sat up and held her glass up. "To good health. To the future. Cheers!"

They gently clinked glasses and drank a sizeable amount in their first sip. It burned Anna's throat, in a good way. She considered Hayley's comment. "I have no idea what I want to do once I graduate. What the hell am I going to do with a geography degree?"

"You'll figure it out. It's an excellent degree. You have tons of skills. You're good with people. That's what really matters

in life.”

“Do you know what you’re going to do? Is it some sort of business management?”

“I’ll probably take a job in the city and work my way up the corporate ladder. By thirty I’d like to be somewhere near the top calling all the shots and earning the big bucks.”

“Isn’t that a bit too ambitious? Sorry! I’m not meaning to chop you down or anything. You’re amazing and if anyone can do it, you can.”

“I think it’s absolutely possible.”

Anna raised her eyebrows. “Wow. You’re serious. I admire that so much.”

“It’s what I’m working towards, anyway. I don’t know if I’ll actually achieve it.”

Anna nodded, just listening.

“My parents expect it, though. I’m also really interested in travelling. Maybe working in the travel industry somehow. Maybe running an airline.”

“Running it?”

“Yeah.”

Hayley was so confident compared to Anna and most of the people she’d ever known. “I love how self-assured you are. It’s fucking amazing. I’m just... not. I get so anxious over the stupidest little things.”

Hayley furrowed her brow. “What makes you anxious?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” A ton of things ran through her head. “Everything. Myself.”

Hayley reached over and lay her hand on Anna’s knee. Anna fought the urge to flinch. The touch of her hand was electrifying. Like lightning.

Hayley smiled. “You gotta trust yourself, you know? Take a deep breath and trust in your instincts. I’ve seen you. You have good instincts.” Hayley took a sip. “Or, you could always take

a drink to settle your nerves? Not the healthiest of options but it could help. Hell, we've all done it." Hayley finished her whisky. "Damn, this stuff is goood."

Anna necked the rest of hers too. It was so cosy and exciting to hang out in Hayley's room like this, especially with it being all rainy outside. Instead of pouring more whisky into the glasses she picked up the bottle and took a swig. "My instincts are telling me we need to finish this bottle."

"Woohoo, yes! Go, baby, go!"

Anna passed the bottle to Hayley, feeling bolder and more daring than ever, fired up from the whisky.

Hayley slid her hand off Anna's knee and took the bottle. She put it to her lips before tipping her head back and letting the amber liquid fall into her mouth. Anna couldn't look away; her eyes were glued to her beautiful friend. Hayley's golden hair and luminous skin were so inviting in the dim lighting of the bedroom. It was okay to notice that, right?

Hayley passed the bottle back to her with a funny look in her eyes. "Your turn."

Present day

Sitting across from Hayley in her local pub less than half an hour after meeting her off the train, after all these years, as if no time had passed, was a lot. There was something in the way Hayley held up the whisky glass for a toast and held her eyes that threw Anna off. It reminded her of that night they'd spent drinking from the same bottle. That was such a good night and so long ago. Would they still get on as easily as they had when they were younger?

Anna forced a breath, conscious of how long she was taking to reply. "Cheers." They tapped their little whisky glasses together and drank.

Hayley stole herself to one side after her sip, her hand on her chest, as if she was about to cough.

"Are you okay?"

“Yes,” Hayley croaked. “I forgot how strong this stuff is. I just need”—she cleared her throat—“to ease into it.”

“There’s no rush. Little sips are what it’s all about.”

Hayley, slightly blushing now, sat back up straight.

“Feeling better?”

“Much better.” Hayley smiled.

“Are you warmer?”

Hayley glanced at the woodburning stove in the corner and then held Anna’s eyes for a few seconds longer than necessary. “Much warmer.”

To Anna’s extreme discomfort, this stirred things deep inside. Things that she didn’t want to feel any more. Having Hayley here, in her space, gazing into her eyes was making it impossible not to feel the feelings she was hoping this visit would free her of. Feelings she wanted firmly in the past. Anna shifted in her seat and took a large drink of beer, desperately trying not to think about Hayley’s arresting hazel eyes and how much she fancied her when they were younger.

“What brought you up to the Highlands? I don’t think you mentioned.”

After Hayley’s out-of-the-blue email just over a year ago, and her brief but heartfelt apology for having ghosted her when she returned to the US, they’d been emailing every now and then. The past was all water under the bridge as far as Anna was concerned and she was happy to pick the friendship back up. They’d chatted a bit about their lives and what they were up to nowadays. Hayley had talked of her desire to quit her job and come back to Scotland and travel around mainland Europe all summer, but Anna hadn’t actually gone into much detail about why she had moved up to the Highlands, come to think of it. “Work, mainly.”

“I see.”

“There was an opening at Glenbuinidh distillery, and I jumped at the chance.”

“Good for you. What were the other reasons?” Hayley said.

“Um, it’s quieter up here. It feels safer. I like the slower pace of life. I was finding the city too stressful. Up here I’m more chill.”

“I can see that. It suits you. How long have you lived here?”

“I’ve been here for five years now.”

Anna tensed up, feeling her shoulders rise towards her ears, annoyed at herself for sharing. Despite wanting to be friends with Hayley again, part of her didn’t want to fully open up. Something inside of her resisted. She didn’t quite want Hayley to know her history or her insecurities or the things she still struggled with. Did Hayley even want to know these things about her? It wasn’t like she cared about how heartbroken Anna might have been when they lost touch or how it had taken Anna a long time to recover. She’d never told Hayley that it nearly destroyed her, and she never would.

Hayley tilted her head. “You okay?” She spoke the words softly.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine.” Anna forced herself to relax her shoulders. There was no use in holding onto grudges when Hayley was only here for a short time.

Hayley smiled. She took a sip of her beer. “Man, that’s delicious. Is this your local pub?”

“Yep. My house is around the corner.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing it.”

“This pub is pretty much the centre of town.”

“I love that. I’ve never lived in a place like this. You are very lucky.”

Anna smiled. “I know. I’m very grateful.”

“Your shorter hair suits you. It looked great longer, don’t get me wrong, but this is nice.” Hayley reached over and ran her fingers through the ends of Anna’s hair and down the side of her neck, resting there.

The touch sent a powerful wave of tingles through Anna's body, like lightning, which she could do nothing about. Damn it. So that was definitely still there then. Anna cleared her throat. "I'm growing it out. It's at an awkward length."

"It's so smooth." Hayley took back her hand, not meeting Anna's eyes. She seemed flustered, which was unlike Hayley. At least, unlike the old Hayley Anna once thought she knew.

Hayley had run her hands through Anna's hair when they had slept together that one and only time. It had felt so loving at the time, but Anna had misread that. Anna clenched her jaw, willing herself to forget the past.

"So." She changed the subject. "Tell me how it went leaving the corporate world."

Hayley leant back and unzipped her fleece. "It's done. I quit. Moved out of my apartment and put all my stuff in storage. I'm renting it out while I'm away. My boss thinks I'm making a huge mistake. He offered me a career break and to come back in six months instead of leaving completely. But I said it's not a career I want any more and cut all ties with them."

"Wow. You're so brave."

Hayley took a drink of beer, looking pensive. "Or stupid. I don't know. All I know is that I had to get out of there. I've felt trapped for a long time. I wasn't having fun or enjoying my life any more. I didn't want my boss's job, so I had no incentive to keep growing and developing. I was killing the job but it was killing me." Hayley paused. "I couldn't continue to waste my life there."

"You did what was best for you. And that is brave. You've done the right thing. I truly believe that." Anna fought the urge to squeeze her hand or give her a big hug.

Hayley looked deeply into her eyes, seemingly touched by Anna's words. "Thank you, Anna."

"And your parents, have they come around yet?"

Hayley grimaced. "Not yet. Not fully. My mum is trying to be supportive, in her way. My dad isn't."

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I get that they’re disappointed. But I can’t live my life for them.”

“Do you have a clearer idea of what you want to do instead?”

Hayley’s eyes danced. “I have so many ideas. That’s the problem. I’ve been thinking about starting my own business doing digital design stuff. I’m excited about the idea of travel vlogging – as a way of life, almost. Or there’s working in the travel industry, which has always appealed to me. I have some money saved up from my time at the bank and some investments, so I have a little bit of time to figure out what I’m going to do next, which is amazing.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a lot to think about.”

“I can’t choose between them.”

“That’s a good problem to have,” Anna said.

“Aside from all that, I just need a vacation. I’ve worked hard for years. I can’t even remember the last time I took some proper personal time off.”

“That’s no good.”

“All I really want to do right now is travel and have a good time.”

“You deserve to live a little. Life’s too short not to do the things you enjoy.”

“I couldn’t agree more. You know”—Hayley looked down at her drink then back up, with a hint of insecurity in her eyes—“Scotland is the last place I ever felt truly happy and free, the last time I felt most like myself.”

Anna took a sharp intake of breath, stunned. “Surely not.”

“I’m serious. I loved my time here so much. It was all downhill after I left.”

“That can’t be true.”

Hayley stared at her beer, confirming it to be the case.

Anna let Hayley's words sink in. To think the last time Hayley was happiest was her time in Scotland was incredibly sad.

"Get good grades. Get into a good college. Graduate well." Hayley looked up. "Get a coveted job in the city. Get promoted quickly. Dominate your field. Move into a leadership position. Make money. Work. Work. Work. Blah. Blah. Blah. I did it all and where did it get me? Burnt out and so miserable that all I lived for was the fantasy of quitting. I reached the top, as they say, and it wasn't all that. All I did was work, so I had very little time or energy left to enjoy other things. I had to pretend to be this corporate robot, which was just the worst. We mould ourselves into these corporate structures. It'd be funny if it weren't such a waste of human talent. It's crazy, when you think about it."

"You achieved a lot, though. You always said you wanted to get to the top and you did. You achieved your goals. That's got to count for something, right?" Anna sipped her whisky, still in awe of her successful friend even if she was questioning her previous life choices.

"Did I? Who really cares about investment banking? Making money for rich people starts to wear off pretty quickly. At least it did for me."

"You learned a lot?"

"I did learn a lot. I enjoyed my MBA. I have experience that I can take with me to my next venture."

Quitting and changing careers was a bold step. But then, Hayley was nothing if not bold. "I think you will be very successful at whatever you do next, and hopefully much happier."

A huge smile broke out on Hayley's face. "Thanks. That's kind. I think the key thing is knowing when to quit something that isn't setting your soul on fire. It's knowing when you're moving in the wrong direction and need to course-correct."

"And knowing when to come back to Scotland and spend time with your long-lost friend?" Anna smiled, feeling lighter

now and like she wanted to open up more given how candid Hayley had been. They always did just put everything out there when they talked, albeit except for one crucial subject on Anna's part. It felt weird not to be so honest, now. Plus, Anna saw the bigger picture. There was more to each of their lives than what they shared ten years ago, even if it was one of the most life-changing things that had ever happened to Anna. She had moved on.

"Yeah. Exactly. I need to live a little before I go on to whatever I'm going to do next. Scotland seemed like the best place to do that since I loved it here so much at college. I just want to travel around and have new experiences. Finally see it properly, you know." Hayley shrugged. "Run a bit wild."

"Knowing you, it will most definitely be wild."

Hayley laughed. "Not as wild as you might think, Anna. But yes, I do want to have some fun."

"And prioritise joy and pleasure? I think you wrote that in one of your emails."

Hayley laughed. "Did I? That sounds about right."

"I think it's amazing you're giving that to yourself."

"Thanks." Hayley held her eyes for a few seconds, then picked up her whisky and finished it.

Anna did the same, feeling slightly tipsy now. She wasn't expecting them to come straight to the pub before dinner. She didn't normally veer from her routine like this. "Are you ready to go? I have dinner ready to be warmed up in the oven, but I can't promise my house will be as warm as it is in here for about thirty minutes."

"I'm ready."

They passed by the fish and chip shop on the way back and Hayley got excited about having a fish supper again. They agreed to go there soon. Anna's street was quiet. She was at the end of a row of terraced cottages. It was early April but still felt like winter at this time of night. Anna held open her door for Hayley to enter, self-conscious about having Hayley

in her space. “My little house. I should warn you, it’s very small.”

Hayley stepped inside. “It’s delightful. I love that this is where you live.”

There wasn’t much space in the hall for the two of them. Anna took off Hayley’s backpack and they got rid of coats, shoes and bags by the front door. They bumped into one another. “Sorry,” Anna said, stepping out of the way.

“No, it’s my fault. I’m all arms and legs here.”

“I’ll give you the grand tour.”

“Exciting!”

Anna led them the short distance into the open-plan kitchen and living room, then back across the short hall to her bedroom and then pushed open the door to the bathroom. “It’s small but I’m happy here. It’s got a bath and a woodburning stove and a little garden. My neighbours are really good. I’m very lucky.”

“It’s so nice. So cosy! I love it. It feels so homey.”

“Thanks. Wait and I’ll get the heating on so your American ass doesn’t freeze off.”

“Ha. You know me so well.”

Hayley couldn’t handle the cold; Anna did remember that. But that phrase, ‘you know me so well’, was that true after all this time?

Anna got the fire going and turned the oven on as Hayley looked around the living room.

“You framed this?” Hayley picked up the picture of them by the loch from the sideboard.

Anna fought a blush and failed. “It was such a wonderful day. I like to remember it.”

Hayley’s smile was a full beam. It was almost dazzling to look at. “I’m really happy that you have this. It was a great day.”

In truth, that was the day that Anna had suspected Hayley might like her back. Hayley was coming to the end of her time in Scotland and things between them had been at boiling point, or so it had felt. Hayley had held her hand and snuggled into her. They'd talked about their dreams for the future and of travelling together. It was a future which had each other in it, to some extent. The memory was now something bittersweet because none of it ever came true.

Anna prepared their meal and Hayley took a seat on the kitchen breakfast bar. Anna had a small dining table by the front window but this was fine for now. Hayley offered to help but Anna just wanted her to relax. She'd had a long journey.

“How's the jetlag?”

“I'm five hours behind so it's not too bad yet. I guess I'm a little tired from the journey. I might find it difficult to get up in the morning. What time do you normally get up?”

Anna always got up at the same time. She had an established sleeping routine and tended to stick to it even if she didn't sleep well, which she often didn't. No good could come from lying in bed alone with her thoughts. So, Anna spent as little time in bed as she could. “Seven, normally, but it's fine. I'll let you have a lie in.”

Hayley would be sleeping in the living room on the sofa bed. It wasn't ideal that she didn't have a spare bedroom for guests.

“That's so kind of you but you don't have to. Just come in whenever you want. I sleep like a log, so you won't wake me.”

Anna served up two plates of lasagne with salad and slices of garlic bread, remembering how deep a sleeper Hayley used to be and how well Anna used to sleep next to her whenever they shared a bed. She may or may not have watched Hayley sleep from time to time, like a total creeper. Shrugging her thoughts away, she slid onto the high stool.

“This looks delicious!” Hayley's eyes widened. “I remember how you used to cook for us all back in the apartment sometimes. It was the best I ate all that year.”

“I enjoyed it. Plus everyone was always eating crap or hungover so the bar wasn’t very high.”

“It made it feel like a home away from home. And that was all down to you.”

“Oh.” Hayley had never said this to her before. “I’m glad it made you feel that way.”

“I tried to replicate your potato gratin over the years, but I’ve never been able to make it quite as good.”

“Plenty of double cream. I’ll show you before you go, if you want.”

Hayley smiled. “I’d love that.”

Anna was starving, she realised with the first few bites.

Hayley made a face after she tasted hers. “Still an amazing cook then I see?”

“You like it?”

“Sure do.”

Hayley took another bite and Anna watched her. She was still adjusting to the fact that Hayley was really here, even if only for a short time. She forced herself to look away. Hayley eating food had always been a fascination of hers. There was something so pleasure centred about it. God, she had to stop sexualising this poor woman. Hayley was visiting an old friend and didn’t deserve to be lusted after like this. It wasn’t fair. Anna hated herself for it. It wasn’t right. After what felt like a long silence, Anna finally broke it. “So, what is your plan for this trip of yours?”

Hayley looked up from her food. “Plan? Did I hear you say plan?”

Anna raised an eyebrow and gave a disparaging look.

“Anna, you know I have no plan. That’s half the fun of it for me.”

Anna was surprised but not shocked. She thought that maybe because Hayley had worked in a corporate setting, she would be more organised by now. “Still a free spirit, I see?”

“Are you horrified? You would have every day planned out by now with a full itinerary, wouldn’t you?”

“Maybe not every day, but a plan – yes.”

Hayley laughed. “We really haven’t changed much, have we?”

“I think I’ll reserve my verdict until further information is gathered.”

“Of course you will.”

After dinner they sat on the sofa that would become Hayley’s bed and chatted for a while.

“Hey, thank you for letting me stay. It’s super cool of you. It really is so great to be back.”

“No worries. You’re very welcome. It’s nice to spend some time with you before you go off on your big trip.”

A small silence opened up.

“It’s late. I’d better let you get to bed,” Hayley said, softly.

Anna was grateful Hayley was happy to call it a night. Today had been a lot to take in. “Sure. I’ll go get your bed stuff.”

Anna fetched the bedding she had prepared for Hayley and assembled the sofa bed. The bed was easy enough to pull out and she showed Hayley how to do it. Hayley helped her put the sheet on the double bed. Once it was all made, it looked quite appealing.

Hayley fell onto the bed, arms splayed out to the side. Anna perched on the armrest and watched as Hayley lay on the bed, thinking that she should really get out of her travelling clothes. “I hope it’s comfortable.”

“I’m sure it will be. I already don’t want to leave it.”

“There are fresh towels in the bathroom for you. And just help yourself to whatever you want and make yourself at home.”

“You’re the perfect host.”

“Campervan search tomorrow. I’m quite looking forward to it.”

“Me too. Thanks again for helping me.”

“Don’t thank me until we find you a good one.”

Hayley laughed, quietly.

“Goodnight, Hayley. I hope you sleep well.” Anna backed out of the room and went to close the door.

“Sweet dreams, Anna. See you in the morning.”

Three

June 2013

Hayley snuggled into Anna's chest, putting her arm across her waist. She'd never done that before. Anna, lying on her back, stole a quick inhale on the back of Hayley's head, trying to savour every last second of their time together. Her heart pounded so hard. Damn it. Hayley would hear given her ear was flush against Anna's chest.

"What time is it?" Hayley murmured, squeezing her closer.

"Half-past twelve."

"Ugh."

"I know."

Anna stroked Hayley's arm draped across her waist. Hayley's skin was so soft. They'd never been quite this intimate. But she didn't care. Hayley was leaving in less than twelve hours. Her fingers moved up and down Hayley's forearm beyond her control. It felt so natural. Just like she thought it would. She just couldn't hold back any longer, a mixture of grief and longing taking over her rogue fingers.

"That's nice," Hayley whispered, not moving.

Anna's every nerve tingled. She had never felt as connected to Hayley. Or to anyone in her whole life. They were both sad about Hayley's leaving and supporting each other through it. Their bodies were like something glued together, entwined, but forever with this huge distance between them. Close but a million miles away. The contradiction was often dizzying. Debilitating, even.

Hayley shifted even closer onto Anna, resting her leg over Anna's thighs. Anna put her other arm around her, instinctively, and they cuddled into each other. Hayley's chest rose and fell. Anna's heart still pounded. They stayed like that for ages. Anna didn't want to let go. Ever.

But she would have to, very soon.

Hayley lifted her head and looked directly into Anna's eyes mere inches from hers. "I don't think I can sleep."

"Me neither."

"Do you mind if I stay in here with you tonight?"

"Of course not."

"We still have a few more hours together."

Anna nodded.

They lay together for ages until Hayley moved off Anna and rested back on the pillow they shared.

Anna turned to face her as Hayley did the same. They were still wrapped up in each other, their faces so close together. The bed was warm. Their bodies emanated so much heat. They'd been sharing a bed for months, off and on, sometimes cuddling each other to sleep, but it felt different tonight. Heightened.

Hayley stared into her eyes. Anna got lost in that hazel tinge and seductive stare. Hayley glanced down at Anna's lips and rested her hand on the side of Anna's neck. She stroked along Anna's jawline with her thumb. Anna struggled to breathe. She was either going to ask Hayley what she was doing or lean in and finally kiss those lips she so desperately wanted to.

Hayley inched forward, eyes glancing backwards and forwards from Anna's eyes to her mouth.

All Anna could do was stare back. She wanted this. She needed this. But was Hayley on the same page? Did she feel the same? Was this a good idea?

Before Anna could overthink it, Hayley's lips were on hers.

Anna was shocked at first. It had finally happened. Then she quickly lost herself in Hayley's oh-so-soft lips that were kissing hers so gently. Hayley's tongue found hers, tentatively, which instantly sent a wave of electricity between Anna's legs. Anna squeezed Hayley's waist as Hayley ran her hands through Anna's hair, slowly, like she was caressing Anna's innermost being. The kiss went on and on.

It was like a dream.

Present day

Some early morning light crept underneath the curtains. Anna had slept a little bit worse than usual. She'd been tossing and turning all night thinking about the past and remembering things she'd rather not. The closeness of Hayley the night before she left felt like yesterday. That moment when they first kissed was forever burned onto Anna's brain despite her repeated attempts to erase the memory.

A couple of hours and some light sleep later, Anna peeked into the living room. Hayley was still asleep. Tiptoeing, she went into the kitchen, casting longing looks at the coffee machine, and switched the heating on. Hayley stirred. Anna froze. Why did it feel like having a stranger in the house?

"Hey, you." Hayley turned around, blinking. Her hair was wild, and her eyes were soft and sleepy. She was always so beautiful first thing in the morning. She was so beautiful all the time. Anna sighed inwardly at herself.

"Good morning. Sorry I woke you."

Hayley yawned. "Don't be. It's all good. I need to get"—she yawned again—"used to this."

"We should swap. You can have my bed and I'll sleep in here. You need to get over your jetlag more gradually and I need my coffee in the morning."

"Well, when you put it like that, Anna, how can I possibly resist your bed?"

Anna laughed. Hayley was always so easy-going and so effortlessly flirty. She'd missed laughing with her like this, in a house, with their guards down. She'd missed it perhaps more than she'd realised. "It's a better plan."

"You do love a plan."

"Speaking of which, do you want to go through the van listings on my laptop soon? I have a whole selection saved that I thought you might like."

Hayley pushed herself up. She was wearing a long-sleeved cotton top and no bra, obviously. Anna darted her eyes away.

“That sounds great. I can’t believe you’ve found some already.”

Anna had been searching for vans for Hayley for weeks now. It had become her new hobby when she got home from the distillery. While she knew Hayley wasn’t short of money, she wanted her to get a decent vehicle for a good deal, and for it to be safe and roadworthy. Given that Hayley was buying it in the UK, she felt a sort of responsibility to help her. “It’s all good. I’ve enjoyed looking.”

Hayley smiled.

It was such an unguarded, open and warm smile. She’d missed that smile. She’d missed how easy it was to talk to Hayley so much. “How was the bed, by the way?”

“Very comfortable. Honestly, I’m fine to sleep here again tonight. You’ve been so kind to let me stay at your home I can hardly kick you out of your own bed. Just wake me in the morning. I’ll wake for coffee no matter what the hour.”

Anna laughed. “On that note, I’ll get some going.”

Hayley went to the bathroom and Anna zipped about the kitchen getting the laptop and coffee ready. She was looking forward to this.

Hayley came back in in her pyjamas still looking like a movie star and sat beside her at the breakfast bar. She focused on Anna’s laptop displaying vans and campervans of varying shapes and sizes in a list of favourites Anna had created. “Anna, what the fuck, this is so cool! Look at them all. You’ve got a whole thing going on here. I can’t believe it. Thank you!”

“It was nothing.”

“It’s everything! Let’s see what’s out there.”

Anna pulled up outside the car garage. This was their last viewing of the day. None of the other vans they’d seen had

been suitable. Hayley's budget was generous, but fully fitted out campervans were expensive to buy outright. This van was perfect on paper, but the interior needed a bit of doing up. Despite this, she hoped it would be the perfect van for Hayley. If it wasn't, Anna was seriously considering doing up a basic van for her herself. Anna turned the car off. "This is it."

The garage was popular, judging by the number of people in the waiting room. Hayley turned towards her. "Fingers crossed for this one."

Anna asked for their contact at the reception. A man appeared in oily overalls a few minutes later. "Hiya, have you come about the van?"

"Yep. We're Anna and Hayley."

"Great. It's out the back if you want to follow me around."

As soon as they saw the campervan, Anna got a good feeling about it. It was white with a purple stripe along the side. It gleamed in the late afternoon sun.

Circling the van, they examined it thoroughly as he relayed the specs. "It's done forty-thousand miles which for a two thousand and thirteen reg, isn't bad. It's got a two berth, fully fitted suite with seating area. Manual. Two-point-eight litre engine."

"And the tyres? When were they last changed?" Anna said.

"Two years ago. They still have good tread, but if you want I can throw in some new ones for you."

He handed Anna the service history and she scanned it. "That would be great, thank you."

The inside was spacious but her earlier suspicions from the photos were confirmed. The worktops were worn and the cabinet doors didn't shut completely, hanging down to one side. A table on the wall behind the front compartment took up far too much space and had stains on it. There was no mattress on the sheet of wood that must have been the bed.

Hayley was quiet as she ran her eyes around the space with a hint of disappointment. "What's the ventilation like?"

Hayley asked.

“There’re two main vents which meet regulation standards. But it can’t hurt to open the windows if you have the stove on. That’s what I always did.”

“How about the electrics?” Hayley said. “How many charging points are there?”

He pointed them out and assured them they were in great working order. Anna looked at the detailed service history again.

They walked back around to the front of the campervan. Hayley sat in the driver’s seat and ran her hands around the steering wheel. “Does it have a stereo?”

Unfortunately, all Anna could see was an old-school CD player and no USB-socket.

“It’s not very fancy, I’m afraid,” he said, looking apologetic. “The speakers are quality but you might want to get a more modern player if that’s your jam.”

Hayley smiled at him. “Old-school. I like it.”

They chatted a bit more about the campervan and its various strengths and weaknesses. Hayley was more inquisitive than Anna had expected her to be. It was impressive. The conversation ran its course. “Thank you so much,” Hayley said. “We’ll need a few minutes to discuss.”

“No problem. Take all the time you need. Let me know if you want to test drive it.” He left them to it.

“So what do you think?” Hayley said.

“I’m impressed. It’s an excellent vehicle. But it needs a bit of work in the back for you to be comfortable, I would have thought.”

“I think the living area is fine.” Hayley didn’t sound convinced. She took a deep breath, as if talking herself into it. “As long as the vehicle itself is in good condition and it has a bed, I’ll be fine. And it has that.”

“I’d be happy to do it up for you before you go.”

Hayley's brow furrowed. "You'd do that?"

"Yeah."

"Do you know how?"

"I have the tools. I make furniture as a side-hustle."

"What?" Hayley stepped back. "I did not know this about you."

Anna folded her arms over her chest. "I work with local woods. I have a shed in the back garden. Sometimes I work outside on the grass or on a table by the back door. It relaxes me."

"So that's why all the furniture in your house looks so well made."

"Just some. I'm not sure they're that well made."

"It sounds like a very therapeutic hobby."

"It can be. I like designing the pieces and cutting clean lines. I like the uniformity and the precision of it."

"That sounds like you."

Anna smiled. "Are you going to test drive this then?"

"Yeaahh!"

"Not worried about driving on the other side of the road?"

Hayley laughed at her. "No. Should I be?"

Anna shrugged. "I would be. But your approach is better."

The test drive went smoothly. Hayley smiled the entire time, as if something was clicking into place in her life. Her enthusiasm was palpable. She took to the roads with ease and Anna could see her falling in love with the campervan with each passing second. It was heart-warming to see her friend as happy as this.

They arrived back at the garage and Hayley turned the engine off. "I think this is the one. It just feels right."

"You should go for it then."

“But I don’t want you to have to go to all that trouble. I’ll be okay with the basics. I’m only going to sell it on again so there’s no need to go all out.”

“Let me tidy it up a bit and give you some shelves and storage space at least. I can even pull out that clunky table and put in a compact one that folds away when you’re not using it. It won’t be a bother.”

Hayley just looked at her, as if considering something. “That would be amazing, thank you.”

Hayley sorted the paperwork and finalised the purchase with the guy while Anna sat back and watched her friend in action. Hayley was both polite and astute. Professional, even. Anna had never seen her like this before. It was a far cry from their student days.

In under an hour they were driving back to Anna’s in separate vehicles, Hayley following behind as if she’d been driving on these roads forever. She always did adapt quickly.

Two days later Anna was knee deep in sawdust and wood cuttings. She had to go back to work tomorrow and she wanted to get most of it done. The campervan renovation was coming along nicely. The new car stereo with digital radio and Bluetooth connected to her phone had been keeping Anna company. The seller was right; the speakers were excellent. She’d been blasting music for hours.

“Your coffee.” Hayley passed Anna a cup. She sat on the edge of the mattressless bed and crossed her legs.

“Thanks.” Anna took the cup while kneeling on the campervan floor. She tapped pause on her phone so they could hear each other. The silence rang in Anna’s ears for a few seconds once the music stopped.

“I love that song.” Hayley smiled.

“It’s good, isn’t it?”

“It’s one of my favourites.”

Anna narrowed her eyes. “Is it?”

“Yeah. I love Christine and the Queens. You seem really surprised by that.”

“Sorry.” Anna shook her head. “You’ll need to play me your favourite songs soon. I don’t know what you like any more.”

“I will. I’m sure we’ll still have the same taste in music.”

Anna smiled. It was amazing to be getting to know Hayley all over again.

“I heard you playing The xx a few minutes ago. Wasn’t that song out around the time I was studying over here?”

“I think it was, yeah.” She’d listened to it a thousand times while pining for Hayley but she was never going to let on.

“Kind of reminds me of that time,” Hayley said.

“Yeah. I know what you mean.”

Hayley ran her hand over the new countertop Anna had installed. “I can’t believe how much you’ve done in here so quickly. It looks amazing.”

“I like a challenge.”

“You get one thousand lesbian points.”

Anna laughed.

“It’s a seriously attractive trait you’ve got going on here, being so good with your hands and practical stuff. I’m amazed the lesbians aren’t lining up outside.”

Anna inhaled. Hayley was eternally flirty. She shouldn’t read into it. “I’ll be done here in a few hours. Then she’s all yours.”

Hayley smiled, leaned forward, and uncrossed her legs. “I don’t know what I did to deserve such a good friend as you.”

“Neither do I.”

Hayley ran a hand through her long hair, scanning the inside of the small campervan. “It already feels so cosy in here. I love it.”

“It’s a good van. You’ll be safe in it.”

Hayley looked at her quizzically. “You value that a lot, don’t you? Safety.”

“I guess so. Why do you say that?”

“It’s the way you talk. You’re always thinking about potential risks and practical solutions.”

“When it comes to setting you up with this van, I think I’m just being sensible.” Anna nudged Hayley’s shin. “You’re too chill about the whole thing.”

Hayley laughed. “If that’s how you see it.”

Anna was only teasing. She knew Hayley was clever and that her breezy, easy-going nature also came with a quick mind and bags of intelligence. She just acted like an enthusiastic golden retriever most of the time. Anna really liked the easy-going side of Hayley. It balanced out her own more sceptical, anxiety-tinged view of the world.

Hayley lay back on the wooden base of the bed. Anna glanced at her body and looked away. It was totally wrong to think that way about Hayley. Wrong but so hard not to when she was sprawled out like this. Was Hayley flirting with her? Anna looked up and allowed her eyes to roam over Hayley’s body. It was okay to look, right?

“I can just imagine lying here at night under the stars in the middle of nowhere looking through the little windows.” Hayley’s voice was soft. Wistful. She spoke towards the roof. “Or cruising around the mountains all day. Doing whatever I want, when I want.”

Anna cleared her throat, looking away. “Everything you ever wanted.”

Hayley sat up. “Man, I can’t wait to hit the road.”

Anna couldn’t help but feel sad at the idea of Hayley leaving again. She picked up her screwdriver and began to fix the wonky cabinet door. She had to get a grip of herself. Hayley was a wild, dangerous creature. A thrill-seeker at heart, revving up for the time of her life, while Anna wanted to find a wife, settle down, and maybe think about starting a family. Anna wanted safety while Hayley wanted danger.

There was no way Anna was going to let herself believe there was something between them again. No. Way. Especially not after all this time.

“Hey. Why don’t you leave this for the day, and we can go get dinner? You’ve been at this for hours, and I want to spend time with my friend. You did promise me fish and chips, lady.”

Anna stopped adjusting the cabinet doors. “But I wanted to get this fin—”

Hayley put her hand on Anna’s shoulder. “There’s no rush. We’ve been so focused on the campervan the last few days when we’re supposed to be spending time together. We need to relax.”

The feel of Hayley’s fingers softly resting on her shoulder caused a warm buzz to ring through her. “Er. Okay.”

Within twenty minutes, Anna was showered and changed and they were walking down her little street towards the chip shop.

When they turned onto the main street, Hayley gasped. “Would you look at that! It’s so pretty.”

The fading light cast warm golden rays against the old stone buildings. Anna liked Hayley’s excitement. She liked it a lot. “There’s probably a nice sunset over the loch right now.”

“Can we go?”

Anna smiled. “Sure.”

The loch was particularly beautiful as they approached its banks. The mountains were reflected in the water. Hayley’s eyes were lit up in wonder. Seeing her like this, being with her in Anna’s hometown felt so good.

“This place is stunning. I love Balbuinidh. It’s so sweet. I see why you love it here.”

Anna looked at Hayley and smiled. They always did like the same things. It was comforting knowing they still did. “I sit out here and watch the sunset when I’m anxious. It soothes me.”

“Do you still get anxious sometimes then?” Hayley turned to her, the sunset reflecting in her eyes.

“I do, yes. I’m still a bit of an overthinker. I don’t sleep that well. So, not that different from before, really.” Anna pressed her lips together.

Hayley reached out and squeezed her arm. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

They watched the sunset over the loch in a comfortable silence. It was so peaceful spending time in Hayley’s company again. She’d forgotten how relaxed Hayley could make her. She’d missed this. Anna shivered as a gust of air swept past them. Hayley must have been freezing. It was interesting that she hadn’t mentioned how cold it was. Anna turned to her, with her curiosity piqued. “Hungry?”

“Starving.”

In the bright neon light of the chip shop, Moira was serving tonight. She wore a pale blue apron and a determined expression. The distinctive smell of the deep fat fryer, vegetable oil and vinegar whetted Anna’s appetite. It could never be explained.

“Hi, Anna,” Moira said, plunging some cut potatoes into the chip fryer. “Be with you in a second.”

Hayley stood tall and majestic by the hot counter of battered fish, sausage and black pudding. She looked so out of place but totally at ease with herself and at one with the situation, as usual. Anna took a picture because it amused her to do so. It was hard to take her eyes off Hayley.

“Did you just take a picture of me?”

“I did. Yes.”

Hayley shook her head, smiling.

“Just documenting your trip. Adventures in a chip shop.”

“Keeping it real.”

“You certainly are.”

“Do you mind if I order?” Hayley said, under her breath.

“Not at all, go ahead.”

“Hi,” Moira said. “What would you like?”

Hayley piped up, “May we have two fish suppers please? One with salt and vinegar and one with ketchup.”

Moira didn’t bat an eyelid, used to the many tourists in here no doubt. “Aye, okay. Give me a wee minute.”

Hayley giggled and gave Anna a small, cheeky smile. She was so cute. Frustratingly cute.

Anna carried the bag of steaming hot food housed in white boxes and paper back to the house as Hayley fell into step beside her. Her neighbour Joyce was in her garden. She was crouching down and making it look effortless, as ever. Balbuinidh’s resident yoga teacher was at least double Anna’s age but easily twice as flexible. Joyce was a local legend and total inspiration.

“Hey, Joyce,” Anna said, holding the gate open for Hayley. “What’s that yoga pose called?”

Joyce turned and looked up at her and Hayley. “Hiya, this one is called letting a bug out of the house-asana.”

It was then that she noticed the cup in Joyce’s hand. They laughed.

Joyce stood, glancing between Anna, Hayley, and the branded bag from the chip shop. “Dinner for two?”

Anna smiled. “Yep. This is my friend Hayley, from the US. Hayley, this is Joyce, my pal from next door.”

“The famous American! Welcome to Scotland!” She smiled warmly.

Joyce was such a great next-door neighbour. She was friendly but not invasive and fairly quiet. Joyce was also very entertaining with her choice of garden ornaments such as a giant frog, numerous buddha statues, and a naked woman. As soon as Anna had met her, she had felt instantly at ease and at home. She was proud to introduce her to Hayley.

“Anna told me you were coming over. I hope you have a great time.”

“Thanks! I’m very excited to be here.”

“And travelling around Scotland? What a wonderful thing to do.”

“I feel very lucky. It’s been a dream of mine for a very long time.”

Joyce pointed to the plastic bag Anna was holding. “Sampling our finest cuisine, I see?”

Hayley laughed, politely. “When in Rome.”

God, Hayley was so cute.

Joyce laughed, warmly. “I like your style. Now go eat, before that gets cold.”

They sat at the table by the window with their food.

“This is so good,” Hayley said. “There’s nothing quite like this back home.”

“That’s probably a good thing. It’s basically a heart attack on a plate.”

“Anna! Don’t spoil my moment!”

They both laughed.

In truth, Anna was having a hard time not staring at Hayley enjoying her food. There was something about the way she savoured every bite. She ate slowly and with a kind of unguarded pleasure. Her mouth was simply delicious. Anna had always thought so. They fell into a comfortable silence while they finished eating. Anna did better not to stare.

“Have you always lived here by yourself?” Hayley said, dabbing her mouth with a napkin.

“Um.” Anna hadn’t expected that question. “I did when I first bought it. But no, my ex-girlfriend, Tiffany, lived here with me for a while.”

“What happened? I hope it’s okay to ask?”

“Of course it’s okay, you dafty.”

Hayley laughed. “Cool. It’s been a while since we chatted like this, so I just wanted to check.”

Anna found Hayley’s eyes, which were a bit unsure. Anna had no idea why. She seemed to really want to know, though. “Well, Tiffany was a bit younger than me. She wanted to go out and party a lot, whereas I was wanting to be more chill, you know. Stay in most nights. I mean, we were always out but it was never enough for her. We drifted apart.” Anna paused. There was much more to it than that, but she wasn’t sure how comfortable she was yet to share more with Hayley.

“Sounds pretty amicable?” Hayley’s eyes were soft and open. Anna was reminded of how safe she used to feel with Hayley. How safe she felt now.

“It wasn’t really.” Anna sighed, quietly. “We argued all the time. I was her first girlfriend, and she wasn’t ready to commit. She wanted to sleep with other women. She pulled away from me, said I was too needy and that she couldn’t give me what I wanted. I got my heart broken.”

“Anna, I’m so sorry.”

Hayley rested her hand on Anna’s forearm, causing goosebumps to rise involuntarily. Damn, would her body never stop around Hayley?

“I had no idea,” Hayley said, with one caress of her thumb over Anna’s skin.

Anna sat back, resisting the urge to pull her arm away. There was a lot that Hayley didn’t know about her now. Anna had a need for security. She also felt an intense loyalty to this town and Glenbuinidh distillery. She had become routinised. But despite all that, sometimes it felt like no one had ever understood Anna as much as Hayley had all those years ago. Sitting at the table across from her again, it felt like she’d been adrift for a decade.

She took a cleansing breath. “It’s all in the past. Anyway, tell me about you. What was your last relationship like? I feel like I hardly know anything about you any more.”

Hayley frowned, then it disappeared. She took a sip of water. “Her name was Leah.”

“What?”

“Didn’t I tell you I was bi?”

“No. No, I don’t think you did.” Since when did Hayley have relationships with women? Why hadn’t she told her before? For such an outgoing person, why would she hide this? Not knowing this about Hayley kind of hurt. Was she the last to know? Anna cursed the fact that she wasn’t on social media. It was probably all on there.

“I’m sorry, I thought I had. It’s not a secret.”

Anna was not important enough to tell. “Don’t worry about it.”

Hayley bit down on her lip.

Anna shook off her disappointment. “How did you meet?”

“On a dating app.”

“How long were you together?”

“Two years.”

“Why did you split up?”

“I wasn’t happy. She was a great girl, but I felt stifled. We stopped having fun together.”

“Fun is very important to you.”

“It is. Before Leah, I was with Kim and before her, there was Ryan, who I think you might have known about.”

Anna just sat there, blinking, trying to process. Hayley was also into women. She could hardly believe it.

“You seem shocked, Anna.”

“I’m not shocked.” A few beats of silence went by. “Okay, I am a little shocked.” A nervous energy pulsed through her body. Hayley being bi and having had relationships with women was quite possibly the revelation of Anna’s century. “But it’s brilliant. I mean, we have even more in common now.”

Hayley relaxed her shoulders and took a deep breath. Since when did Anna's approval on a matter she didn't know about mean so much to Hayley?

"Thank you for that," Hayley said.

"So you're a bi femme? I can imagine you've done very well with the lesbians."

Hayley laughed, gently. "I don't know about that." She ran her hands through her hair and all Anna could do was watch every single movement, trying to understand this new dimension to Hayley and how she could have convinced herself that Hayley was straight. Anna had had to concede on that front, years ago, even though it had never fully made sense to her. It turns out her instincts were right.

"I'm happy being single right now." Hayley shrugged. "It gives me the freedom to figure things out with my career and to travel. It makes sense."

"That's cool. I get that. I've never been out of a relationship for as long as this." Anna paused. "I've got to the point where I'm happy being on my own and in my own company. I think that's important. What's that saying, if you can't love yourself how can you love someone else?"

Hayley laughed, loudly. "I love that saying! It's so true."

"And if that means you need to go on a quest halfway around the world to find yourself, you've got to do it."

Hayley smiled. "Exactly."

"Full disclosure, though, I just want to meet my future wife and have her babies. I am so ready."

Hayley laughed.

"Although it would technically mean me putting myself out there again, which is kind of terrifying. I think it gets scarier the older I get."

"You'll be fine." Hayley's eyes were kind.

"I hope so."

“Well, before you find that lucky wife of yours, do you want to have a little fun with me?”

Anna raised an eyebrow. Where was Hayley going with that? “That sounds vaguely dangerous.”

“I’ve been thinking. Now, just hear me out.” Hayley held up her hands. “Come with me. Come on a road trip around Scotland with me. It makes perfect sense.”

Anna replayed Hayley’s words over in her head, unsure if she heard her correctly. “Go with you on your trip?”

“Yes.”

“You want me to go with you on your wild and crazy adventure? Have you met me?” She could feel her brow furrowing.

Hayley laughed, leaning forward. “Yes, Anna, I have met you. And that’s why I know that it’ll be good for you. Mix things up a little. Maybe even get a little crazy and do something spontaneous. Seriously, think of all the good times we could have. It would be just like the old days.”

“I have a job. I can’t just up and leave at the drop of a hat even if I wanted to.”

“I know.” Hayley pressed her lips together, looking guilty. “I should have asked you sooner.”

Anna couldn’t believe that Hayley would even want her to go with her. “The full trip around Scotland? Or just parts of it?”

“The full trip. All of it. We only live once. Life *is* short. Now that I’m here, it’s clear that you need to come with me.”

“In the campervan together?”

“We’ve shared an apartment before.”

Anna softened. It was sweet of Hayley to ask her and suggested she meant more to Hayley than perhaps Anna realised. “I would love to come with you. It’s the trip of a lifetime. But I’m not in a position to just up and leave my job for months.” Anna tried to be as kind as possible in the

delivery of this. “I also don’t have the money. Thank you for asking but it’s not a possibility, I’m afraid. I’m sorry.”

“I have more than enough money for the both of us to enjoy this trip. Please don’t let money stand in the way.”

Anna’s mouth dropped open. “Uh...”

“Here.” Hayley pushed her chair back and got something from her backpack: a bit of paper and something else that fitted in her palm. Walking back, she unfolded the bit of paper, straightened it out and placed it on the table between them, putting a cloudy white stone beside it. “Do you remember this?”

Anna nodded, struggling to believe her eyes. “You kept this?”

“Yes.” Hayley sat down.

Anna attempted to compute. They’d made this list together over a decade ago. While the future was still limitless. When the harsh realities of getting jobs and living in different countries to one another seemed like tomorrow’s problems. When the fear of the unknown wasn’t so crippling. The paper was worn but still perfectly legible. Why had Hayley held on to it all this time?

“These are all the places we said we wanted to visit together. All the cool things we said we wanted to do. Our list.” Hayley’s voice was soft and tender. It spoke of a time Anna thought Hayley had long forgotten about. “And this is the stone I found on the beach that day.”

Hayley picked up the stone and turned it around in her fingers as if she’d done it a million times before.

Anna had forgotten about the stone. That Hayley had kept it all this time and brought it back with her on this trip was mind-boggling. Anna stared at their secret pact made just before they’d taken the picture that sat in Anna’s living room. She remembered their list all too well, but it was something she’d long since lost hope would ever happen.

Hayley leant forward, reading from the list. “Wild swimming. Glencoe. Climb Ben Nevis. Whisky on a beach.”

Hayley paused, looking all innocent but Anna knew better. “Skinny-dipping.”

Anna laughed, tentatively. She remembered them laughing about it then and Hayley writing it down. She couldn’t believe Hayley had just said that now, though. Then again, it was on the list and Hayley did always know how to push things that bit further. Like that time they’d brought two guys back to the flat after a club and things almost escalated into a foursome in the living room. It was all Hayley’s doing and Anna knew fine well what she was capable of and how daring she could be. She didn’t know whether to be thrilled or terrified. “I don’t know what to say.”

Hayley continued to read. “Visit the islands: Skye, Lewis, Mull, Jura and Islay. See puffins and seals. Castles. Paddleboard. Eat out in fancy seafood restaurants. Visit a distillery.”

Anna smiled. “Aw, bless.”

“Say yes. Show me the real Scotland like you said you would all those years ago. Come on, it’ll be fun.”

Seeing their list evoked something in Anna she couldn’t deny. But it was a painful, dangerous thing that she didn’t want to open up again. Hayley was sitting across from her all hopeful though. “You make a very persuasive case. But I can’t go with you. Like I said, there’s my job at the distillery. I don’t even know if it’s possible to take that much time off.”

Hayley nodded, defeated. “I understand. It’s very short notice.”

“It’s not a no. Let me think about it. I’ll talk to Kelly.”

Hayley beamed. “Awesome! I’ll take that.”

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up.”

“My hopes are high. They refuse to be dropped.”

Anna smiled. “You don’t even have a plan. I hardly even know what I’d be signing up for.”

“We could make a plan together?”

“I see what you did there.”

“If it means I get you to come with me on the trip I apologise for nothing. To be honest, it is high time I get organised now that the campervan is ready. I was going to do that in between seeing more of you and your lovely town. Man, there’s so much I want to do, and I really hope you’ll come with me.”

“Damn you for putting the idea into my head.”

“You hadn’t thought of it before?”

“No.”

“Come with me, please! It will be amazing, I promise.”

“You’re mad.”

“You’ll love it. I’ve seen you lovingly craft the inside of that camper. It makes sense you should get to enjoy it, too.”

Anna shook her head, a small smile creeping onto her lips. “I’ll think about it. That’s all I can give you right now.”

Hayley sat back with a cocky and satisfied grin that made her look even hotter. What was Anna doing even entertaining this idea?

Four

May 2013

Hayley danced in front of Anna in the middle of their student flat, all bright eyes and cheekbones. She had a daisy chain around her head and had styled her hair poker straight for the evening. A tie-dyed t-shirt tied at her slender waist completed the look for their hippie party. Hayley was so beautiful Anna could hardly look at her.

Pink Floyd boomed out of the speakers by the window. She'd never seen so many people in the flat at one time. Everyone was here, including loads of Hayley's friends from the International Exchange programme.

A new song came on. Their song. Hayley started singing to Anna, "Don't worry, about a thing." She held Anna's hands and squeezed them, looking directly into her eyes, still dancing, "Cause every little thing, gonna be alright."

Anna held her breath. Hayley kept singing and swaying, giving her a heartfelt rendition of the song that they both knew had a deeper meaning between them. This was Hayley's go to song whenever Anna was struggling with something. It was their thing. Hayley knew all about her trouble with anxiety and was good at calming her down. It was like she saw into Anna's very soul.

This was too much. Anna removed her hands from Hayley's soft hold and looked away. A couple were kissing right next to them. Really going for it. What Anna wouldn't give to be able to do that with Hayley right now, to finally act on this thing between them. Anna shifted from one foot to the other, trying to dance but feeling all her feelings and not being able to.

Anna glanced between the impassioned couple and Hayley. Hayley did too, and the look in her eyes was like she was thinking about kissing too.

Anna's heart lurched. Of course she wasn't thinking that. Anna had to get away. She stepped aside and went to her room, passing friends in the hallway and keeping her head down. Her heart felt heavy and sad.

There were random people in her room smoking a joint. She didn't have the energy to ask them to open the window. She sat down on the floor resting against her bed. Hayley was all she could see when she closed her eyes. Hayley was all she could ever see. This crush had become like an obsession. It was eating her up inside. Why was she doing this to herself?

"Hey dude, what's up with you? You've been in here for ages?" Hayley said, wobbling slightly on her feet and nearly tripping over her flares. She smiled. Even when drunk she was still dazzling.

"I'm fine, just taking a breather."

"Hurry up. I'm missing you out here. I need my wingman."

Gah. Anna could hardly bear this any more. "Five minutes."

"Make it two." Hayley flashed her another dazzling smile and left the room.

This was torture. Painful. Having feelings for your straight best friend who you lived with and who was going home to another country soon was a fucking nightmare. Escaping this was the only thing to do. "Hey. Can I have some of that?"

The guy and girl hanging out in the corner of her bedroom looked up and nodded easily. The guy extended his arm with the little joint between his fingers. "Sure. You look like you need it."

Present day

Anna turned off the shower and willed herself to stop thinking about the past, to stop torturing herself with memories of pining for Hayley and how painful it had been. Nothing good could come of dredging up those old feelings, even if Hayley was now into women, because Anna did not want to go back

there. If she went on this trip with Hayley she'd likely end up back in that same painful state she was that night Hayley had put flowers in their hair and had sung to her.

Anna had to get to work. Hayley was still fast asleep on the sofa bed. She quietly got her things ready in the kitchen and poured a glass of water. Hayley had refused Anna's bedroom so far, but she was going to have to insist on it soon. Creeping around the house in the morning while trying not to creep on her friend was no good. It was Anna who had invited Hayley to stay once she got to Scotland, after all, so she only had herself to blame for this.

Before she knew it, she was watching Hayley sleep. Hayley was such a comfortable sleeper. Her body could relax in any position and just rest. Anna was the opposite. She had to follow her diligent night-time routine, and she had to have her bed just how she liked it, and even then it often still took her a while to get comfortable and fall sleep. She took a deep breath. Seeing Hayley sleeping had always made Anna feel calmer, and it still did, apparently.

Hayley stirred and opened her eyes. Anna opened the cupboard and got out some cereal, desperately hoping she hadn't been caught staring.

"Good morning," Hayley spoke softly. "Sorry, I need to get a handle on this new time zone." She sat up, bringing the covers with her.

"Good morning. Or you could just take my bed and I can make a noisy coffee in here in the morning?"

"Okay. I'll switch beds with you tonight."

Anna picked up her bag and made to leave, deciding against breakfast. "So, will I see you at the distillery later?"

"You bet. I can't wait to see it."

"The first tour starts at ten and the last tour starts at four. Come whenever you're ready."

"Great. I'll see you later."

"What are you going to do today?"

“I’m going to get more organised for the trip. Maybe take a walk around the town. Have a lazy breakfast.”

“Sounds good.”

“It’s so sweet of you to remember my favourite breakfast cereal by the way.”

Anna looked down at the box of crunchy nut cereal that she’d forgotten Hayley had got her into. Strange to think after all these years Hayley still ate it as well. “It was nothing. It’s my favourite, too.”

Hayley frowned for a split second then smiled again. “Well, have a great day!”

At the distillery, Anna went straight to her office and shut the door. They had a steady stream of tours scheduled for today, including Hayley’s visit, and she had to make sure everything ran smoothly. The rota needed sorting out for the next two weeks and she had to update the tasting kits ahead of the next two days. This was on top of her usual routine of checking that the bar and the tasting rooms had been cleared and set up the night before to her desired standard, nothing out of place, everything gleaming. She was far too busy to be thinking about Hayley this much and whether she should go on this trip or not. But she was, infuriatingly, unable to get Hayley and her road trip out of her mind.

It was the trip of a lifetime, was it not? Could she really pass that up? On the one hand, she could go and be in the space of someone she was annoyingly attracted to and risk getting her heart trampled on again, or she could not go and miss out on a great opportunity to travel with her friend. Should she take the risk and put herself in that position, or play it safe and pass up the invitation?

Anna was never going to tell Hayley how she felt all those years ago. She hadn’t told her at the time and there was no way she was going to tell her now. She was certainly not going to tell Hayley about how seeing her again was making her feel.

After finishing the rota, which took longer than normal, she headed to the tasting rooms. Good. They were ready to go. She

would praise Greg the next time she saw him.

By mid-afternoon Anna snuck away for a chat with Kelly in her office. They had coffee and chocolate biscuits sitting in Kelly's comfortable chairs. Being friends with the boss had some serious perks.

"She asked you to go with her?" Kelly said, evenly, chewing on a biscuit. "Do you want to?"

Anna found that she couldn't answer. It was complicated. "I'm not sure. It's a terrible idea in nearly every way. But then again, it would be amazing. How many times do you get offered to go on a big trip like this? I could never afford a campervan. I mean, I probably can't get the time off work so it's not even a possibility, right?"

Kelly tilted her head, as if getting the measure of Anna's emotional crisis right now. "Are you okay? What has it been like seeing her again?"

Anna blew out a breath. "I don't know. Wonderful. Unsettling. It's like we picked back up where we left off. It's been a bit intense."

Kelly nodded, kindly. "She means a lot to you."

Anna didn't want to lie. "She does."

"Do you want me to see if I can have a word with Georgia? I would have to get the team's buy-in for you to be off for that long or it might spark a mutiny."

"Oh my god, that would be amazing. It could be like a short career break, or something?"

"A sabbatical. How long would you want off? When would you want it to start?"

Anna couldn't believe she was even entertaining the idea and bringing it into her actual life. She thought about it. Maybe Hayley could do some day trips on her own for this region? And they could set off west when Anna was ready. "Maybe two months? Starting in a couple of weeks?" Even saying the words felt outrageous and daring. She wasn't sure she was up for this.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you.”

“I’d love to meet Hayley.”

“Oh my god that would be so weird.”

“Would it?”

“Two of my eras colliding? Weird but kind of cool, yeah.”

“Why don’t you guys come around for dinner with me and Myla?”

“When were you thinking?”

“I’ll check with Myla but maybe in a couple of days?”

“Sounds great.”

Anna left Kelly’s office a short while later. Both of them had to get back to work. Anna sped back to the bar unsure what she was going to do. That Kelly could get her the time off meant Anna would have to make a decision about Hayley’s generous offer.

Anna couldn’t relax waiting for Hayley to come into the distillery. For some reason, she felt more self-conscious about this bar than she did about showing Hayley her own home. She triple-checked the tasting room for Hayley’s tour ahead of schedule and polished the bar and table-tops one more time, even though they’d already been done. She sat at her desk sorting through her emails to further distract herself until the moment of truth. Would Hayley be impressed by what she was doing with her life here? It was hardly on a par with Hayley’s high-flying job in New York, even if she did just walk out of it.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Greg came in. “Hi Greg. The man himself.”

“Hey, Anna. How’s it going?” He hung up his jacket in their little office beside the main bar and clipped on his name badge to his perfectly ironed shirt.

“Good, thanks. Great job last night, by the way. The place looked so organised this morning. Thank you.”

He smiled a handsome rugged smile that melted most of the visitors' hearts. "Cheers, boss. Only the best for this place."

Anna saw a lot of her younger self in Greg. Not long out of university and looking to be part of something bigger. He was good with people, passionate about whisky, and a true ambassador for Scotland. The tourists loved him. He had the magic effect. Did she still have that same enthusiasm for being here?

Greg smiled at her again and went through to the bar. About thirty minutes later a gust of air came into the bar as the door was opened and the latest tour group made their way in and towards the tasting room. They made a lot of noise and were in good spirits. There were German, American, and Spanish accents along with some English, too. Pretty typical for Glenbuinidh.

Hayley came in last. She caught Anna's attention and dropped her mouth open as if in total awe at the place and mouthed, "Oh my god."

Being at work she had to keep things professional. Anna gave Hayley a small nod and gestured for the group to come through. The butterflies in her stomach were not welcome. She'd only seen her this morning, damn it.

She took a deep breath and centred herself. "If you'd like to take a seat."

The tour group filed in around the long table. Each place had tasting kits which consisted of three of their whiskies and a small jug of water. "I'm sure you're all dying to get a taste after listening to John for an hour."

John, the tour guide, laughed good-naturedly. "They've all been very polite, but I can tell they've had enough of me now."

They did this joke every day but somehow it never got old.

"Never," Hayley said, taking the seat nearest to Anna. "I could listen to you for hours, John. That accent of yours."

Hayley always did make her presence felt. "Okay," Anna said, from the head of the table, trying not to look at Hayley.

“You’ll notice this very colourful wheel of flavours.” She pointed to the graphic filling the wall behind her from the projector. “We’ll go through the whiskies in front of you, and we will see if you can work out what the notes are for each.”

“Excellent,” John said. “I’ll leave you to it. Watch out for this one.” He pointed at Hayley while leaving the room. “She’s a firecracker.”

The group started on their first whisky, the signature malt, taking slow, tentative sips. Despite the nerves about Hayley coming in, Anna was enjoying herself. She loved working here, especially on days like this when she got to meet awesome people and have a bit of fun with them. Being hospitable and helping people have a good time really made her heart sing.

“This one is spicy,” Hayley said.

Hayley was spot on. Anna smiled at her friend and pointed at ‘spicy’ on the wheel. “Who else thinks it is spicy?” There were some confused faces.

“I do,” said a woman with a German accent.

“You are both correct. Well done.”

Hayley smiled at Anna, eyes sparkling. This was typical. Hayley was as charming and magnetic as ever. Anna would avoid her gaze until this was over.

“Now put a couple of drops of water in it and take another sip. What else do you notice?”

“It’s quite smoky,” said a man with a Spanish accent. “No?”

“Anything else?”

“There’s a touch of citrus. Definitely,” Hayley said, eyes laser sharp and focused on Anna.

Anna nodded. “Very good.”

Hayley finished the rest of her small taster, not taking her eyes off Anna. Goosebumps prickled at the back of Anna’s neck.

“Right. Onto the next one,” Anna instructed the group. They played the tasting game for a bit longer, taking time to chat and letting the group enjoy the space. The group filtered out into the main bar, finding seats that suited them. Some loitered at the bar, choosing what to order from Greg. Anna and Hayley stood by one end of the bar.

“This place is stunning,” Hayley said. “What an amazing environment to work in.”

“It is pretty nice.”

Hayley looked her right in the eyes. “It suits you, working here, doing your whisky tasting. You look hot doing it.”

Anna’s mouth fell open. Had Hayley really repeated what she’d said to her over a decade ago on her bed in their student flat? How had she remembered that? No. It couldn’t have been linked. That would be madness. “Thanks.” That was all Anna could formulate.

“I love your job. You get to talk to people from all over the world, show them what you love and help them have a great time. I think this might be my dream job. I’m not kidding.”

“Well maybe you should work here.” Anna couldn’t believe that had slipped out. She’d never thought of it before.

Hayley’s eyebrows shot up. “You know that’s not a bad idea. Got any jobs going?”

The thought of it made Anna lightheaded. Having Hayley in her space everyday would be a nightmare. So why was she even considering going on this trip with her?

“I think we’d work great together,” Hayley said.

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“How come?”

“You’re a wee bit too chatty. We would never get any work done.”

“We would! This place thrives on a good atmosphere, surely?”

“True, but I know how to control myself. You”—Anna got lost in Hayley’s eyes for a second before composing herself—“would be a liability.”

Hayley laughed. “No I wouldn’t. I’ve had practise holding my tongue in a million boring corporate meetings. I can be professional, Anna.”

“I know. Sorry. I’m only kidding.”

“Seriously.” Hayley held her eyes this time, causing a kind of gooey feeling to come over Anna. “You’ve found a job that nourishes your soul. You’re ten times more successful than most people I’ve met. Good for you.”

It was a bit strange talking to your wild friend from university like a grown up with life experience. But it was good. Anna just wished her physical reaction to Hayley would subside. “I don’t know what else I’d do now. Glenbuinidh has been very good to me. I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’re loyal. That’s a wonderful trait.”

“Right then. Do you want a drink?”

Hayley grinned. “Thought you’d never ask.”

Anna went behind the bar, feeling Hayley watch her every step and walking that bit taller. Hayley’s compliment had really boosted her.

At home, later that night, sitting on the sofa together, Hayley’s cheeks were flushed, probably from a little too much whisky at the distillery. They’d been talking and laughing for hours. It had been a wonderful evening.

“Okay, you night owl.” Anna yawned. “I’d better get to bed. I’m kicking you out into my room. You can sleep as late as you like, but just know I’ll be secretly judging you.”

Hayley laughed. “How will you know if you’re at work?”

“Oh, I’ll know.”

Hayley stood up. “I believe you.”

Anna just looked at Hayley in her tiny living room, filling the room. She was larger than life. She always had been.

“What is it?” Hayley stared back at her.

Anna shook her head, feeling her cheeks redden. “Nothing. I’d better swap the sheets.”

“There’s no need. I don’t mind.”

“Er.” Anna was confused.

“We’ve shared a bed plenty of times before. It doesn’t matter.”

“We’re grown-ups now.” Anna stood up, feeling slightly amused at Hayley. “At least we’re meant to be. I’m swapping them.”

Hayley pressed her lips together and smiled. How was Anna supposed to be around this level of beauty both inside and out and not be affected by it?

“At least let me help. There’s nothing more tedious than making beds.”

Anna gathered up the sheets for the sofa bed and carried them through to the bedroom. They stripped the bed and worked together to fit the sheet around the mattress. Hayley swapped the pillows as Anna shook out the bedcovers. The exertion was making her hot, so she pulled off her jumper and threw it onto the laundry basket.

“Anna, you didn’t tell me you had a whole sleeve of tattoos!”

In a t-shirt now, her tattoos were visible. She’d been in long-sleeved tops since Hayley’s arrival, come to think of it.

Hayley walked around the bed and touched Anna’s forearm and then bicep. “Fucking hell, Anna.”

Her touch was warm and steady, sending a gentle buzz around Anna’s entire body. Hayley traced her fingers all over Anna’s arm as if it was the most natural thing to do. Her breathing became slightly uneven as Hayley examined her arm, right within her personal space, tactile as ever.

“These are so fucking cool. It really suits you.”

“Thank you.”

Hayley's fingers left her arm. Anna mourned their absence already. Shit, that wasn't good.

"What do they mean? Are they connected?"

"There's a bit of a story to it." Anna shook her head, feeling off balance and a bit overwhelmed. "If it's okay, I'll tell you some other time?"

"Sure. I'll look forward to it."

Anna went back to straightening out the duvet as Hayley openly looked around her room, not saying much but taking it all in.

"Is this what I think it is?"

Anna looked up.

"My blanket?"

"Ah." Fuck. She'd forgotten about that. "Yes."

"You still have it?" Hayley picked up the maroon and golden tartan blanket from the chair in the corner. The skin in between her eyebrows furrowed. "In your bedroom?"

Anna stopped arranging the duvet. Hayley had left the blanket behind when she moved back to the states. That Hayley hadn't wanted to keep the gift Anna had got her for her birthday was another part of the jigsaw puzzle of reasons why, ultimately, Anna knew that Hayley didn't like her back. It didn't stop Anna from cherishing the blanket ever since, however. How was she supposed to answer this without lying. She shrugged, desperately trying to downplay the meaning of it. "It's a good blanket."

"Uh-huh."

"Right, well, I'll leave you to it."

"Anna?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for having me stay. Really. I mean it."

They held each other's eyes at the foot of Anna's bed, momentarily suspending time and reason. It was almost like

the last ten years hadn't happened when they orbited each other like this.

Anna crossed her arms over her chest. "It's all good. No worries. Sleep well."

Anna went back through to the living room and pulled out the sofa bed, feeling slightly shaken. The house was quiet. If she couldn't remain unaffected from having Hayley to stay, how could she possibly live with her in a campervan? She couldn't. She didn't want the stress, which would mean their time together would be fleeting. Anna threw on her bedding and lay down on the sofa bed, thinking about Hayley in her actual bed only a short distance away. How did she feel about being in Anna's space? Was Hayley thinking about her too?

Hayley would be leaving soon. That was a fact. Anna let out a heavy breath. She didn't want that either.

The next day at work Anna took a call from her mum. She had a free moment, and it wasn't like her mum to call her during the day. "Hi Mum, what's up?"

There was some crackling on the line before her mum spoke. "Anna. There you are. How are you?"

"I'm fine. How are you?"

"I'm wondering how my daughter is. Did you go on that date last week? Or was it the week before last? I can't remember. Anyway. How was it? Was she nice? Do you think you'll see her again?"

"I didn't go."

"Anna! Why not?"

Anna sighed freely into the phone. Her mum and dad had taken to pestering her about her love life recently. They didn't seem to approve of her being single for this long and made no attempt to hide it. "I couldn't be bothered to travel." This was only partly true. She had been talking to this girl she'd met on a dating app for a couple of weeks but when it came to meeting up, Anna just wasn't feeling it. She wasn't going to tell her mum that though. She had to preserve some boundaries. "We live too far away. It would never work."

“You’ll never meet someone with that attitude. You do live in the middle of nowhere, sweetheart. Have you thought any more about moving back to Glasgow?”

“No, Mum. I like it here. I’m not planning on moving back.”

There was a long silence. Anna could practically hear her mum’s disapproval down the line.

“And can you please stop asking me who I’m dating; it makes me uncomfortable. It will happen when it happens. I’m not exactly a hermit.”

“Okay. Sorry. What about your friend. Did she come to visit?”

“Yep. She’s here.”

“And? How is Hayley?”

“She’s good. She wants me to go travelling around Scotland with her in a campervan for a couple of months. I’m thinking about it.”

“That’s a great idea! You should definitely go. It’ll be good for you.”

Her parents loved their holidays. It was nice to get some positive feedback for once.

“Let me know what you decide. I’ll go and tell your dad the big news.”

“Wow. This place is like something out of Downton Abbey,” Hayley said.

“Myla owns the distillery. This is her ancestral home.”

“No way!”

Anna and Hayley walked up the steps to the entrance of Myla and Kelly’s mansion. Even though she was going to be spending time with her friends tonight, Anna still felt nervous. She gripped the dessert dish tighter. She hovered by the

oversized front door, balancing the dish in one hand so she could knock on the door.

“Here,” Hayley said. “Let me.” She stepped towards the door and gave it a decisive couple of knocks, coming close into Anna’s personal space.

Anna inhaled her perfume involuntarily.

Within seconds the door was swung open and Myla and Kelly were there, smiling, as Barley the golden retriever burst through the door.

“Hello!” Myla and Kelly said together.

“Come in,” Kelly said, gesturing for them to step inside.

Barley circled their legs, wagging his tail. “Barley,” Kelly said. “Come on. Let them in.”

“It’s so great to meet you guys, especially you, Barley.” Hayley shook hands with Myla and Kelly before patting Barley on the back. “What a gorgeous dog!”

It was all very formal and polite and making Anna tense. “We brought a lemon tart.”

“Thank you!” Myla said. “I love a tart.”

“Hey!” Kelly said, indignantly.

They all laughed.

“I love your home,” Hayley said. “It’s like stepping onto a movie set.”

“Would you like a tour?” Myla said.

“Uh, yes please!”

Hayley and Myla drifted further into the house, already chatting away.

“She’s lovely,” Kelly said, keeping her voice down. “And very pretty.”

Anna didn’t know what to say. They weren’t a couple. Hayley wasn’t hers. “She is that.”

“Let’s take that tart through to the kitchen.”

Anna followed Kelly through the wide corridor towards the large and square kitchen. The high ceilings never failed to amaze Anna. Two rooms could fit in there. Barley sniffed at the dish as Anna placed it on the counter.

“I was going to text you.” Kelly partially closed the door. “It’s been confirmed today. You can get the time off. Thought you might want to know as soon as possible.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Anna was stunned.

“You’ve been so loyal to Glenbuinidh over the years, working overtime when we were short of staff, always giving plenty of notice for your annual leave, not to mention entertaining visitors and making sales soar – we owe you this.”

“I really appreciate that, Kelly.”

Kelly smiled. She was such a good boss, as well as a good friend. “Now you just have to decide if you are going to go or not.”

“I’m so torn.”

“Are you overthinking it?”

“Yeah. Maybe. It’s been doing my head in the last few days. It’s so typical of Hayley to turn my whole world upside down even if it’s for a good reason.”

Myla and Hayley came into the kitchen. Barley greeted them like he hadn’t seen them in ages. He was such a cute dog.

“We see you, Barley,” Myla said, affectionately patting his head.

“This is like a picture-perfect country kitchen,” Hayley said, looking amazed.

The dining table was already made with four places set. Myla started pulling out dishes and serving spoons. Hayley sat beside Anna, eyes sparkling as if she was having a great time. That was all Anna wanted for Hayley, for her to be happy and enjoy her trip. Could she be part of that happiness? Could she

handle a sapphic Hayley? Seeing how comfortable Hayley was about her sexuality hadn't really sunk in yet. Twenty-two-year-old Anna would have been ecstatic, but present-day Anna knew better. It had danger written all over it.

"Wine?" Kelly asked.

Hayley accepted while Anna declined. She was driving. Kelly sprung up to help Myla with the plates and brought them over. Anna loved seeing them this happy together. She wanted that type of happiness for herself one day.

"So," Myla said once they were all settled and eating. "How did you two meet?"

Kelly shot Myla a look, as if that were a poor question. Hopefully Hayley hadn't seen that.

"We met at college. Sorry, university. I was doing an exchange year. Anna was the very friendly and entertaining international student representative for all the overseas kids."

"Hayley came up to the stall at the Freshers' Fair and eavesdropped on my phone conversation."

"Anna invited me to live with her within ten minutes."

"What? I did not."

Hayley laughed. "You did. Technically."

"You asked me first. You needed a place to stay."

"I lucked out."

Kelly and Myla sat quietly, looking between them both. The knowing look on Kelly's face said it all. Anna would never hear the end of this.

"I love that," Myla said, putting her fork down. "Sounds like you were instantly drawn to one another."

Anna took a large drink of water and Hayley reached for her wine at the same time.

Kelly cleared her throat. "You're visiting here for a while then, Hayley?"

“Yeah,” Hayley said, sounding relieved for the change of topic. “This is my *Eat Pray Love* moment.”

Everyone laughed, breaking the tension, at least for Anna.

“Except I’m going to travel around in a campervan.”

“Go for it,” Kelly said. “That will be such a cool experience.”

“See, that’s exactly what I think. I’m taking a career break. I realised a year or so ago that I needed to change a few things and now I’m finally doing it.”

“That’s wonderful,” Myla said. “And where do you plan to visit?”

Hayley smiled, Anna knew, at the word ‘plan’.

“Everywhere. I want to see everything. Pack in as much as I can. Anna was a rockstar in helping me buy a campervan. I couldn’t have done it without her. She’s even fixing it up for me.”

Hayley smiled at Anna, causing a warm feeling to spread through Anna’s chest. Sometimes, all Hayley had to do was look at her a certain way and it would reduce Anna to a puddle.

“I moved here just over a year ago. There’s so much to see and do in this area alone,” Myla said.

“I know! The scenery is spectacular. There are so many hikes I want to try around here. But this one is at work all day.”

“I’ll go on a hike with you. I love walking. I can show you some of the good walks, if you like?” Myla said.

“Seriously?” Hayley said. “I would love that.”

“I’m free tomorrow if that works?”

“I’m there.”

Hayley made friends everywhere she went. She was so great to be around. Anna listened as the conversation turned in another direction. It hadn’t sunk in yet that she could go on the

trip with Hayley if she wanted to. Glenbuinidh had given her a unique opportunity. Maybe it would be good to lift the veil of illusion on Hayley once and for all, seeing her roughing it in a van for two months?

“How did you two meet?” Hayley said. She took a sip of wine.

Kelly and Myla glanced at each other, furtively. They were so cute together.

Kelly sat forward, resting her elbows on the table. “Long story.”

“We met at a gig in Glasgow,” Myla said.

“And then she took over my distillery.”

“But I let you keep it.”

Myla smiled and Kelly leant over and kissed her on the cheek. They had that lovers’ ease around each other.

“Right. Enough, you love birds,” Anna said.

“Well, I’ve only known you guys for a hot second and I can already tell you are just perfect for each other.” Hayley smiled and looked at Anna, but Anna couldn’t make out what the look was.

“Who’s for dessert?” Myla said, standing, picking up plates.

Everyone said yes and Hayley excused herself to go to the bathroom.

“Hayley’s awesome,” Myla said.

Anna smiled. “Yeah, she is.”

“Are you okay?” There was a hint of concern on Kelly’s face. Anna could tell Kelly knew how conflicted she was.

“I’m fine.”

“Nicole might be interested in renting your house by the way. It’s doing her head in living with the parents. Do you know what you’re going to do?”

That was excellent news. She could trust Kelly's sister to move in at short notice, and she wouldn't lose out financially. The reasons not to go were dwindling fast. Damn it. And time was running out for her to make a decision. "At this point Kelly, your guess is as good as mine."

Five

September 2012

Anna willed this phone call to be over already. Her landlord was stressing her out. The main sports hall during Freshers' Fair was not a good place to be talking about this. "It's not easy to find a new flatmate. It needs to be the right person. That's what we agreed, remember?"

"Find someone right away or I'll do it for you. I'm sorry but it's starting to cost me money and I can't have that. I assume me finding someone is preferable to you all splitting the rent for the extra room between you."

"Okay." Anna sighed. "I'll get it done. I will find someone." She could see his point. It wasn't fair on him either. "Speak to you later." Anna hung up.

"Ouch. That sounded prickly."

Anna looked up. A girl was standing in front of the table staring at her. She had an American accent and was possibly the most attractive girl Anna had ever seen. She had long wavy blonde hair and bright, intensely intelligent eyes. "Can I help you?"

The girl leaned forward. "I think the question is, can I help you?"

"Sorry?"

"I overheard your conversation."

"You were eavesdropping?"

"Ha! I love your accent. It's so cute."

Anna narrowed her eyes. "What do you need? I have information on the upcoming international events, some flyers and the full schedule for the fair—"

"I don't need any of that, but thanks."

“I apologise. I’m normally more friendly than this. You just caught me at a bad time.”

“I’ll move in with you,” the stranger said to Anna.

“Excuse me?”

“I heard you on the phone. You need someone to move in with you.”

Anna’s mouth fell open. Who was this girl?

“I need a place to stay for the year. It’ll be a perfect fit.”

“You think I’m just going to let you move in with me? You are a complete stranger.”

“Strangers are just friends we haven’t met yet.”

“Don’t you already have somewhere to stay?”

“I wanted to keep my options open.”

“You do go to this university, right?”

The girl laughed. “I do. Would you like to see my matriculation card?”

Anna wanted to but decided against such a hostile act. There was something about this girl that drew Anna in and made her trust her.

“Where is the apartment? What’s it like?”

Anna stood up. She had to get someone, and soon. Perhaps this could work? They had to be less fussy or it was going to cost them. “The flat is close to campus. The room’s large. It’s six hundred a month. You could get a cheaper place through the uni if that’s too high.”

“It sounds perfect. I’ll take it.”

“Don’t you want to see it first?”

“I’m sure it’s fine. I’ve got a good feeling about you and that’s what matters. It’s all about the people.”

“Uh, I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this but okay, if you’re sure. Let me just phone my flatmates to run it past them. I think they’ll be fine with it.”

“Awesome.” She stuck out her hand and gave Anna the most dazzling smile. “I’m Hayley by the way.”

Present day

Anna picked up the last of the carpet cuttings from the floor of the campervan, reflecting on the first time she met Hayley and the impact she’d had on her life. Hayley had come crashing into her life, from the very first time they’d met, and become her instant best friend. She’d had some of the best times in her whole life with Hayley. Shooting stars had less gravitas. Hayley was one of those people who lifted up others just with her presence. Hayley made everything okay while simultaneously stirring everything up. Someone like Hayley didn’t come around very often. She was special. Anna knew that. Hayley and her trip was all Anna could think about. It was all Anna wanted to think about. Her life seemed so empty before Hayley had returned, which was a depressing thought.

Her work on Hayley’s campervan was complete. She surveyed the neat cabinets, shelves and sitting area she’d installed which would make it a more functional living space for Hayley. She probably didn’t have to round the edges, but she was a perfectionist like that. The new carpet completed the refit. If she was going to join Hayley on her trip, however, she would have to install an extension to the bed for somewhere for her to sleep. A hinge and an extendable base would do it.

Hayley joined Anna in the campervan, inspecting Anna’s work before taking a seat at the new table. “It looks incredible in here. I can’t believe how quickly you did all this.”

Anna put her tools away in her toolbox and clipped it shut with a satisfying click. “It was nothing. I live for this stuff.”

Hayley laughed. “I’m sure you do. This is the perfect space for me to travel around in. Thank you, thank you, thank you.” Hayley lingered on Anna before looking away.

“Good. So are you ready to go for our walk today?”

“Sure am.”

A few hours later they were walking through the woods towards a hidden loch that not many people knew about, nestled high up in the hills. Anna loved this walk but hadn't been here in years. The last time was with Tiffany, who had complained the entire time. The woods were less dense than she remembered. It was so quiet around them.

"Is that the water?" Hayley pointed to a clearing in the woods.

"Yep. That's it."

They reached the water's edge. The loch was calm and still before them. Hayley sat down on a rock. "It's stunning. Off the beaten track, literally."

Anna sat down across from her, on another rock. At the edge of the loch, they sat looking out at the water, not saying much. It seemed like there was something on Hayley's mind. Her hair was tied back, making her look younger and more like the Hayley she used to know, like the Hayley who used to confide in her and who used to big spoon her in bed at night. She missed that Hayley.

"See those mountains there?" Anna pointed to the peaks beyond the loch.

Hayley looked up. "Yeah."

"You can do a circular walk all along the mountain tops and see for miles around. The views are incredible."

"Cool." Hayley looked at Anna. "You sure you don't want to come with me? Just think of all the things like that you could point out and show off your knowledge about."

Anna laughed. "You want a tour guide?"

"Is that such a bad thing?"

Beside them, something rustled. Anna snapped her head around. A red squirrel was bouncing around and then darted up a tree near to them. "Look!"

"I see it!"

The red squirrel disappeared up the tree, leaving Anna and Hayley squinting up at the tree for ages after it trying to get another look.

“Red squirrels are rarely seen. The grey squirrels have been decimating the red population.”

“That’s so cool. That we saw it, I mean. Not that they are dying out.”

“Yeah.”

“I think it’s a sign.”

“A sign of what?”

“That you should come with me.”

Anna looked away. She was still making her mind up, in truth. At least Hayley seemed to genuinely want her to go. In some small way, Anna was enjoying how much Hayley kept asking her. But time was running out. Anna had to make her mind up soon, or Hayley would be gone again. “You are nothing if not persistent, aren’t you?”

“Yep, always have been.”

They held each other’s eyes for a few seconds longer than necessary. Being this close to Hayley for so long was disarming. She wished she could just be a normal friend to Hayley, not a friend who was harbouring hidden feelings. Whether they were real feelings based on seeing her again or just a hangover from the past, it was impossible to deny that they were there. Anna looked back out towards the still and relatively untouched loch.

“Your sleeve.” Hayley touched Anna’s bare upper arm, just under the sleeve of her t-shirt. “I’m still waiting to find out what it all means.”

This one simple touch caused instant tingles to spread down low in Anna’s body. Anna smiled, despite her inner turmoil, despite the war between her body and her mind. “Oh. Yeah.”

“A thistle”—Hayley rubbed her thumb over her lower arm—“Wrapped in a Celtic knot.” She slid her hand up Anna’s arm, higher still to just underneath her sleeve line. “Another

thistle, wrapped in leaves, leading up to a wolf's head." She paused. "May I?"

They locked eyes. Anna's heart skipped a beat. "Uh-huh."

A gentle pushing of Anna's sleeve upwards toward her shoulder revealed the rest. A lone wolf's head in front of pine trees fading into the background.

"You've got to tell me about this, Anna."

"The thistles and the Celtic knots are about home. As you know, like most Scots, I'm very proud and so grateful to call this place home. I feel it in my bones, and I never want to leave. The leaves and the trees are about nature, which we're all part of, and I value very much."

"Fuck, Anna, that's beautiful. I love the meaning. And the wolf, which by the way is super hot. What does that represent?"

"The wolf reminds me to have strength and courage in hard times, because I don't feel like I have much of that sometimes."

Hayley's forehead furrowed. She let Anna's sleeve fall. "Do you not?"

"No. Not as much as I'd like. But it's okay. I've got my tattoo."

Hayley laughed, nervously. "That's a start. I think you're stronger than you realise."

"I hope so."

"Do you have any more tattoos anywhere?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

Anna hesitated.

Hayley waited.

Anna hitched up her t-shirt and lowered the waistband of her trousers an inch. Her tattoo sat just below her hip bone, in

a very delicate place, curving around from the side on two lines. It was her favourite one.

Hayley read out loud: "*If your nerve deny you, go above your nerve.* Oh my god, that's Emily Dickinson!"

Anna nodded. "You know it?"

"Of course I know it! I love that quote. It's so beautiful, Anna. This is so cool!" Hayley lowered her head towards it, studying it. "It looks great on you. Where you have it." Hayley ghosted her index finger over the quote, causing goosebumps to rise on Anna's skin. "Very sexy."

Anna let her t-shirt fall and pulled her waistband back up.

"Why did you choose it, if you don't mind me asking?"

"It reminds me to push myself outside of my comfort zone. Like my wolf." Anna touched her upper arm.

Hayley tilted her head and looked into Anna's eyes. "I really love that."

The rest of the walk went by too fast as they clocked in some miles surrounded by hills. It was so easy to spend time in Hayley's company. Hayley drove them home via a stop in Aviemore and a quick visit to a café for coffee and cake. Hayley already looked so comfortable driving her campervan, as if the worries of her old life were long forgotten and she was already enjoying her time here. It was lovely to see and be around. Hayley was easy to please, a simple creature in some ways.

As they cruised along the scenic roads, Anna could visualise herself doing just this: being a tourist in her own country, coming good on her promise all those years ago to show Hayley Scotland, and hanging out with her friend and getting more time with Hayley before she left again. All she had to do was ignore this stupid crush and focus on being a good friend.

There was a reason Hayley came back to Scotland and their spending more time together felt part of it somehow. It was inexplicable. Whatever this was between them was never going to be solved by saying goodbye to Hayley tomorrow.

Anna needed more time with her. And she needed some fun, despite how scared that made her on so many levels. With each mile closer to home, Anna came that little bit closer to her decision, even if it meant going against her better judgement.

Back at the house, Hayley was parking the campervan in a small space between two other cars outside the front garden. Anna had offered to get out and help but Hayley was having none of it. It was impressive and frustratingly attractive. But Hayley was frowning, which was unlike her. Her movements were heavy and lacked the usual life Hayley exuded. She seemed subdued. To think Hayley was possibly sad about leaving tomorrow was hard to get her head around. It wasn't as if Hayley had ever made out that she was coming back to Scotland for Anna and her to travel together. But Hayley seemed to genuinely want Anna to go with her given how much she'd talked about it over the past few days. She'd been like a relentless salesperson coming at her from all angles. Perhaps Hayley was simply a true extrovert. When faced with the idea of months on their own, they would always reach out for company. Perhaps that was all this was.

Nevertheless, Anna had made her mind up. Life was too short to play it so safe that you stopped doing new things. Hayley was right, Anna did need to mix things up. If she was ever going to meet someone, she needed to get some more life about her. Sleepy little Balbuinidh had its limits, no matter how much Anna loved it there.

Most of her friends were now in long-term relationships, too, which made getting them to go out and do things with her that bit harder. Kelly, for example, was far less available to hang out with since being with Myla. Anna wanted to live a little because she was seriously forgetting how to do that these days. Hayley would be perfect for helping her get back out there.

In the end, Anna wanted to go on this trip. Having a good time just appealed. Most of all, however, she wanted to spend more time with Hayley, even if it meant torturing herself by being so close to her. Nothing was ever going to happen on

that front, anyway, so it didn't matter. Hayley didn't like her in that way, and Anna was never going to open herself up to that level of hurt ever again. She was more than capable of putting her feelings to one side to avoid the pain of Hayley disappearing from her life again.

Hayley finished parking. She did a great job handling the large vehicle in such a tight space. Being around her felt so right, it was hard to explain after all these years.

"I'll go with you."

"Huh?" Hayley looked over at her, hands still on the steering wheel.

"On the trip. I'll come."

"You will?" Hayley blinked rapidly a few times.

"I've given it a lot of thought, like I said I would. I needed to think it over. I found out I can get the time off work. Kelly's sister wants to move in, so I'll also have the mortgage covered. If you can wait two weeks for me to work my notice, I can come with you for two months. How does that sound?"

Hayley turned the engine off and turned to face Anna completely. "Really?"

"Yes. I thought you wanted to do this trip yourself and I never expected you to ask me to come with you. Seeing you again has reminded me of how much of a great time we used to have together, and I don't really want to waste this opportunity to spend more time with you."

Hayley leant forwards and smiled one of her most mischievous smiles. "Anna, this is brilliant! We are going to have so much fun!"

"But I have a few conditions."

"Ah. I thought you might."

"Follow me," Anna said.

"Ooh. This is already exciting."

Anna led her into the house, through to the dining table, which they hovered beside. She'd written a list of ground rules

in her notebook one night when she couldn't sleep. If the trip was to be enjoyable for her, she had to get them in early for them to register in Hayley's mind.

Anna picked up her notebook. "Things I need us to agree on."

"Ah. Not so exciting."

"Number one. We make an itinerary."

Hayley groaned.

"Two. I want at least one day a week where we don't drink any alcohol."

"Fine. Go on."

"I'll need at least a day's notice for any spur-of-the-moment ideas you might have so I can prepare for them." She paused. "I'm just going to read them all out. Nothing dangerous. Do not expect me to do a bungee jump. I want at least seven hours sleep a night, and I should warn you I really am a terrible sleeper. We divide the driving equally and we split the cost for everything in half."

"Wow, you make it sound so sexy."

"Hayley, I'm serious."

"So am I."

A slow smile crept onto Anna's lips. She couldn't help it. She was excited about this. More than she was letting on. More than she wanted to admit to herself, even. "You're okay with my ground rules?"

"While I object to the very concept, if it means I get to have the pleasure of your company, I can get down with them."

"Great."

"The only thing I'm not on board with is your last point. I'll pay for all the gas because I turned up on your doorstep and roped you into this. To be honest, I'm probably going to want to pay for more than half for stuff. Sorry. I won't back down on this."

Anna was going to dip into her savings to pay for her share, which wasn't ideal. Then again, not paying her way went against everything she valued. "Perhaps just the petrol?"

"Fine."

Anna already knew Hayley didn't just mean the petrol but didn't want to fight her on it after all the soul-searching she'd done to get to this point. "Fine."

"You can be my tour guide!"

"Er, full disclosure, I still haven't been to most of the places we put on our list all those years ago. It will be a first for me too."

"I like that. We get to experience it for the first time together. Discover Scotland together."

"I know." Anna smiled.

"Woohoo!" Hayley held up her hand for a high-five. Their hands connected perfectly, making a loud and satisfying clap. "Yeah, baby!"

The contact reverberated around Anna's body like an electric current. She cleared her throat. "But let's be real here. We'll be doing the touristy stuff, not the real Scotland. We won't be hanging around the cities and we probably won't see the poverty and the sectarianism and the whatnot."

"We'll do the romantic version of Scotland."

"Ayyye," Anna exaggerated, ironically.

"I already saw everyday life when I was living here. But maybe after our trip we could spend some time in the cities?"

Anna smiled. "That would be nice. We'll tick off our dream list together first. But I will get you some vitamin D supplements. Lowest levels in the world here. You should be concerned."

"I really do love your accent, Anna. Honestly, I could listen to it all day."

"Good. Because you're going to be around it for a hell of a lot longer."

“I wish you would use your real accent with me more often.”

“What do you mean?”

“Every now and again you slip into an even more Scottish accent but then you cover it up. It’s like you’re keeping your guard up with me or something.”

“I’m not aware I’m doing that. It must be my telephone voice or something.”

Hayley put her hands on her hips, adopting such an attractive power pose, Anna had to look away. “You never used to speak so *proper* around me.”

“Didn’t I?”

“You used to speak more relaxed around me for sure. I’ve heard you when you are drunk out of your mind. I know you have a different voice under there. I want to hear it. I miss it.”

Anna could feel her cheeks starting to blush. This wasn’t a good start to their agreeing to travel together. Anna had to get a grip. Did she really speak differently around Hayley now? “Okay. Well, we are about to be spending a lot of time together so I’m sure it will come out at some point.”

“I hope it does.”

“So, we’re really going to do this together? You really want me to gate-crash your ‘quit my job, fuck it and find out era’?”

“Yes, we fucking are and yes I fucking do!” Hayley broke out into a happy dance. “The trip officially just got interesting.”

It was hard to believe the person who drove her home was the same person now dancing in front of her. Did Anna really have that big of an effect on her? “I just have one question.”

Hayley smiled, teasingly, and took a seat at the dining table. “Just one?”

“Why didn’t you ask me sooner?”

“Ask you what?”

“Ask me to come travelling with you.”

“I wanted to see you first. I didn’t know if we would still get on like before.”

“You were vetting me?”

“No, silly. Just being sensible.”

Anna raised an eyebrow.

“You know what I mean. But we’re still the same people deep down, you and I, which I think is pretty awesome.”

Anna wasn’t sure how she felt about being vetted by Hayley. But on some level, she understood. “I guess you’re right. I’d probably do the same. Ten years is a long time after all. Do you want to get the map out and make the plan for the trip?”

“You make it sound oddly appealing, so yes.”

Anna skipped over to her bookcase and got out some ordnance survey maps and a road map. She loved a road trip. She hadn’t been to most of the places on the list, so she was genuinely excited to be going with Hayley. Having an outdated crush on her wasn’t even an issue. It would dissipate the more time she spent with her, surely. Anna laid the maps on the table, moving some candle holders out of the way. “Here.”

“Oh god, what have I gotten myself into?”

Anna sat down. “This is where it all begins.”

“I think I’m going to need some whisky or wine for this.”

“Good idea.”

Hayley drifted over to the kitchen as Anna realised they had a ton of shopping to do to actually get prepared. Hayley really hadn’t thought much about the practical stuff at all and only had the bare minimum of supplies.

Hayley put a bottle of wine on the table and placed two glasses down. “I can see your mind working. I’m going to need you to dial down your inner girl scout and just go with the flow a bit more.”

Anna frowned.

“Seriously. We can make an itinerary but this is my one and only condition, apart from paying for stuff and questioning your definition of dangerous.”

“I thought you said you were only not on board with dividing the cost?”

Hayley used a corkscrew to open the wine. It popped open and she poured out two glasses. “I was still processing it. Look, I want you to relax and have a good time, not be super stressed about every tiny detail or annoyed at me by day two. We’ll need to meet somewhere in the middle on this.”

Hayley seemed serious, which stopped Anna in her tracks. Hayley was right. It was her trip first and foremost and Anna had to respect that. But going with the flow and not thinking through every potential situation and scenario and over-preparing for them all brought Anna out in a cold sweat.

“I’d like to be more chilled out, but I don’t know how not to be this way. I don’t seem able to not think about all the different ways things could go wrong.”

“That sounds exhausting.” Hayley reached out and put her hand over Anna’s, causing a warm buzz to spread through Anna’s body. “Let me help you with that.”

Hayley used to help calm her down when they were at university. There were times when Anna was stressing out over small things, or that one time she had a full-blown panic attack at a protest. Anna had never felt so taken care of since, except by her parents. Did Hayley know the effect she had had on Anna? Her hand was still on Anna’s, causing Anna’s brain to malfunction. Hayley took it away, just as Anna was about to start overheating.

Anna got it together. “Okay. We both have the best of intentions so let’s just see if we can make it through the planning part.”

“Deal.”

“Let’s see our list again.”

Hayley got the list out of her purse and placed it between them, eagerly. “Here it is.”

Anna already appreciated that Hayley was making an effort. Anna picked up her wine glass and raised it in a toast. Hayley did the same. Anna cleared her throat. “To our Highland adventure.”

Hayley spoke softly. “To dreams coming true.”

Six

January 2013

Anna's breathing was fast and shallow. There were so many people crammed into the square holding placards and signs and talking loudly. *Love is Love* was everywhere. Her heart was racing. She didn't know why. The energy at the protest was intense, heated. Some of the protestors were fellow students but there were also people from all walks of life around them. There was a line of anti-gay-marriage protestors behind a fence on the other side of the road. The disgusted looks on their faces were a bit upsetting. There was anger and there was passion from both sides. The police were there, acting as barriers. Anything could happen at any second. Anna wasn't sure she wanted to be there any longer.

"Do you mind if we move to the side?" Anna asked Hayley, beside her, who was shouting along with the people around them. *Love is Love. Love is Love. Gay Marriage Now.*

"It's all kicking-off here. Why would we leave this spot?"

Anna nodded, feeling dizzy and shakier by the second. Her mouth felt dry. There was a horrible feeling of impending dread in the pit of her stomach.

Hayley regarded her closely, which in itself was disconcerting. Being there with the wonder that was Hayley Pearson was seriously messing with her head.

"You look pale, honey." Concern grew on Hayley's face. "We'll move."

They waded through the crowd and chants. It was all a bit much. Anna rested against a wall and tried to focus on her breathing, but it wasn't working. Her head felt disconnected from her body. She squatted down, holding the floor in front of her, feeling like she might either be sick or pass out.

Hayley joined her by her side, keeping a close eye on her.

"I think I might be having a panic attack."

“Shit. How can I help?”

“I don’t know.”

Hayley rested her hand on Anna’s lower back, which set Anna’s heart rate off even higher and made her feel dizzier. Last month, Anna had realised that she was gay. Gay for Hayley. She hadn’t told anyone. And now she was at a gay marriage protest with Hayley. Hayley who took her breath away and made her world tilt on its axis even at the best of times. Everything was upside down. She could not think clearly.

“Try to take deep breaths.” Hayley massaged Anna’s back with her hand.

“That doesn’t do anything,” Anna grumbled. If Hayley didn’t stop that Anna would for sure pass out.

“Look into my eyes.”

“What?”

“Look into my eyes.”

Anna looked up.

“I’m right here with you. I’ve got you.”

Anna let herself really look into Hayley’s eyes. There was a hazel tinge to them that was mesmerising. She couldn’t look away.

“Breathe in.” Hayley demonstrated. “Hold it. And slowly breathe out. Follow me.”

Anna went along with Hayley’s breathing, finding it did start to help. Hayley took her hand and squeezed it. The touch was both electrifying and grounding. The more Anna looked into Hayley’s eyes, the calmer she started to feel. There was something so soothing about Hayley. So strong and steady.

“Can you stand up?”

Anna stood up. Her body felt like a dead weight and her eyes went all blurry for a few seconds.

Hayley wrapped her arms around her and squeezed her so tight.

Anna's chest compressed. Her arms hung limp at her sides. "Uh. What's this about?"

Hayley squeezed her tighter. "I saw it on Grey's Anatomy. It's supposed to calm people down when they're freaking out. Is it working?"

"Yes." It was, strangely. "But you're taking all the air out of me."

Hayley let her go. Anna missed her already.

"Do you want to go?"

"I do. Sorry. Do you mind?"

"Don't apologise. I just want you to be okay. Come on."

Back in the flat, Anna lay down on the sofa, feeling embarrassed but not quite completely over it yet. Forcing herself to take deep breaths, she felt her body begin to relax a bit.

Hayley came through with the blanket Anna had got her for her birthday and draped it over Anna's body, tucking her in. She stroked Anna's forehead, still looking a bit concerned.

Anna subtly inhaled Hayley's smell on the blanket, still tingling from her touch.

"How are you feeling?"

"Much better."

"That's good."

"I'm a bit mortified, to be honest."

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about. I'm just glad you're feeling better."

"I was never like this as a kid, by the way. I had no fear. I was such a confident little girl. I don't know why I get so worked up about things these days."

Hayley looked at her. "I'm sure that little kid is still within you, somewhere."

“I hope she isn’t. She’d cringe so hard at who she’s become.”

“You’re too tough on yourself. Take it easy, Anna. Get some rest.”

“I will.”

Hayley took a seat across from her. “I’ll be right here.”

Anna turned onto her side and curled into a ball. Her eyes rested on Hayley at an angle. “Hayley?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for today. I feel so taken care of.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“I want to. You’re amazing. I’m grateful you were there for me today. And every day. Just wanted to say that.”

“Well, you know.” Hayley stumbled over her words, which was unlike her. “You’re my person. I know we haven’t known each other for very long, but that’s how I feel. You’re my best friend over here, Anna. You mean a lot to me.”

The hairs on the back of Anna’s neck stood up. Having someone as incredible as Hayley Pearson say she was her best friend was not something that happened every day. Or ever, really. And Hayley had said it with such sincerity and vulnerability. The moment stretched on in a blur of tiredness mixed with euphoria. “You’re my person too,” Anna said, happy, smiling from within. “My best friend. On any continent.”

Hayley smiled, slowly, widely, unguarded. It was so beautiful. She was so beautiful. “I like the sound of that. I feel the same, actually. On any continent.”

Present day

Anna crossed her arms around her chest and rocked forward and back. It soothed her. They were about to tick off their first activity from the list by wild swimming in a loch. Anna wasn’t

sure how she felt about it now that she was here and faced with getting into cold and dangerous water.

Hayley was sitting beside her on the beach in front of the loch. They were finally on the trip, though, which was good. Anna had to pinch herself that it was actually happening. Working her two weeks' notice gave time for Hayley to see and do things in the local area and for Anna to get ready for the trip, both practically and emotionally. Although she wasn't getting any further on the emotional front. Thinking back to the day of the gay marriage protest, for example, and when they had admitted they were each other's person was not helping Anna combat her crush.

Hayley had been doing day trips on her own and shopping for various supplies for their longer trip, including getting a new mattress for the larger base Anna had installed since agreeing to go. Hayley and Myla had become friends, going for walks and coffees during the day. Having Hayley coming and going was both highly unusual and so easy to get used to, although it didn't feel like real life. It was like they were living together again, but it was still out of the ordinary. In some ways, it was almost like she hadn't been gone for ten years. As ever, this time with Hayley was only temporary. She had to not let herself get too drawn in.

“You seem a bit tense, Anna. Have you done this before?”

“No.”

“You've never been wild swimming before?” Hayley frowned.

“No.”

“And you tell me this now, after we've talked about all the lochs we're going to dive into? After you made us plan it all out in such meticulous detail?”

“I've swum at beaches in Spain and Greece, if that's what you're asking. But no, I've never actually swum in the waters in and around the British Isles before.”

“I'm just surprised.”

“It sounds good in theory.”

“Even though you live in the Highlands, you’ve never made it into one of these gorgeous lochs?”

Anna shook her head, starting to feel embarrassed. “It never came up. It was never the right time. Or the weather was bad.”

Hayley stood up on her beach towel and started getting undressed, kicking off her trainers and slipping out of her trousers. Even though she knew Hayley had swimwear under her clothes, because they’d discussed it already, and Anna did too, it didn’t make it any less... *alarming*.

“I think you were just too scared.” Hayley threw her top off, revealing a bikini that drew Anna’s attention to Hayley’s breasts. Hayley’s skin filled with goosebumps, the tiny hairs rising from the cold.

Anna’s breath caught in her throat. She looked away, realising she was staring at Hayley’s gorgeous figure excessively. “You look cold.”

“I’m fucking freezing. Look, come on. Get undressed. We’re doing this.”

Anna looked around the small beach. They were on their own, thankfully.

“There’s no one else here. You don’t have to worry about anyone seeing you. It’s just me.”

Anna blushed. Hayley really had no idea that Anna had a crush on her, did she? “I’m not self-conscious. I’m just geeing myself up.”

“You do seem a little hesitant.”

“We shouldn’t go in too far. These lochs suddenly get deep.”

“Then we swim.”

“What if it’s too cold?”

“It’s going to be freezing but that’s part of the fun, isn’t it? Cold therapy like this is meant to be really good for your body. Helps reduce inflammation or increase dopamine or something.”

Anna was inflamed all right but she certainly wouldn't call this therapy. But she said she would do this and it was time to push herself to finally take the plunge, literally. "Okay." Anna stood up and tentatively took her clothes off. Her own bikini was quite revealing, too, come to think of it.

Hayley looked towards the loch and wrapped her arms around her chest, hopping from one foot to the other. "Would be great if you could speed that up a little bit."

"I'm done."

Hayley looked Anna up and down, presumably to check she was indeed out of her clothes, then looked away. "Great. Ready?" She glanced back.

Anna nodded, still feeling apprehensive about going in.

Hayley's eyes softened. "If you go in slowly, it makes it more bearable. I've swum in some lakes in Canada, and they were pretty cold. It helped. I also saw it on a documentary once."

Together, they shuffled into the water. The cold was a shock, even at ankle deep. The sand scrubbed the bottom of her feet and in between her toes as she sank into the rough sand with each step.

Hayley was majestic wading into the mountain-flanked water beside her. Her skin had a golden glow to it that Anna's did not have. Anna's skin was almost blue; its paleness was exacerbated by the cold. Anna didn't want to complain about the cold so soon, trying to appear tougher than she really was. They were knee deep now. Anna could hardly speak. Even her tongue was cold.

"Oh fuck. Oh fucking fuck fuck fuck, it's so cold," Hayley said. "What the fuck are we doing?"

"I thought you were all chill about this. Pun intended."

Hayley laughed. "Nope. I'm just trying to be at one with nature or some shit."

They each squealed then burst out laughing as the water lapped at their thighs. Anna had never been colder in her life,

but the laughing helped. As did hearing Hayley swear so much. They faced each other, chests heaving and teeth chattering.

“We can do this, Anna.”

“Well, we’re here now. We might as well.”

Hayley held out her hand. “Together?”

Anna took Hayley’s hand, feeling the warmth spread all the way up her arm and reach her chest as their fingers entwined. “Together.”

“On a count of three we walk even further, then go all in and start swimming.”

Anna nodded. Hayley did the counting and before she knew it, they were plunging forward into the unknown. Hayley gripped her hand and submerged. Anna was shocked at how cold her body was under water for a split second. Back at the surface, the icy water lapped at Anna’s shoulders.

Hayley’s mouth was open, and her eyes were as wide as Anna had ever seen them. “How are there not icebergs in here?”

Anna tried to agree, but only gasping sounds escaped her.

Hayley swam around a bit, going further into the loch, smiling and making loud groaning noises at the cold.

Anna swam back towards the shore, instinctively, unsure if she could take much more of this.

“Where are you going?”

Anna stood up on her tip toes, grateful to have found the floor. “Er. To shore. This. Is. Crazy.”

“Lean into it. It’s so cold it’s almost warm. You feel that?”

Anna focused on the sensation in her body, despite her mind’s plan to go in the opposite direction. “Strangely, I do.”

“Come and swim around with me.”

Hayley had such a reassuring gaze and energy that Anna found herself swimming towards her. Hayley always had a

way of helping Anna go above her nerve, like that time she helped Anna prepare for and succeed at a presentation Anna had been stressing about. It was equal parts annoying and thrilling.

“Life doesn’t get much better than this,” Hayley said, doing the breaststroke beside Anna. “I can’t remember the last time I felt so alive.”

Despite herself, Anna had to agree with her. There was something about swimming around in very cold water in a beautiful loch that made every nerve stand to attention: the silky feel of the water as she pulled it past her, the sound of the water sloshing around her, and her matted wet hair sticking to her face. “Me neither.”

“Aren’t you glad you came in?”

“Maybe.”

“Yaaaaas. I’ll take that as a win.”

“I’m ready to get out. I think less is more with water at these temperatures.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Small doses are best.”

As they turned around and swam back to shore, with the campervan glistening in the distance, Anna smiled at nothing in particular. She’d been too scared to go wild swimming for years, and Hayley had only been back in the country for a matter of weeks and had already made this happen. This was effectively the first day on their trip. What else was Anna going to experience in the company of Hayley and her adventurous attitude to life over the next two months? Could she handle it?

They wrapped themselves up in their beach towels once they got to shore. The sand irritated Anna’s skin but she was still glad of the relief. Her body oddly felt like it was burning. Her teeth started chattering again. It was almost colder outside the water than in it.

After drying herself down with her towel, Hayley threw on a giant poncho towel and looked off into the distance. “What a beautiful place to be! I already know I’m going to remember

this day for the rest of my life. I loved that.” Hayley regarded Anna shivering in her towel. She held up the shoulders of her poncho. “Would you like to put this on?”

“No thanks.”

“We should get you one.”

“Thanks. But I think the key learning from today is we need to get wetsuits.”

Hayley laughed. “Any other ‘key learnings’ from today I should know about?”

“That we should get warm before we catch a chill.”

“We can make a fire!” Hayley paused. “Or maybe we should wait until we get to the campsite? Oh, but that’s not going to be for ages.”

“It’s not safe to make a fire here. It might be better if we got warm and went for a meal instead.”

“You’re right. It’ll be too cold to sit out tonight anyway. It’s going to be so lovely by the campfire on the warmer nights, though. I can see us sitting around, drinking whisky and talking shit, just like the good old days.”

“Me too,” Anna said.

“It’s at least an hour’s drive to the campsite and I don’t know about you but I want to dry my hair asap. I love the fact we’ve got a little electricity in the campervan.”

“I agree. And I’d like to dry my hair too. Maybe just sit there with it blasting on me.”

“First one back to the campervan gets to use the hairdryer first?” Hayley said.

“You child.”

“Race me. I dare you.”

Anna picked up her stuff, already envisioning the win. “Okay, you’re on.”

“One. Two. Three.”

Hayley got going first and sprinted away, poncho towel flailing everywhere, but Anna caught up and overtook Hayley at the very last second, tapping the bonnet of the campervan in triumph.

“Where the hell did you come from?” Hayley leant forward, hands on her knees as her chest heaved.

“Didn’t I tell you I run?”

“Yeah, but marathons, I thought, not sprinting.”

Anna shrugged.

Hayley blew out a long breath. “You are full of surprises.”

Anna opened the campervan door. “Looks like you’ll have to have a wet head for a little longer.”

At their campsite, they stayed warm in the softly lit campervan. Anna had been impressed, earlier, at the relative ease with which Hayley had hooked up the campervan to the mains electricity at their plot. She hadn’t even complained about the basic showering facilities of the campsite.

Anna had taken pity on Hayley and let her go first with the hairdryer after all. Anna’s hair was shorter and had nearly dried by the time they’d got changed, anyway.

“You’re too nice for your own good,” Hayley had said, with gratitude in her eyes.

After a jaunt to the local pub for dinner, Anna sat at the table in one corner, and Hayley was already lying on the bed inside her sleeping bag underneath the spare duvet in the opposite corner. Hayley had brought the blanket from their university years too, ‘my blanket that you stole’, as she jokingly called it.

“It’s so cosy in here,” Hayley said. “I really love it. I feel free as a bird. Cold, but free. I’ll take it.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

With their stuff now in the van, and the functional use of space Anna had built, it was a very pleasant space to be in.

Homely, even, especially with the fairy lights Hayley had put up. It reminded her of those tiny homes she'd seen people live in. Every inch of space given a purpose.

Anna liked van life. Surrounded by nature and wilderness, with free rein to come and go was something she could get used to. It was the complete opposite of her highly structured day-to-day life in Balbuinidh: work, gym, dinner, self-care, bed, repeat. Being around Hayley was good for her, it would seem. She had no idea what was coming next.

“So, first day of the trip,” Hayley said, eyes peering out from under all the covers. “How would you say it went?”

Anna looked up from her phone. “I was just thinking about that.”

“I got the feeling you were.”

“You’ve already pushed me outside my comfort zone and challenged me to a dare, so I guess I’m a little terrified for what comes next.”

Hayley laughed, loudly, as if from her belly. This went on for some time. “Oh Anna, just you wait.”

“The tone in your voice is rather unsettling.”

“I just want to bring out your inner wolf.”

“Mmm.”

“On that note. Do you want to go to that adventure park we passed on the way here? It looked so exciting. Climbing and flying through the trees like that.”

Anna crossed her arms. She knew this was going to happen. “You’re adding in extreme sports on the first day?”

“It’s fit for ten-year-olds. It’s hardly an extreme sport.”

“It’s not on the list.”

“Isn’t this me giving you advanced notice?”

“I’m not keen on heights. Maybe you could go yourself and I’ll watch and take pictures while sipping coffee with my feet firmly on the ground.”

“Anna, is your nerve denying you?” She wagged a finger.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Okay.”

Anna shook her head, smiling, despite herself. “You’re a nightmare.”

“You love it.”

“Debatable.”

Hayley yawned. “I’m going to sleep. Are you coming to bed yet?”

Anna looked up, painfully aware of how close she was going to be to Hayley for the foreseeable future. She’d installed an extension to the fitted bed structure, but it still seemed too small. “Soon.”

“What are you doing?”

“Planning our route for tomorrow.”

“Oh that can wait. You must be tired.”

How long could Anna avoid sleeping next to her? Was there any point in being on the trip unless she could relax into it and be around Hayley without feeling like she was hiding something? “Maybe I am a little tired.” Anna put her phone down and crossed the campervan. Hayley moved over to give her more space. Anna unzipped her sleeping bag and slipped inside, already ready for bed. She fidgeted with her pillow. As Anna got settled she felt Hayley watch her the entire time, right beside her.

“Would you like some more duvet or blanket?” Hayley said.

“No thanks. I already feel too warm.”

“You must run a lot hotter than I do.”

Anna couldn’t deal with Hayley being even mildly flirty this close to bedtime. It made her... uncomfortable. “I don’t know how you managed swimming in the freezing loch today. You did well.”

Hayley turned onto her elbow, facing Anna, who was lying on her back. “So did you.”

“Goodnight, Hayley.” Anna reached up to the wall and switched the light off. It was almost pitch black with the single curtain pulled closed. Outside was mostly woods and other campervans.

“Goodnight, Anna.”

They fell silent. Anna lay there listening to the sound of Hayley’s breathing, hyper aware of every movement either of them made. Hayley turned over onto her back and took a deep breath in and a slow breath out. It felt like they were both staring at the ceiling together. The last time Anna had been in a bed with Hayley it had ended up in full sex, so it was bound to be a little awkward, right? Anna turned onto her side, facing away from her. Her sleeping bag made a high-pitched scratchy noise as she did so.

Unable to sleep, Anna’s mind drifted to earlier, when they were in their bikinis, swimming around and laughing. To when Hayley slipped off her shorts. To when Hayley ran her eyes so briefly over her body when she took her clothes off. To Hayley’s smile and her lips. Her mischievous grin. Anna started to feel hot. Bothered. Turned on.

She sighed.

Had she done the right thing coming on this trip and sharing such a small space with her old crush? Or was this just going to be awkward and torturous? Could she cope with the latter?

Seven

October 2012

While Anna was in the kitchen making dinner, Hayley came in and sat in front of the television behind her. For the next ten minutes, Anna glanced over her shoulder as Hayley became engrossed in the Scottish news programme and the random segments. Anna found Hayley's interest in the country captivating. She liked how curious and open-minded Hayley was. Her enthusiasm to learn about what it was really like here was flattering. Part of Anna felt like she had to represent the whole of Britain and, even, look out for this American. "Hey. Would you like a cup of tea?"

Hayley looked up from the small sofa as if only remembering where she was. "Oh, hey. Um. Yes, please."

Anna smiled. For a perfect stranger off the street, Hayley had instantly fitted into the flat as a good person to live with. Fun. Interesting. Clean and tidy. Not too loud, unless she was on the phone to her family and friends back in the US. But that was totally understandable.

Hayley pointed at Anna's hand. "What's that called?"

Anna filled the kettle from the tap. "What?"

"That thing you're holding."

Anna held it up, confused. "The kettle?"

"Oh, it's a kettle! I haven't seen one that shape before, or one made out of plastic."

"How do you boil water in America?"

"On the stove or we just put a mug of water in the microwave."

Anna was lost for words. Her brain couldn't compute.

Hayley laughed. "You look horrified."

"I am. In the microwave?"

“The wrong thing to say?”

“On so many levels.”

Hayley laughed.

Anna lowered the kettle and switched it on. “It must take ages on the stove.”

“We drink a lot less tea than you guys.”

The kettle shook as the water came to a boil then it switched itself off as steam billowed out of the spout. “We are obsessed with tea. Britain would collapse if we had to faff about with stoves every time someone had to make some.” Anna poured the water in. “Do you take milk? Sugar?”

“No thanks. Just black, and could you take the teabag out after a few seconds please?”

“Sure. Not a builder’s brew, then.”

“What’s that?”

“There’s this trope about builders drinking it strong and sweet.” Anna shrugged. “It’s just one of those sayings we have here.”

“See. This is the sort of stuff you just can’t learn unless you live in a country and get to know people.”

Anna finished making the tea. “You seem to be enjoying those news reports.” Anna handed Hayley her cup and sat down beside her. “Is it different from the news you get back home?”

Hayley sat back, resting her cup on her lap and holding it there. “On the face of it, yeah, they are presented very differently. Our news tends to be brighter, with more commercials and lots of information flashing across the screen. But in essence it’s pretty much the same. Except for the cute accents.”

“Can you understand them?”

“A lot of the time, no. But I’m trying. Listening to Scottish people in pubs is helping. They exaggerate more when they talk, and I can kind of get the gist. Plus they don’t get as

offended when you ask them to repeat what they just said when they're drunk."

"Smart."

"What does blether mean?"

"It means to talk. To ramble on about nonsense. It's about as Scottish as it gets."

Hayley brought the cup to her lips and gently blew on her tea. "That's cute. I'm here for that."

Present day

The landscape grew more rugged as they travelled. Anna concentrated on the road, glad that Hayley was getting to enjoy the nice scenery. Hayley had always been super interested in learning new things about this country. And seeing more of it. It was adorable. Cultured. *Attractive*.

"Thank you for driving," Hayley said. "I'm loving being a passenger princess."

Anna laughed. "It's nothing. I don't mind."

Hayley had insisted they put some music on. She tapped her thighs in time with the music still looking out of the window. "This is the life."

Bob Marley came on the speakers. This was the song Hayley used to sing to Anna when they lived together, sweetly reminding her not to worry. Anna felt her cheeks redden. Was this on Hayley's playlist or something?

Hayley looked over at her and smiled. "Do you remember this one?"

"I do."

"I love this one." Hayley looked forward at the road, swaying to the music. "It always reminds me of you."

Anna's breath caught. She swallowed, gripping the steering wheel that bit harder. They listened to it in a somewhat tense state as the views flew past.

The next one came on. Another Bob Marley. More upbeat. It was also one they used to listen to and sing to, hanging out in one another's bedrooms intending to study but not getting any work done. Hayley started singing, quite freely. She reached over and poked the side of Anna's thigh with her index finger. "Sing with me."

"Nah, you're okay."

"Oh come on!" she said, in between the lines, dancing in her seat now. "We always used to!"

Anna submitted to the inevitable and let herself join in with Hayley's singing, rocking her head slightly in time with the music.

"Woohoo! There it is! Just like old times!"

Anna shook her head, smiling now. "Old times. Yes."

They sang the rest of the song and went straight into the next one, letting loose. Anna drummed on the steering wheel and sang freely too. It was a dance song about feeling the love that was out when Hayley was living here, and it was so uplifting. She glanced over at her friend rocking out beside her, and they caught eyes briefly, all smiles and in full car seat performance glory. Hayley sang even louder. Anna giggled.

"Life's good, man!" Hayley said. "I could get used to this."

"Yeah," Anna said, flustered now.

"Ooh. There it is," Hayley said, pointing out of the window.

"What?"

"The castle. Wow! Would you look at that. It's just like sitting there in the middle of nowhere."

The stoic castle was almost sitting on the water. It rose high into the air. "I know what you mean. It's like, 'look at me'," Anna said.

"It's enchanting."

"Always makes me wonder how they built something like that."

“It looks like it just magically appeared.”

Anna laughed. “It does.”

A few minutes later they parked in the visitor car park. Anna had barely switched the engine off, taking the music with it, and put the handbrake on before Hayley was jumping out of the campervan and setting off towards the castle esplanade. She looked back and waved at Anna to come on. Smiling, Anna locked up and watched as Hayley got her phone out and started taking pictures, moving to different parts of the esplanade for more angles of the castle.

“Here,” Anna said, when she caught up with her. “Let me get one of you.”

“Let’s get one of both of us.”

“Okay.” Anna stepped beside Hayley and got close enough so they could both fit on the screen. Hayley smelled of fresh air and coffee.

Hayley turned towards Anna, her face almost touching hers. “Smile.”

Anna tilted her head towards Hayley and smiled, vaguely aware she was meant to be looking at the camera or the views instead of thinking about her fluttering heart and her senses going into overdrive.

After far too many photos later, Hayley declared she was satisfied with what she’d got and was now ready to go in. “Let’s get our castle on.”

They crossed a moat and entered through the oversized castle doors. Hayley paid for them to go in despite Anna’s protests. They strolled around, winding through the historical structure which was like a maze. Thick tapestries and faded flags hung in different rooms. It was dark, with thick stone walls and paved floors. Hayley stopped to read the small information signs scattered throughout the castle beside points of interest. Anna couldn’t believe she’d never visited this one before.

“Hey Anna,” Hayley pointed towards a narrow corridor which was cordoned off by a red rope. “A secret passage.”

Hayley chuckled. “I wonder what goes on down there?”

“Why do I get the feeling you are making some weird innuendo or something.”

“Because I am.”

Anna shook her head, hiding her smile, and walked past Hayley. They ended up high in the castle at an outside lookout. Anna rested her elbows on the castle wall, enjoying the view towards the islands.

Hayley joined her by the wall. “If you were alive hundreds of years ago, would you have preferred to live inside the castle or outside?”

“Inside. You’d have been much more protected in a place like this. Outside would have been way more dangerous with wolves and rival clans and all that. What about you?”

“Outside. I think it would have been seriously claustrophobic being trapped in here. Can you imagine?” Hayley shuddered. “It’s like a prison. I’d have hated not having the freedom to come and go as I pleased.”

Anna looked sideways at her friend. Hayley was such a free spirit. But that desire of Hayley’s to never be attached to anything or be tied down made Anna sad. Hayley would never be happy unless she was doing new things and going to new places all the time. Anna wanted the opposite – routine and building a life in one place. Ultimately, they weren’t suited to each other. Anna knew this. It wasn’t news. So why did each reminder make her feel so disappointed?

Hayley leant over the edge of the castle wall, a little too far over it for Anna’s liking. “Have you seen the size of the moat?”

Anna had a low-key fear of heights so seeing Hayley hanging over the wall caused her nails to dig into her palms. Anna consciously unballled her fists and cautiously reached for the wall. “It goes all around.”

“Talk about a giant prison.”

“I’m sure it was for their protection from invaders rather than to keep the inhabitants in.”

“They say that.” Hayley faced Anna, thankfully having slid back down off the wall. “But we all know the women of this joint weren’t calling the shots. It kind of gives me the creeps.”

“Maybe the women were treated like queens. Wouldn’t that have been nice?”

“Unlikely.”

“You’ve got to admit, though, living in a castle must have been better than living in a croft or something.”

“Maybe. I just find it so suffocating, and we are only here for a couple of hours. Imagine spending your whole life here.”

“I don’t think you would have enjoyed the fourteenth century much.”

Hayley laughed. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“I thought you couldn’t wait to see this place.”

“Oh, I’m finding it absolutely fascinating. All I’ve seen for the last god knows how many years are skyscrapers, high-rises and neon lighting. I’ve never seen such a beautiful structure, and in this amazing landscape it’s perfect. I just like to apply some critical thinking to what it is I’m being presented with. I’m like this all the time. I don’t just take things at face value, I guess.”

“You used to talk like this back in the day, now that I think about it. It’s a good way to be. You come out with such random things. I love that about you.”

Hayley found Anna’s eyes and held them.

Anna felt like she was being cross-examined. She shifted her weight onto her other foot. “What?”

“Nothing.” Hayley shook her head. “Sorry.” Hayley wandered away towards the information point by the opposite corner.

Anna followed, completely glued to her. The urge to cling to her was so strong. There was just something about her that

turned Anna into a pining teenager. She had no control over it, really. She stood beside her free-thinking friend as Hayley studied the information about how the castle defended itself from its many attacks. They drifted back inside again. It was even darker inside the main building after having been outside.

Hayley came to a stop beside a stuffed stag's head and shook her head. "Poor animal."

"I know. It's barbaric."

They exited towards the visitor centre and did some shopping in the gift shop. Anna followed Hayley around like a loyal puppy, not particularly interested in the items for sale, enjoying how engrossed Hayley was in everything.

"Look here," Hayley said, holding up a fridge magnet featuring the castle. "To remind us of this day. It can go on our little powerhouse fridge in the van."

"If you want."

"And how about this calendar? We can hang it up beside the table and put in stuff about the trip. Visualise the plans."

"Now you're talking."

Hayley carefully selected a bunch of postcards of the castle and a pretty notebook and paid at the counter. Anna hung back, unable to take her eyes off her.

"They make it seem very exciting in here," Hayley said, carrying her gift bag as they exited the gift shop. "But I think the view of the castle as you drive up to it is the best bit. Far more dramatic."

"I don't know. I liked coming in. It's like stepping back into the past."

"True."

"Want to get lunch in the café?"

"Now that is a brilliant idea."

Anna had always liked driving. It gave her focus and control. The campervan was proving to be an excellent acquisition and was handling the miles they were spinning through well. For such a large vehicle, it was easy to handle. They'd been driving through rugged scenery and all sorts of roads both narrow and winding and long and straight. Anna had taken to doing most of the driving while Hayley navigated. It was working well.

After a morning touring along the very top of the country, known as the North Coast 500, they stopped at a café on a peninsula with an outdoor seating area featuring spectacular views out to sea. The café was packed full. It was a key pit stop on the route. They took their coffees and cakes outside but there were no seats.

Anna frowned. "Should we go back to the van?"

"What about there, next to those guys?" Hayley had pointed to a group of bikers. A line of motorbikes, theirs presumably, were parked outside the café, neatly arranged together like a bike showroom. The bikes glistened in the sun. The men were talking and laughing, loudly.

"Um. There's no space."

"There is." Hayley pointed to the end of the long table. "We can perch on the end."

"If you want."

"Hi!" Hayley said, approaching the table. "Do you mind if we sit at your table?"

"Not at all." A large man in full motorbike attire turned to his buddies. "Budge up for the ladies."

They sat down at the table as every single man in the group turned towards them. Hayley faced the rest of the table with an easy and open vibe. She was revving up for a conversation, loving this. Anna had no intention of speaking. This was all Hayley.

"I take it you're the owners of those motorcycles out front?"

“Aye. That’s us.”

“Sweet. What’s it like to zoom around Scotland on them? It looks very exciting,” Hayley said, eyes bright and daring.

“It’s bloody brilliant,” one of the men said. He had a thick beard and a broad frame. The cup he was holding looked tiny in his large hands. “Best feeling in the world.”

“Well, one of them,” his pal sniggered.

“Do you all live up here?”

“No. Most of us live in Glasgow, or the central belt. We tour around. That is, if we don’t stop for too many coffees and pints.”

“He’s joking about the pints,” the man with the large hands said.

“What a place to have on your doorstep! You’re so lucky.”

“Aye. It’s not bad. And these lads aren’t too bad to hang out with, either.”

“Are you in a club or do you all just know each other?”

Anna watched on, in awe of how confident Hayley was, as usual. It reminded her of their university days and how often Hayley would go up and talk to random strangers and make friends with loads of different types of people. While it could be annoying at first, because they’d be hanging out together and Hayley would want to go and talk to other people, she quite liked this trait of Hayley’s. Anna considered herself a sociable person, she did work in a distillery bar, after all, but Hayley was next level.

“We’re the hairy-dudes,” the man sitting closest to Anna spoke, pointing at the logo on their identical leather jackets. Anna hadn’t noticed before.

“That’s so cool.”

Anna took a sip of coffee. The men mostly went back to talking amongst themselves. There must have been about twelve of them.

“Where are you from?” the hairiest dude said. He seemed friendly.

“I’m from the US. Pennsylvania originally, but I’ve been living in New York for years.” Hayley looked at Anna, smiling.

“And I’m from Glasgow but have been living in the Highlands for years.” Anna smiled. It was comforting to meet people from where she was from in such a remote place.

“I thought you were both American. How do you know each other?”

They looked at each other, smiling. It was hard not to smile constantly when around Hayley.

“From university,” Hayley said. “I studied here for a year a while ago. I’m over for a trip and to catch up with my long-lost friend here.”

“And are you enjoying your trip?” he asked.

Hayley held Anna’s eyes. “Yes. Very much.”

Their campsite was on a hill, overlooking mountains turned purple by the setting sun. It was a still and pleasant evening to sit outdoors. Anna fiddled with the portable speaker and changed the track from her phone as Hayley sat in front of the firepit roasting some marshmallows. Anna set the volume low on her alternative indie music playlist they’d been listening to on repeat.

Hayley hummed along to the melodious music. “I really like this one.”

“Me too. Daughter are amazing.” Anna braced herself while sitting down. The muscles in her legs had that achy soreness from all the new activities and hiking they’d been doing on the trip. Even as a runner, she was still finding it tough with all the miles they’d been putting in. It was worth it though. Touring around and walking among the beautiful mountains with all the time in the world was special. Anna didn’t want to complain too much about a bit of leg soreness.

“It’s brilliant we still have the same taste in music, Anna, I love it so much!”

It was true. They had been vibing so much to each other’s playlists. It was one of the best feelings ever. “Yep, we do. I love it too.”

“Would you like some more tea now?” Hayley said, eyes twinkling in the firelight.

Anna smiled at her friend and got that bit cosier in her chair. Getting to spend this much time together was such a treat. “Yes please.”

Hayley sprung up and set about making their precious tea for the evening. She turned the knob on their small portable cooking stove anticlockwise and held it down until blue gas lit up the ring with a swoosh. The small metal pot made a loud clanking noise as Hayley put it down on the gas.

They’d been getting into a routine with making tea and coffee on the trip. It had prompted Anna to think about how they used to make endless cups of tea in the shared kitchen and chat for hours and hours. They knew all each other’s secrets back then, unlike now, except for one huge secret Anna had never told Hayley, and never would.

“Do you remember,” Hayley said, now facing Anna as she waited for the water to heat up. “When I first moved into the apartment we shared?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“You were very sweet to me. You made me feel so welcome. You kept offering me cups of tea every five minutes.”

Anna laughed. “Did I? That’s good. As any Brit would.”

“You did. You kept asking me if I was okay. If I needed anything. Although you did tease me a bit when I said I’d never used an electric kettle before.”

“In fairness, I was genuinely disturbed by that.”

“That’s when I knew we would be friends.”

“By me teasing you?”

“I guess.”

“You’re funny.”

“You were good to me, Anna. That’s all I’m saying. I was alone in a new country and you made me feel so at home. I think it’s the reason I had such an amazing year.”

“I’m really happy to hear that. But you were going to have an amazing year here with or without me. You were so larger than life.” Anna crossed her sore legs and winced. “Still are.”

“Still bad at accepting compliments, I see?” Hayley smiled at her and made the tea.

Anna watched, happily. It was already just like old times.

Hayley handed Anna a cup and sat down again. “Can you believe how many times we went out in those first few months? I sometimes look back and all I remember is a blur of bars and clubs and house parties. It was an awesome time.”

“It was.”

“Remember that time we crashed that office Christmas party in that restaurant and took over their karaoke?” Hayley said.

“I do. We were so out of line. And bad.”

“They kept asking for us to sing more songs though. Couldn’t have been that terrible.”

“I think that was the men. I remember the women heckling us,” Anna said.

“Didn’t you steal a bottle of champagne when they finally kicked us out?”

“I don’t remember that.”

Hayley laughed. “You were so much fun that night.”

“So were you.” Anna looked back at the firepit, with fond memories swirling in her head and a warm feeling in her chest.

“I often think back on that time. When I’m stuck at work or something.” Hayley smiled, almost shyly. “Oh to be twenty-

two again.”

“Yeah. Good times.”

A small silence opened up between them. Anna let her head fall back and looked up at the sky. The sun had set and the odd star was breaking the twilight. Hayley was right, this was the life.

“I’ve been meaning to say something,” Hayley said, her voice soft, but guarded. “Actually, I think I did mention it very briefly in an email, but I didn’t want to get into it then. It’s probably easier to talk face to face, you know.”

Anna looked at her friend, curious and wary. “About what?”

Hayley’s eyes were wide and more serious than Anna had seen since she’d been visiting. “That I’m so sorry we lost touch over the years. Our friendship was, is, really important to me and I let it take a back seat.”

Anna swallowed. Where was Hayley going with this?

“After I went home, things just got really intense, you know?”

Anna nodded, staring into the firepit, trying not to remember how devastated she’d felt those first few months after Hayley had gone home. How helpless and numb.

“I went straight into that internship, and I met Ryan that summer. Then my final year at Princeton took over. I was struggling with my relationship with my parents, and then I landed that corporate job—”

“It’s okay.” Anna smiled, sadly. A thousand little moments flashed through her head about what could have been and what happened instead. “I’m sorry we lost touch, too. But there’s honestly nothing to apologise for. Sometimes friendships simmer down when you’re not in each other’s immediate lives any more. It’s a shame, but it can’t be helped sometimes.”

“It was hard. I felt guilty for leaving.”

“You had to go home. That’s where your life was. Is.”

Hayley was quiet.

Anna continued. “Our friendship was of a time. You moved home like you were always going to. You did nothing wrong. I said that in my email, remember?”

Hayley gave Anna a long hard look. After a while she finally spoke. “I remember. I just wish that wasn’t how things went down. I missed you over the years. I missed you a lot.”

It was Hayley who had stopped replying to Anna’s emails, but she wasn’t going to be pedantic and go into the finer details right now, or ever. There would be no telling where that conversation would lead. There was no point in opening that wound again. It would almost certainly be uncomfortable. It had been awkward and painful enough when they’d tried to talk about things the first time over email. Hayley had been evasive about the fact that they’d slept together. Anna had been crushed. She understood Hayley had regretted it, but it didn’t make it any easier. Part of Anna was just glad they’d managed to save the friendship at all, even if it had taken ten years. “I missed you, too.”

Hayley smiled, but there was a look in her eyes that Anna didn’t recognise. Anna sipped her tea, surprised that Hayley had brought up the topic and that she still seemed to be affected by them drifting apart.

Anna liked the thirty-two-year-old version of Hayley. Like, a lot. She was everything Anna had dreamed Hayley might become: inspiring, exciting, confident, smart, kind, and more mellow and refined in the most attractive way possible. Underneath all that growth and maturity was still the same old Hayley, the same bundle of enthusiasm that Anna had fallen in love with when they were younger. It was a beautiful thing to have confirmed and to see.

She had spent most of the trip doing her best to deflect attention away from the fact that she had been madly in love with Hayley at university, had been crushed that it wasn’t reciprocated and was now still harbouring some lingering attraction of some sort. Anna was like an MI5 agent. At all costs, the truth could not get out. She had to protect herself.

Such secretiveness didn't feel good, however, and she was terrified of being found out.

"You're here now." Anna did her best to sound nonchalant. "Ten years isn't so long. It's good we're still friends. There's no point going over what happened in the past, right? Not when we're out here having a great time like this."

Hayley smiled, shyly. It was crazy seeing her like that. "That's true. You're right."

Anna picked up a marshmallow and ate it. "How about those roasted bananas then?"

Hayley nudged the banana-shaped tinfoil with their tongs. "Yes, ma'am. They should be about ready."

Eight

November 2012

Anna carefully placed twenty-two candles around the chocolate cake she'd spent the morning baking. The smell of chocolate filled the kitchen. This was the first time Anna had baked in this kitchen. She'd gone out to the store to get the cake tin and the baking utensils especially. To finish, she'd lavished a thick layer of chocolate icing on top because why not? She held a flame to each candle, hoping that Hayley would like the cake, hoping that Hayley would have a nice birthday even though she was far away from her home and struggling a bit today.

Everyone was in Hayley's room hanging out. She couldn't wait to get back in there. Anna picked up the heavy cake and waddled through the flat with the flames flickering as she went and butterflies in her stomach for some reason.

"Happy birthday"—Anna sang as she entered Hayley's room, with Rose and Lauren immediately joining in—"to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear homesick-but-totally-loved-here-as-well Hayley, happy birthday to you."

Standing up, Hayley beamed at Anna holding the cake. Her smile was so wide. So beautiful.

"Hip-hip hooray! Hip-hip hooray!" Rose and Lauren cheered, and Anna joined in.

"Thanks so much, you guys. Anna, this cake is so sweet of you. Oh my god."

"Happy birthday, Hayley," Anna said. "I hope you like it."

"Look at that chocolate icing!" Rose said, practically salivating.

"She's never baked either of us a cake before," Lauren said. "It looks so good."

It was true. Anna had been friends with Rose and Lauren for two years, and they had lived together for one year, and

had never baked either of them anything.

“It does. I feel very privileged,” Hayley said, locking eyes with Anna.

Looking into Hayley’s eyes made Anna feel things she’d never felt before. Their eye contact often got so intense Anna had to look away. She wasn’t sure what it was, but she didn’t not like it. “Right. Come on.” Anna shook her head. “You’d better blow out the candles and make a wish.” Anna placed the cake on Hayley’s desk next to her birthday cards and the bottle of prosecco.

“So bossy,” Hayley said. “Yes, ma’am.”

Anna pretended she hadn’t heard that. Hayley was so flirty. It was hard to know when she was being serious and when she was just playing around. She wasn’t flirting with Anna. She was just a very charming person. She had a way with people. That was all.

Hayley bent over and blew out the candles with one sweeping breath. Her cheeks looked great as she did so. God, Anna shouldn’t have been thinking that.

Lauren handed Hayley the knife. “Make sure you have the first slice or your wish won’t come true.”

Rose laid out the plates and Lauren poured the prosecco.

Hayley cut generous slices of cake. “You guys really are the sweetest. I’m so glad I forced Anna to let me live here whether she liked it or not.”

Rose and Lauren shared a quick look. They had teased Anna constantly about it. Anna knew full well how rash a decision it was, and she never made rash decisions. There was just something about Hayley.

“It was love at first sight,” Rose said. “Isn’t that right, Anna?”

Anna rolled her eyes. She wasn’t getting drawn into this again. “It all worked out for the best, didn’t it?” They had all made friends with Hayley and were their own little group on top of being flatmates, and it was awesome. Anna and Hayley

had become particularly close, and it had happened very fast. She already considered Hayley as one of her closest friends. If not her best friend. It was crazy.

“It absolutely fucking did! I love you guys!” Hayley said, handing a slice of cake to Rose.

“And we love you,” Lauren said. “Now give me a bit of that cake already.”

Anna was glad for the change of subject. They sat on cushions on Hayley’s bedroom floor and devoured the cake and the prosecco.

“This is so delicious,” Hayley said. “Anna, you are killing me. I can’t stop eating it.”

“Then don’t stop. It’s your birthday, you can do whatever you want.”

“You’re right. See. This is why I love you. You are one hundred percent on my wavelength.”

“You do seem to love each other.” Rose giggled. “I’m glad you’re finally admitting it.”

Anna shot Rose a look. Would she ever let up with that stuff?

Hayley tilted her head at Rose, with a funny look on her face. Was she annoyed or was she thinking about it? What was she thinking about?

“Leave them alone, Rose,” Lauren said, between her mouthful of cake. “Just because you are girl-crushing on Jennifer Lawrence doesn’t mean everyone else is a lesbian.”

“Pfft. I think all women are a little bit gay,” Rose said.

After the cake had been eaten, Hayley prodded her presents. “Ah, so beautifully wrapped! I’m gonna open this one, from you, Anna.”

Anna nodded.

Hayley ripped open the present like a wild animal devouring its prey.

“Oh my god, I love it!” Hayley pulled out a gold and maroon tartan blanket. She ran it through her fingers and wrapped it around her shoulders, hugging it into her.

“I know how cold you get here. I thought it might help keep you warm.”

Hayley found her eyes. “It will. I already love it so much. Thank you.”

“Fucking hell, you two.” Rose shook her head, smiling.

Anna glared at Rose.

Present day

“I cannot believe you talked me into doing this,” Anna said.

“If you really don’t want to, now is the time to back out,” Hayley said, in her hard hat and safety harness.

“No.” Anna clenched her fists. “I said I would do it and I will. I need to conquer this fear of heights. I need to push myself outside of my comfort zone sometimes. But I will blame you for suggesting we do this.”

Hayley held up her hands in surrender. “Okay. You’re the boss. It’s your call.”

Anna checked her harness one last time. It was already on as tight as it could go. She looked up at the trees and the obstacle courses stretching between them. They were at an outdoor adventure park built into the forest, along with about a dozen children. The things she was willing to do for Hayley still blew Anna’s mind. “I’m good.”

Hayley smiled, reassuringly.

The young instructor led them through the safety demonstration. Anna hung off his every word. Hayley stood casually with her hands in her shorts’ pockets. Half of the children didn’t appear to be listening, eager to get up there, full of confidence. Anna had been the same when she was their age.

“Does anyone have any questions?”

Anna put her hand up.

“Yep. The lady in the yellow t-shirt.”

“What happens if you’re out there and realise you don’t want to go any further?”

“There are safety exits at each check point platform. There are six check points on the course so if you want to stop you have to go to one of these exits. Just follow the stairs down and the signposted path back to here.”

“Only losers quit.” A young boy sniggered.

His friend beside him, who must have been no more than thirteen, laughed in Anna’s direction. “She’s scared.”

Anna tried to ignore them.

“Also, if anyone runs into any difficulties one of our team will come out and assist you and lead you to the nearest exit. We’ll be keeping a close eye on you all.”

Anna nodded. None of that sounded remotely reassuring somehow.

“You will be fine,” Hayley said. She gave Anna’s shoulder a quick squeeze. “I’ll be right there with you. We’ll do this together, okay?”

“Okay. As long as you don’t go off and leave me. I’ll be slow.”

“I won’t leave you.”

Anna was grateful for those words and wished they were true in the real sense of them. What the fuck was she doing thinking like that right now? Or ever. “Thanks, Hayley. Do you mind if we go at the back, so we don’t hold anyone up? These kids look vicious.”

“Not at all. I’ll kick their asses for you if they make any more comments.”

Anna laughed. “My hero.”

Just climbing up the steps to the start of the course was scary. Her heart was thumping and adrenaline was coursing

through her veins. She gripped onto the safety ropes as if her life depended on it because it did.

“You’re fully clipped in. Totally safe,” Hayley said, coming up behind her and resting her hand on the small of her back.

“I don’t feel it, but thanks.” Anna gave Hayley a big smile. She wasn’t feeling that either but wanted Hayley to have a good time. She was being so patient and supportive, after all.

“You’re already doing great.”

Anna turned away and faced the zip line towards the next tree. Nerves made her legs feel weak. She did not dare look down. Child after child zipped along it, seemingly without a care in the world. She could do this, couldn’t she? After what seemed like an eternity but was probably no more than a few minutes, she went for it, moving forward off the platform and flying through the air towards the next tree. When her feet made contact with the platform, she scrambled to get on it, then hugged the tree.

What the hell had she got herself into?

Hayley gave her an enthusiastic double thumbs up and a huge smile from across the way. It was so sweet. Anna smiled back. She loved it when Hayley encouraged her like this and coaxed her outside of her comfort zone, giving her courage. Anna had not been going above her nerve in her life as much in recent years.

Hayley flew towards her, at speed, smiling and kicking her legs as she went. On the platform she held up her hand in the air and they high-fived. “Rock on, dude!”

“Yes. Quite.”

“How did you find it?” Hayley was buzzing.

Anna nodded once. Her jaw and neck felt super tense. She was doing this. “Not too bad.” She gripped the rope by her head for the next challenge. “But maybe ask me up there?” She looked up towards the top part of the course, nearly triple their current height. Her tummy fluttered at the thought of it.

Hayley reached out for Anna's other hand and held it. Her fingers entwined with hers sending sparks all the way along Anna's arm.

"You're going to be fine."

The feeling of Hayley's hand holding hers started to make Anna's legs feel weak for another reason. It was the longest physical contact they'd had since Hayley had got back. Her head started to feel a bit fuzzy. Hayley squeezed Anna's hand harder. The weight of it in hers was so heavy and full. Alive. Pulsating. Debilitating. Being this close to Hayley was proving exceedingly difficult, both on this assault course and during the whole trip. Anna was so sexually attracted to her it was ridiculous. Her head swirled. She had to get down from here. And soon.

"I'm so impressed that you are doing this. It's really something to see you feel the fear and do it anyway. You've got this."

"I've been overtaken and shamed by a bunch of kids. But thank you for the vote of confidence. It may not sound like it right now, but I do appreciate it."

"Do I need to squeeze you?"

Anna laughed. "What?"

"If you freak out, I hug-squeeze you. Remember? It calms you down."

"Oh." Anna remembered the times when Hayley would hug her so tight because it 'helped'. She'd liked it for that, but also, in another way too. "Er, let's see how I get on."

"Your call."

Anna got going on the next obstacle, walking across grid-like rope towards the next tree. Despite walking like a gangly giraffe falling in and out of the squares, this one wasn't so bad. She liked having her hands and feet on the net at all times to protect her from falling to her peril.

"See. You're killing it!" Hayley called from behind her.

Anna got to the next platform and turned back to face an eager Hayley. “Your turn.”

Hayley moved at pace, making it look easy. Her arm muscles strained as she gripped each rope and concentrated on what she was going. Anna swallowed, feeling hot and bothered by the sight.

“I’m loving this!” Hayley said when she finished her stretch and joined Anna on the platform. “You okay to continue?”

“Yep.”

Slowly, they made their way through the course and upwards towards the highest level. It was like a workout. Anna fought through her nerves and fear of heights until they got to the highest point with the longest zip line. It was the last obstacle to finish the course. All the children had already finished. There was a group of them at the last checkpoint talking with the instructor. It was just her and Hayley left on the course.

Anna looked down. The line extended across a small river. It was dangerously high. Her pulse shot up. Another flood of adrenaline swept through her body. She sat down on the base of the platform, and gripped onto the wooden slats, not wanting to let go. How was she going to get down from here? There was no way other than across that river. A tsunami of stress hormones hit all at once, paralysing her with fear.

“Hey. What’s wrong.” Hayley joined her on the platform, her face falling in concern.

Anna shook her head.

It was all she could muster.

“You were doing so well. What’s this?”

“I don’t know. I looked down.”

Hayley peered out towards the end of the course. “It just looks higher because the river is downhill. There’s no difference in height to what you were just doing. Technically.”

“It’s like the Grand bloody Canyon.”

Hayley grimaced.

“I can’t move.”

“Here.” Hayley knelt behind her, knees either side of Anna’s hips.

“What are you doing?” Was that safe? For the highest platform there was even less space. Design flaw if she ever saw one.

“I’m gonna squeeze you.”

Anna didn’t know if she could deal with the double whammy of a Hayley hug and this nightmare. She might never get off this platform. “No. I don’t need that. Thanks.”

“Anna.” Hayley inched forward towards her back, her breath close to Anna’s ear. “Let me help you.”

The proximity did things to Anna. Hayley was right behind her. Her breathing was steady. Wisps of her hair came flying onto Anna in the breeze. It took her mind off the ghastly assault course, at least. She hadn’t expected that. Maybe it would help? She didn’t have many options here. “Okay.”

Hayley leant towards her, her harness meeting the back of Anna’s, and wrapped her arms around her. She squeezed right in the middle of Anna’s chest, exerting more force than Anna thought necessary, but it helped calm her breathing after a while. Her heart rate calmed down. It was working. Hayley rested her head on Anna’s shoulder and let up on the squeeze slightly, still holding her. Anna let herself sink back into the embrace, wishing there was no safety equipment between them. Nothing at all, really.

“How do you feel now?”

“Calmer.”

“You’ve got this, Anna,” Hayley spoke softly. “You can do it. You’ve been flying through these trees this whole time. There’s nothing different about this last one. And then it’ll be over, and you’ll have conquered it, and we’ll go have a beer to celebrate.”

Anna turned her head towards Hayley over her shoulder. They held each other's eyes for a few seconds. Anna glanced down at Hayley's mouth. Hayley's lips were right there. It would be so easy to lean forward. Hayley's eyes dropped to Anna's lips. Anna lost all sense of where she was. She turned her head away. She had to get off this platform.

Hayley backed away from her and stood up.

Anna found her legs and joined her. She did not meet her eyes and she did not look down.

"Are you ready?"

"I think so."

Anna clipped in and checked the lock and her harness half a dozen times.

With her usual steadiness, Hayley also checked Anna was in securely. "All good."

Anna took a deep breath, hands firmly holding her rope. She was still nervous, but there was a steely resolve to get moving and get this over with. The fact that she'd nearly completed this course was a small miracle in and of itself. "Here goes."

"See you on the other side."

"And Hayley?"

"Yeah?"

Anna found her eyes. "Thanks."

Hayley patted the small of Anna's back. "Any time."

Anna smiled and looked forward, pushing herself off the platform with a small run and jump. As she flew through the air, driving towards the end, she looked straight ahead. The rope whizzed above her. When the zip line hit the block to signal completion, she found the platform and turned around to see Hayley jumping up and punching the air. Anna waved, elated it was all over and proud of herself for accomplishing this. She still didn't look down.

Hayley threw herself off the platform with abandon, shouting excitedly on her way across. Her smile, her enthusiasm, her calming support, she was magnificent. Anna couldn't take her eyes off her flying friend. What was that moment on the platform? Were they nearly about to kiss? Did that just happen or was Anna delirious from the stress of this?

On the new platform Hayley jumped up and down and hugged her and kept saying how dope this was or something. "Are you okay now?" Hayley said.

"Yep, I'm fine. Glad it's over."

"You went so pale at that last section. Don't think I've ever seen you look so terrified."

"I may not have been."

"It's exhilarating though, right?" Hayley said. "Doing stuff like this."

Anna looked back towards the last platform and the massive river she'd shot across, finally letting herself look down. She shuddered. "We survived. I'm happy with that."

"It was fun."

"One way to describe it."

Hayley tilted her head, as if disappointed.

Anna touched Hayley's arm, not wanting to see her look deflated in any way. "Yes, it was fun. I'll give you that."

Hayley beamed.

It was lovely to see.

Back at the start of the course, there was a real feeling of achievement and post-experience endorphins. A few kids lingered with their families, all rosy cheeks and smiling. The parents looked so proud. Anna took off her harness and threw on her hoody. It felt so good to be back on solid ground in comfortable clothing. Despite how difficult it had been, she was glad she'd completed the course. She felt ever so slightly more confident about herself. And she had Hayley to thank for that.

Hayley handed their stuff back to the instructor and had a brief conversation with him, just out of earshot. Hayley laughed at something he said and did that thing she did when she was talking to new people. The eyes, the charm, the complete focus, making you feel like you are the luckiest person in the world for getting to talk to her. Admiring Hayley from afar was a familiar feeling to Anna. There had been so many times when Anna would stare at Hayley across a room as if only Hayley existed. Ugh, she was doing it again.

Hayley walked back over to where Anna was, like an angel sent from heaven. She had a healthy glow and such an easy and light-hearted aura. The way she'd calmed Anna down when she was freaking out reminded her of that thing they shared that she'd always found so hard to articulate. They just clicked. Hayley was still that person who could breathe confidence into Anna, lift her up and make her feel motivated and like she could do anything. Anna swallowed, in awe of her friend and the effect she still had on her.

“Beer?” Hayley said.

“That’s an easy yes from me for the first time today.”

They found a table in the beer garden of a pub in the nearest village, a five-minute walk from the campsite. The sun was shining and it felt good to be alive. Zip lining through trees and fearing for your life had some upsides, apparently. Across the way was a small café and a local shop. The village was pretty with well-maintained grounds set among rolling hills. The gothic buildings were magical, lit up in the sunshine. Their pints of beer glistened in the sun.

Hayley was taking it all in as well. “Cute place.”

“It’s quite the tourist spot.”

“Shall we have dinner here?”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

“We deserve it after so many tins of soup and packets of noodles lately.”

Anna laughed. “And after flying through trees and across canyons at speed.”

“True! Hey, let’s go out for a fancy dinner soon too. My treat.”

“That’s a nice idea. I’m in. We’ll go halvers though.”

“Okay. So, how do you feel?” Hayley took a sip of beer, watching Anna closely. Her eyes bright in the sunshine.

Anna smiled. “I feel good. How do you feel?”

“I feel amazing. I’m having such a great time.”

“Highlight of the trip so far?”

“It’s got to be today. You knew I was going to say that, though, didn’t you?”

“I had an idea.”

“And yours?”

Nearly kissing on the platform of death sprung to mind first, but that wasn’t supposed to be in her head. Seeing how capable Hayley was and what an even more awesome person she had grown into also sprung to mind, but that wasn’t supposed to be in it, either. Or listening to Hayley’s soft breathing as she slept beside her, or seeing her wake up in the morning and mumble something to Anna before her eyes were fully open. She wanted to say these things and more but couldn’t. Spending so much time in each other’s pockets would have been like a dream come true in the past. It felt a bit that way, now. This crush on her friend was well and truly still there, it appeared. Only this time it felt like it was growing into something stronger. She had to get a grip of herself, and fast, before this all ended in tears. She sighed. “The castle.”

“The castle? Really? Why?”

“I like history. It was impressive.”

“Oh.”

“Hearing your take on things was also pretty interesting.”

“Huh?”

“Questioning everything. I liked that.”

“Cool.”

Anna wondered what other adventure type activities Hayley was going to get her to do on this trip, but this time, she wasn't dreading it or annoyed by it. “Those kids thought I was useless. They kept glancing back at us and sniggering. But you know what, I didn't care.”

“Good for you.” Hayley took another drink of beer. “I wonder why more of the parents didn't do the course.”

“Probably just glad of five minutes to themselves.”

“No way. I'm going to do stuff with my children. Be the active mum they can't get rid of.”

“Sorry?” Anna said, perplexed. “You want kids?”

“Yes.” Hayley nodded. “Not right now but definitely in the future, yes.”

“Really?” Anna studied Hayley across the wooden table from her. She was stunned.

“What?” Hayley asked. “You seem shocked by this.”

“Sorry. I didn't know.” Anna was pretty sure Hayley had said she didn't think she would ever want children.

“With the right person, if I was lucky enough, I would love to start a family and raise children. I think it would be very rewarding.”

Children, plural. Anna couldn't believe it. She was gobsmacked. “So you think you will want to settle down one day with a partner and children?”

“What do you mean by settle?”

Anna pulled her head back, confused. Putting a child's needs first was not something Anna thought Hayley would want. The complete change in lifestyle and the domesticity of it all didn't fit Hayley's love of glamorous city living or her desire for travel. Hayley had too many ideas about things she wanted to do and places she wanted to go. She wanted freedom above all else, didn't she?

“Uh. Staying in one place. Getting them ready for school in the morning. Making lunches, cleaning up after them. Football training, piano lessons. Going to their friends’ birthday parties all the time. All that stuff you’d have to do when you have children, you know.”

“I want to do all of those things. I want a family. I want to be a parent. Well, apart from the cleaning up part. Who wants that, right? But I don’t think of it like one long chore. I don’t think it will be like that. I want to spend time with my children while they’re young and take them travelling with me, for example. I had a great childhood so the thought of getting to experience all that again appeals to me. Kids want to play and explore. I want to play and explore.” Hayley stopped and took a breath. “Look. I’m not saying I think it’d be all swing parks and lattes. My needs would have to take a back seat. I get that. It’s a huge responsibility and I know it’s about raising tiny humans to become healthy adults.” She shrugged. “The ultimate job, you might say.”

“Whoa.”

“You didn’t expect me to want kids?”

“No. Um. I mean, ages ago, you said you didn’t want them.”

“I was twenty-two. I’ve changed my mind.”

Anna nodded.

“I want a lot of different things now than when I was in my early twenties.”

Being attracted to women sprung to Anna’s mind first. Fuck, that was so exciting to think about, but Anna couldn’t let herself go there. The new information that Hayley would one day want children shook her perception of Hayley to the core in a massively good way. Anna could identify with that desire to start a family as well. It was what she’d always wanted. “That makes sense.”

“And I want to be deeply in love with the person I choose to have kids with. It has to be with someone I can depend on to navigate this messy world with, someone who wants to live a

full life, someone who has the guts to create the life that they want.”

Anna absorbed Hayley’s comments and tried to process. The way Hayley spoke of her ideal family life stirred something inside Anna. It sounded expansive and fulfilling. Creative, almost. Again, exciting. Even if it was the same as everybody else on the outside, with Hayley it would be exciting because everything that Hayley did somehow became larger than life.

Hayley smiled, her usual spirit returning to her eyes. “A new adventure of its own, if you will.”

“I like the way you describe it.”

“Describe what?”

“Family. The future, I guess.”

“The future.” Hayley turned away from Anna and straddled the bench. She finished her beer, as if lost in thought. “Would you like another one?”

“Please.”

Hayley walked back towards the pub, taking their empty glasses with her. Anna watched her glide through the tables across the lawn. What else was she going to discover about Hayley on this trip?

Nine

January 2013

“Come on, *come on!* Get your ass up here!” A dancing Hayley pleaded and beckoned for her to join her up on the table.

“I’m not standing on that table, and you shouldn’t either. You’re drunk.”

“I’m not that drunk.”

The pub was packed. It was the early hours of the new year. There were people everywhere, dancing, drinking, sitting, standing, and falling over. Their friends were somewhere else in the pub, but where, Anna couldn’t be sure. She and Hayley were at a table by the window with an excellent view of the Edinburgh streets outside, also full of drunk people bringing in the new year. A new song came on, which delighted Hayley a lot given her cheers and hands in the air.

“This one’s my favourite!”

“I thought the last one was your favourite?”

“Get up here, hot stuff.”

Anna raised her eyebrows. Hayley always got extra flirty when she’d had a drink. Anna wasn’t complaining, though, and she wasn’t exactly sober herself. “If you insist.”

“Woohoo!” Hayley cheered. “Finally.” She smiled, still rolling her hips and dancing like a hot-as-fuck popstar.

While part of Anna was sceptical, she couldn’t take her eyes off Hayley, and she could never resist her charms. The way Hayley moved had her mesmerised. Before she knew it, she was stepping onto a chair and onto the chunky wooden table that had probably seen it all before. Anna held onto Hayley’s waist for a few moments until she found her bearings. It was so high.

“Bust me those moves, Anna.”

Anna copied Hayley's totally uninhibited dancing, shaking her ass like no one was watching, because they weren't; everyone else was dancing and too drunk to remember any of this. Anna already knew she would never forget this moment though. Hayley was so exciting. This was so exciting. She smiled. "Yes, ma'am."

Present day

"I'll have the crab salad to start, followed by the lobster, please," Hayley said. "And a side portion of steamed vegetables."

"I'll have the soup and the salmon, please, and a side of triple-roasted chips. Thanks."

With one hand elegantly behind his back, the waiter took their menus and left. It was all very civilised. A lot had changed since their partying days. They were in a much sought-after seafood restaurant on the coast. The candle on the table flickered between them, casting soft rays of light onto Hayley. She looked so beautiful tonight in her braless black dress. The only dress she had with her, apparently. It stirred something deep within Anna.

Try as she might, Anna still couldn't get over the fact that Hayley had wanted Anna to come with her on her trip. It was such a compliment and made her feel so good. Having Hayley all to herself and doing so many activities together was simply wonderful. They'd been canoeing down rivers, hiking all over the mountains, and even cruising around Loch Ness on a speedboat. Anna was having so much fun. Everything about this trip was like a dream come true. Anna wanted to savour every second and for it never to come to an end. But she wasn't going to think that far ahead just yet.

"So, tell me about this ideal wife of yours." Hayley sipped her wine, eyeing her from behind her glass for a second. "What are you looking for? What will she be like?"

Anna looked up, startled away from her thoughts. She furrowed her brow. Why was Hayley asking her that? "Er,

well, I don't know. I haven't met her yet."

"Yes, but don't you have an idea of what you want? You seem dead set on your future path, you made it sound like it was something you'd thought a lot about."

"I don't know."

"You don't know what you want in a woman? I can't believe we've never had this conversation before."

"It's not that I don't know what I want in a woman. It's just that I haven't like sat down and made a list of all the qualities I want in my future wife, in my ideal partner."

"You haven't?"

"No."

"Now there's a list I thought you would have made."

"Have you?"

"Yeah."

"A list I wouldn't have thought you would have made."

"I guess we keep surprising each other, huh?"

"What's on your list?"

"I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours." Hayley smirked.

Anna squirmed in her seat. "I don't have one, remember?"

"Anna, you gotta give me something. You must have an idea of who this woman is."

Anna blew out a breath. Why did Hayley want to know this so badly? "Okay. I want someone who is warm and kind. Clever, confident, emotionally stable. She's got to have her shit together. Fun to be around but knows when to give me my space. Active. Ideally a runner, like me, or just into being active in some way. Outgoing." Anna froze. Fuck. Had she just described Hayley?

"And you said you don't have a list."

"I don't. These are just general things."

"So tell me the specifics."

Anna's cheeks grew hot. She really had to get a grip on that. For some reason it felt wrong to talk to Hayley about this. But as friends, it shouldn't have.

"What do you want her to look like?"

"Hmm. That doesn't matter to me. But, you know, attractive, obviously."

"So she's got to be hot."

Anna laughed. "I didn't say that. Looks aren't everything."

Hayley smiled. "I know. I'm just teasing you."

That Anna had pretty much described Hayley was embarrassing. Hayley wasn't acting like she took it that way, but how would it have come across? Was Hayley her ideal woman? Her ideal wife? After all this time, could it still be her first love?

No way.

Hayley leant forward, putting her elbows on the table. The plunge line in her dress teased Anna's peripheral vision, but she did not dare let her eyes drop to those delicious breasts.

"Do you have to have the same political views or not?"

"Oh yeah. That's a must. She has to be a lefty like me. And she has to be empathetic."

"And what about in the bedroom, does she have to be a top or a bottom, or does that not matter to you?"

Anna's mouth fell open. "What?!"

Hayley grinned. "You are so fun to tease."

"I can't believe you asked me that."

"I can't believe how shocked you are. I don't remember you being this prudish."

"We were younger then. Things were different."

"How so?"

Anna's heart beat harder. She couldn't formulate words. This was getting a little too close to home. "Anyway. Can we

talk about you now? What are you looking for in a partner?"

"A high sex drive."

"Hayley! Stop messing around. I told you mine. Spill." Anna waited with bated breath.

Hayley stopped grinning and her eyes turned more serious. She gazed into Anna's eyes and something passed between them. Anna's breath caught. What the fuck was that?

"I do have a list but I'm currently revising it."

"Cryptic."

Hayley laughed. "No, seriously. I'm attracted to people who are very loving and loyal. I want someone who is a bit more responsible than me because I can get too excited about things and go right off the deep end if left to my own devices. But they'd also need to be open-minded and love learning new things. Curious about the world. My biggest issue with relationships is this feeling of being trapped and losing myself. Of missing out and not growing."

"You want love but you don't want to be tied down."

"Um. No. More like I want to grow with someone, hopefully in the same direction."

"Isn't that the point?"

"Well, yeah. I think so."

Hayley must not have found the type of love she was describing yet. That made Anna sad, not only for Hayley's sake, but also that Hayley didn't see that potential in Anna. "I hope you find what you're looking for someday."

Hayley sipped her wine.

Anna scanned the room of other diners. Most of them looked like couples. Some were chatting away, others not saying much to each other.

"Do you think love should feel like hard work?" Hayley asked, head resting on the palm of her hand, elbow on the table. "Because on some level all of my relationships have felt that way. And that's for sure not what I'm looking for."

“I don’t think it should feel like hard work. No. It can be hard work. You do have to put in an effort, but no, it shouldn’t feel like a chore. Love should feel like the most comfortable thing you’ve ever experienced, and the most exciting. They’re contradictory things but having both is necessary, I think. Making your partner happy should make you happy. Because the relationship is the most special thing in the world to you both and you want to protect it at all costs. You want it to be something that’s like your safe place to fall, surely. The place you can come home to at the end of the day and just be yourself. And be loved for who you really are.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

“I know.”

“I want that.”

Anna continued, aware she was about to go off on a tangent. “I also think that love shows us the things inside of us that need to heal. It challenges us to grow in ways we never thought necessary until we met that person. We either learn the lesson, or we don’t, and we go on to repeat the same lesson again and again until we get it right.”

This conversation wasn’t easy for Anna. Hayley was her first love, and she was never going to tell her that. It was too tragic for words at this point. Anna swallowed, wondering what lesson she hadn’t learned yet from all those years ago.

Hayley broke the silence. “I like that. I’m going to think about that some more.” Hayley held Anna’s gaze. The intensity of the connection was impossible to ignore. Why was she staring at her like that?

Their starters came. They leaned back from the table as the waiter put down their plates. They ate in a comfortable silence.

“Man, this is delicious.”

Anna sipped her soup. “Yeah, this is good too. Beats our campfire rustles.”

Hayley laughed, looking up. Her eyes were sparkling in the romantic lighting of the restaurant. “I like it when you rustle.

The baguette with baked beans the other day was a real eye-opener. You Scots have style.”

“Sheesh. You loved it.”

“There it is!” Hayley said. “Your real accent! I’ve been waiting for it to show up again.” She beamed. “Getting more comfortable around me or something?”

Anna scrunched up her forehead. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do.” Hayley smirked. “You’ve been doing it more and more lately.”

Anna shrugged. “Okay. Maybe there is a difference. But I haven’t consciously changed anything.”

“I think you’re getting more comfortable around me.”

“Stop listening so closely. It’ll make me self-conscious.”

“I think you love it when I listen to you.”

Anna froze.

Desserts followed their mains. The pleasurable noises Hayley made while starting her sticky toffee pudding reminded Anna of things she should one hundred percent not be thinking about. Anna ignored her urge to sit there and just watch Hayley eat by eating her cheesecake in silence.

“Sometimes happiness is food,” Hayley said, finishing her dessert. “Simple as that.”

After their meal, they stepped outside the restaurant. It was still light outside.

“Want to go to the viewpoint and watch the sun go down?” Hayley said.

Anna smiled. “That sounds fucking perfect.”

Anna drove them through the winding hills. The break in the trees as the view opened up over the mountains across to the north-west islands was breathtaking. There was no one else in the small car park. It felt isolated and calm. It was just what Anna wanted right now.

Hayley sighed, wistfully. “This is so beautiful.”

Anna switched the engine off. The campervan fell silent. Anna took a long and slow breath, feeling so relaxed. She couldn’t get to this level of chill on her own and so regularly, but being with Hayley on this trip, Anna was able to wind down. She wasn’t so highly strung. She liked how she felt around Hayley even if it was interspersed with near death experiences hanging over ravines of rapids on fragile zip wires.

Hayley turned her head towards Anna. “Wanna camp out here tonight?”

“Here?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“That’s wild camping. I don’t think you’re allowed.”

“There wasn’t a sign. It’s only for one night. We can leave early and go back to the campsite.”

“Won’t they wonder where we are?”

“I don’t think they’ll notice.”

Anna thought about it. They were in the middle of nature with views to die for. It was pure peace and freedom.

Hayley’s voice was soft and low. “We did say wild camping would be an option, and we haven’t done it yet. I think this is a good spot. We’ve turned up late, so no one will know we’re here. It’s secluded, yet has these amazing views—”

“Yes.”

“You want to?”

“Yep. It might get a bit cold in the campervan without any heating though. Will you be okay with that?”

“I’ll be fine. I’m getting used to the cold.”

“Great.”

They sat in silence for a while after that, just watching the sun go down. The golden sky turned to red and eventually to an indigo. Anna appreciated these moments where she and

Hayley could be quiet together. It was one of her favourite things about Hayley all those years ago, even if it didn't happen that often.

"I think I'm going to go to bed," Hayley said, after a while, as darkness descended upon the van.

"Me too."

"Thank god the van has everything we need."

"Yep. It's so glamorous. I'll wait for you to get ready in here."

"It's fine. We've been sharing a tiny space for weeks now. It's too difficult all this dancing around each other, and there's no space to go anywhere else so don't be silly. Come on."

Reluctantly, Anna followed Hayley back into the main compartment of the van. She'd been avoiding being in here with Hayley as much as possible, especially for changing.

Anna got ready for bed at lightning speed while Hayley used the facilities. A quick glance at the thermometer said it was eight degrees Celsius. Very cold.

"Wow, that was quick," Hayley said, emerging from the tiny compartment after a few minutes.

"It's too cold to hang about." In truth, Anna just didn't want Hayley to see her change. She was feeling too vulnerable and in her feelings for that.

"True."

They swapped places. When Anna came out, Hayley had her back to her, naked from the waist up, throwing on a long-sleeved top.

Anna got into bed and straight into her sleeping bag. Her neck and jaw felt tense from the cold. The bed itself was cold, too, offering little relief.

Hayley quickly massaged some cream onto her hands and face, hopping from one foot to the other.

Anna had forgot about that. "Can you pass me my moisturiser, please?"

“Sure.” Hayley handed it to her.

Anna sat up to use it then put it on a shelf by the bed.

Hayley came to bed. Anna was by the wall. They’d been switching sides randomly so far, depending on who was last to bed. Staking claim on preferred sides felt a bit weird, somehow. It was too much like a couple, and they obviously weren’t that.

Hayley got into her sleeping bag. “It’s freezing.” She zipped it up around her and lay down, pulling the duvet and blanket over her and spreading the other half onto Anna.

“I know. Thanks.”

Hayley switched off the light, putting them in complete darkness.

Anna couldn’t get warm.

“I didn’t realise it would be this cold,” Hayley said. “I’m not warming up and this damned coffin bag is no use.”

“You don’t like your sleeping bag?”

“It’s too small. It boxes me in. I like to stretch out when I’m sleeping.”

Of course she did. “You never mentioned.”

“I was trying to put up with it. I’m in my travel era.”

Anna laughed, gently. “I see.”

“What?” Hayley turned towards her.

Anna could feel her stare. “Nothing.”

Hayley shifted around and fidgeted inside her sleeping bag more dramatically than usual. It made sense now why she kept tutting under her breath when she came to bed every night.

“Are you warming up yet?” Anna asked.

“No.”

“Me neither.” Anna considered getting up and putting more clothes on and perhaps even checking the temperature again.

Hayley cleared her throat. “What if we zipped the sleeping bags together and huddled up? Used each other for heat?”

Anna froze, excited and terrified all at once. Was that a good idea? What if she couldn’t fall asleep because of it? What if she liked it?

“No worries if not,” Hayley spoke softly.

Anna was still unusually tense given that she was in bed, and not just from the cold. Part of her knew it wasn’t a great idea to get so close but another part of her desperately wanted to, and to get warm. “Sure.”

“Oh. I thought you didn’t want to.”

“No, no. I do. It’s cold. We’ll heat each other up.” Anna’s voice sounded out into the darkness. Hopefully her emotion didn’t creep into her voice too much. They used to do this all the time. It had been torture then and it would be torture now.

Hayley was quiet for a few moments. “Okay, great.”

They each unzipped their sleeping bags in the darkness. Hayley switched on the light as Anna found all the zips, lined them up and zipped them together. They bumped into one another three times as they rearranged everything together. Anna’s whole body buzzed with electricity.

Hayley was the first to settle. “Can I big spoon you?”

“Yeah.” Anna turned around to face the wall as her heart rate picked up.

Get a grip.

Hayley shuffled over to her, slowly, stopping when her body lightly pressed against the back of Anna’s. She placed one arm over Anna’s waist and rested her head right behind Anna’s. She was very close. “Is this okay?”

“Uh-huh,” Anna murmured.

“We’ll heat up in no time,” Hayley whispered.

“Yeah.”

Anna listened to the sound of Hayley's breathing. It was deep and slow. Tranquil. Anna felt anything but. A wave of emotion took over, and the years between them collapsed into this moment. It was as if no time had elapsed. She held her breath. It was overwhelming. She swallowed, hard, and took a deep breath, finally.

"Aren't you comfortable?" Hayley said.

"I am. Are you?"

"Very."

Anna could either waste this moment on old feelings or be present. She chose the latter. Her muscles relaxed and she sank into the hug. After a while, she did begin to get warmer. It felt so good. So comforting. So right. She could fall asleep like this. Her eyelids felt droopy. Hayley fell asleep quickly, her breathing going even slower and deeper. Feeling cradled and safe, Anna wondered why this felt so much like coming home, before drifting off to sleep.

Ten

December 2012

The library was silent bar the gentle hum of the overhead lights. Anna and Hayley sat across from each other at an oversized table. Books and papers were scattered all over their respective sides. End of term exams were in two days. But Anna couldn't concentrate.

Hayley highlighted something in her textbook. She gently tapped her pen against her lower lip. Her long hair fell over her face every time she bent forward to write something. She was wearing a comfortable sweater and a chiffon scarf. She had this serious and highly focused look about her. Hayley was normally so light-hearted and fun. It was nice to see this side of her. Anna liked it. Watching Hayley study was now one of her favourite pastimes. How *could* Anna concentrate?

Hayley tucked her hair behind her ear. She retrieved a hair bobble from her wrist and threw her hair up into a messy bun. God, she even made that look sexy. How did she even do that?

Hayley's lips parted then closed. Her mouth was like the most interesting thing that Anna had ever seen. There was something about the way her lips moved. The shape of them. Their fullness. They had this appealing quality that Anna just couldn't put her finger on. Since they'd shared a bottle of whisky a couple of weeks ago, it was all Anna had been thinking about. Hayley's lips made her think about kissing. But she had never kissed lips that looked as delicious as that before. Lips that made her feel things in places she probably shouldn't have been feeling them in. Lips that gave her feelings that no boy had ever induced.

The crazy thing was, it wasn't just Hayley's lips or her gorgeous face and her beautiful body that had Anna transfixed. The bond they shared went so deep. She had never felt this connected to someone. They talked about everything. They knew practically everything there was to know about each other, yet there always seemed to be more to learn. Anna

savoured every second of the time they shared together. She craved it and she clung to it like her life depended on it.

Thinking about Hayley, hanging out with Hayley, watching Hayley, even dreaming about her had become her whole life. And those dreams were unsettlingly intimate in nature. Sometimes she lingered there during the day, thinking back to her dreams of them being together. Doing things.

Anna froze, staring at Hayley while she flipped through the pages of a textbook. Anna put her hand over her mouth. This was a crush. But like the most intense crush she'd ever had. She had a crush. On Hayley.

Present day

Anna carefully placed two more logs on the firepit and watched as the sparks took flame and flew up into the air above the logs. She sat back on her camp chair beside the firepit and the campervan all snugly parked up in its spot and turned her attention back to the ocean and the setting sun. It was so peaceful to be here in a place like this, so special.

“Can you believe we’re really here?” Hayley said, sitting next to Anna in her own camping chair.

“Yep. Took us long enough.” They were staying on a small campsite on the bay of a gorgeous white sandy beach on the Isle of Lewis. It was amazing to be this off grid. They had taken the ferry and the small and very winding roads to find this place. Getting to mainland Europe would probably have been quicker. It was worth it though. They now had paddleboards and wetsuits and were going to stay there for about a week, hanging out by the water and sitting by the campfire.

“It’s so quiet.” Hayley took a sip of whisky. “Possibly even too quiet. I’ve never been in a place like this before. It’s so remote.”

“I thought you wanted this? To get away from it all and be at one with your own thoughts and all that. Commune with nature.”

“Yeah. About that.”

“Yes?”

“It turns out I don’t have as many thoughts as I thought I might have.”

Anna laughed.

“What?” Hayley smiled. “Don’t mock me.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

“I’m not. Aren’t you having a good time?”

“I am! Everything’s great. It’s just that sometimes I want a bit of fun-fun, you know. Something exciting. And by sometimes I mean all the time.”

“You’ve got books. And your phone.”

“Yes but the mobile coverage is patchy and I’ve run out of books to read.”

“Never.”

“We could entertain each other.”

“Aren’t we already?”

“Yes but I think we need something more. A game.”

“A game?”

“Yeah.” Hayley nodded. “You know what we should play right now?”

“No. What?”

“Truth or dare.”

“No way. We are not playing truth or dare. We’re not eighteen.”

“You loved that game when we were twenty-two.”

“Exactly.”

Hayley gave her the sad eyes. Anna’s resolve folded in an instant. She never could resist Hayley when she was like this.

And still couldn't, apparently. "Okay. One game, then I'm going to bed."

"Yes!"

Anna grimaced. What had she got herself into?

"The first one to forfeit has to do all the dishes for a week. This rule is binding."

"Ah, for goodness sake."

"Okay. I'll go first."

Anna rolled her eyes.

"Truth or dare?"

"Dare."

Hayley's eyes narrowed. "I dare you to down the rest of your whisky."

Anna scoffed. "That old chestnut."

"Do it. It'll warm you up."

Anna shook her head and threw back what must have been about a dram's worth. What a waste of good whisky.

"Woohoo!" Hayley clapped. "Now you go," Hayley said, leaning towards her, skin glowing in the light from the flames. Damn it, why was she so cute all the time?

"Okay. Would you like a truth or a dare?"

"Truth."

Anna raised an eyebrow. She thought Hayley was all about the dares tonight. "Right. Um." Anna couldn't think. "Do you really like British tea or are you just pretending?"

Hayley's mouth fell open as if seriously offended. "I can't believe you would even ask me that. Of course I like it. I love it!"

"Good. I've just always wondered."

Hayley narrowed her eyes again. "Truth or dare?"

"These are coming in thick and fast."

Hayley turned her palms up, as if waiting for Anna to reply.

“Truth.”

“What’s your favourite sexual position?”

“The fuck, Hayley? I’m not answering that.”

“You said you wanted a truth. This is truth or dare.”

Anna’s breath caught. What was she going to say? “Er…”

“Come on. We’ve not got all night. Oh wait, yes, we do! To be honest I would wait forever to find this out.”

“This is too difficult.”

“Why?”

“It’s too personal.”

“Is it?”

Anna sighed. She needed to stop being so awkward around her friend. It wasn’t Hayley’s fault Anna was crushing on her again. That spending so much time with Hayley again was bringing it all back, and then some. “Oral.”

Hayley exploded in laughter. This went on for some time. “You have a way with words, Anna,” Hayley said, almost crying with laughter.

“You know what I mean, don’t you?”

“Giving or receiving?”

“That’s another question. I already did my truth.”

Hayley held her hands up. “Okay. You’re right.”

“Truth or dare?”

Hayley turned to face Anna directly and sat upright. “Dare.”

Wanting the game to end, Anna decided to say something so outrageous that Hayley would be sure to forfeit. “I dare you to take your top and bra off and do five star-jumps while shouting ‘I’m so horny’ at the top of your lungs.”

Hayley looked shocked. She let out a nervous laugh. “Anna, that’s so out there! You mean jumping-jacks, right?”

“Yep.”

Hayley looked down for a few seconds, as if considering it.

Was she going to do it? She wouldn’t. It was ridiculous. But then again, this was Hayley. It was a possibility.

Hayley stood up and lifted off her hoody, taking her t-shirt off with it.

“No! I was kidding.” Anna jumped up as if to cover Hayley up. “That wasn’t a real dare.”

“Hey, it’s out there now, you said it, and I’m not forfeiting. Sit down.”

Anna blinked. This was crazy. She sat down, dumbfounded.

Hayley reached behind her back, unclipped her bra, and threw it on her chair. Hayley’s breasts were right there. Her nipples were dark and full. Anna swallowed, hard, unable to look away.

“What do I have to say again?” Hayley smirked, obviously loving this. “Oh yes.”

Anna’s jaw went slack as she stared at Hayley’s naked top half. She’d dreamt of this moment for so long. Now that it was here, it was surreal.

Hayley reached upwards with both arms. “Here goes.” She did a star-jump. Her breasts jiggled.

It was all Anna could look at.

“I’M. SO. HORNY,” Hayley shouted as she continued to jump, in between laughs.

Anna couldn’t laugh. She was turned on. Instead, she sat there quietly, taking Hayley’s performance of the dare deadly seriously.

Hayley stopped and threw her t-shirt and hoody back on but not her bra. “I did it! Brr, it’s so cold.” She sat back down, rubbing her arms.

Anna couldn't speak. A gentle throb between her legs was taking all of her attention.

"You okay there? You've gone very quiet?"

"You really went for it." Anna forced out a laugh to appear somewhat normal.

"I bet you didn't think I would actually do that."

"I didn't, no. But you do never cease to amaze me."

Hayley laughed, softly. She smiled, looking directly at Anna. There was something else in her eyes now. Anna couldn't work out what it was. "So," Hayley said, still smiling. "Truth or dare."

There was something in her voice that made Anna quiver. Anna was all over the place, so a truth could be potentially disastrous. And Hayley did say she wanted to have some fun, and so did Anna, when all was said and done. "A dare."

Hayley whistled. "A dare? That's very brave of you. Didn't think you would dare." Hayley laughed. "Pun intended."

"Oh god," Anna said. "What have I done?"

Hayley narrowed her eyes while looking right at Anna, as if plotting something particularly challenging.

"What is it? Just give me the damn dare."

"I dare you to give me a lap dance."

Anna stopped breathing.

"It has to be a real lap dance. You have to make me believe that you want me to watch you."

"You're going to grade me?" Anna exhaled. "Isn't me just doing the dare enough?"

"No."

"I see."

Hayley was downright smirking.

Anna shook her head, slowly registering the gauntlet that had been thrown down.

“Or washing dishes for one week?” Hayley said, innocently. “Which would you prefer?”

“I’ll put some music on.”

“Woohoo!”

Anna rose and turned the speaker on. She scrolled through her playlists to find some songs that might fit the mood. She chose a song that was out when they used to dance in clubs. She’d watched Hayley dancing to this song, while secretly lusting after her, so many times. Hayley probably wouldn’t remember but it meant a lot to Anna. How had she agreed to this? Perhaps the whisky and her current state of arousal were clouding her judgement, or maybe she just wanted to do it. She wanted Hayley to want her. She’d always wanted that. Hayley just never did.

Sexy music played on the speaker as Anna turned around to find Hayley watching her. She was sitting up squarely, with both feet on the ground, legs spread, taking up her space. For some reason, her position on the chair like that turned Anna on. It was like Hayley was expecting something. Anna swallowed, feeling butterflies in her stomach and tension in her neck and jaw.

Anna straightened, already wanting to dance to the music anyway. But if she was going to do this, she was going to do it right. A lap dance was no regular dance. It had to be seductive.

Did she have this in her?

Anna shook her ass, theatrically, and laughed, trying to break the tension. It didn’t really.

Hayley laughed, softly, and smiled.

Anna locked eyes with her and began swaying to the slow and deep beats. On one level, this was ridiculous. On another, she couldn’t wait to strut her stuff.

Hayley’s lips partly opened. Her eyes were kind and patient, which did nothing to dissipate Anna’s frustratingly long-lived attraction to her.

Anna let the tension fall from her body and suggestively ground her hips and shook her ass, channelling her inner stripper and rude boy all at once. She ran her hands up her sides and across her body, over her breasts and back down the centre of her chest. Anna put everything into it. She wanted to prove to Hayley she could do this, that she wanted her to watch.

Because she so did.

Hayley nodded her head to the music, her eyes trained on Anna and never leaving.

Anna danced to the side and squatted down with her legs open wide. She put her hands on her knees and shook her ass down low. She arched her back as she came back up, slowly, never dropping eye contact with her viewer. She tensed her abs while rocking her hips side to side and slid her hands down her crotch and back up again, feeling so powerful given how dark Hayley's eyes had gone.

Anna moved closer. Their legs brushed. Time was suspended as Anna danced for her. She forgot about the dare. This had taken on a whole new meaning. Anna wanted Hayley to love this. Was she?

She leaned over, her face right next to Hayley's, her breasts right in her face, and slowly unzipped her fleece. There was no skin to be revealed but the action of the slow unzipping seemed to be working. Hayley gasped, almost inaudibly. It was like the best thing she'd ever heard.

Anna stood back up. She turned around and danced slowly, aware her ass was right in front of Hayley's face. She couldn't believe they were doing this. But Anna was enjoying it so much.

She turned back around. Hayley's chest rose and fell as she took a deep breath. They locked eyes. A shot of adrenaline rushed through Anna.

Anna opened her legs, standing either side of Hayley's knees, taking over Hayley's personal space. Strippers got as close as this, didn't they? Seductively, she lowered herself,

holding eyes with Hayley the entire time, still softly grinding to the music, still touching her body, running her hands over herself, pinching and squeezing as if it was Hayley doing it to her instead.

Hayley's mouth was open and the skin between her eyes was furrowed. She shifted in her seat, as if wanting to get involved, but her hands stayed firmly on her lap. There was no denying that she was watching and she was into it.

Hovering over Hayley's knees, Anna wanted nothing more than to allow herself to sit on Hayley's lap, to put her arms around her shoulders and kiss her. A flicker of mutual recognition passed between them. Hayley stared at Anna's mouth.

Anna's legs burned from the squat. What were they doing? This was crazy. Anna stood back up, moved back and walked back over to the speaker, heart racing, mind scrambled, slightly out of breath. She stood with her back to Hayley for a while, pretending to be on her phone while she attempted to get it together. In the end she just cut the music and turned around.

Hayley was still looking at her. "That was"—Hayley cleared her throat—"great. Top marks."

"I'm going to bed."

"Oh."

Anna walked over to her chair and bent over to pick up her book and her bottle of water. She didn't look at Hayley once.

Hayley didn't say anything, either.

Anna silently brushed past and went back into the campervan, closing the door behind her. Only when she was safely back inside did she finally exhale.

Had that just happened?

Anna got ready for bed, quickly, totally unable to ignore how turned on she was. She had completely soaked through her panties. Touching herself to inspect the situation, she was

so wet it was almost worrying. She washed her hands to try and remove her arousal from her fingers.

She got into bed and curled up on her side, facing the wall. A faint smell of campfire lingered in Anna's hair. The look of desire in Hayley's eyes as she'd danced for her was all she could see. Anna was too hot, so she shrugged the duvet off slightly. They'd taken to sharing the light duvet in these hotter nights instead of their sleeping bags zipped together. Anna had been sleeping better than she had in years, lately. How the fuck was she supposed to sleep next to her now? The thought of Hayley coming in and getting into bed was both nerve-racking and incredibly exciting at the same time.

Outside, there was no movement. Hayley must still have been sitting there by the fire. Even the thought of that was arousing – Hayley, sitting there in the aftermath of whatever it was that just happened. What was she thinking about?

Anna couldn't sleep. She lay there, replaying the lap dance in her head. Dancing like that, touching herself so suggestively. Hayley's questions about sex. Hayley's breasts. How had things escalated so quickly? Why had Hayley asked her to give her a lap dance? Why had Hayley looked so turned on? Did she enjoy it as much as Anna had? Did Hayley find her attractive? Did she like her? Anna pushed those thoughts from her head. They'd been down that road before and it had only led to heartache. Anna wasn't going to go there again.

Quietly, the door opened, and Hayley came in. Anna tensed up, wide awake, biting her lower lip. Hayley got ready for bed super quietly. Anna rubbed her feet together, unable to get comfortable.

Hayley got into bed and turned the light off. Anna cleared her throat, unconsciously, then wished she hadn't made a noise.

“Are you still awake?” Hayley said. Her voice was soft and gentle.

“Yeah.”

“I thought you would be asleep. Did I wake you?”

“No. I was awake.”

“Oh.”

An awkward silence stretched out between them. Anna’s mind raced. “Well, goodnight then.”

“Sleep well, Anna,” Hayley whispered.

Anna waited for Hayley to cuddle into her, like they’d been doing every night now. They’d always slept so well together. It came so naturally to them. But tonight, Hayley stayed away. Disappointment coursed through her. With Hayley, this was an all too familiar feeling. Anna lay on her front, protecting her heart. Why did she keep doing this to herself?

Eleven

June 2013

This was no dream. Anna deepened the kiss, unable to get enough of Hayley's mouth. They didn't have long. Hayley would be on a plane home far too soon. Why had they left this so late? Anna pulled Hayley closer towards her. Their legs entwined. Anna traced her fingers all over Hayley's neck and jaw, into her hair, and down her sides. This was incredible.

They broke off from the kiss, noses still touching, and looked into each other's eyes. It was dizzying. Hayley's hand drifted down from Anna's hair, neck, and onto her arm and then down over Anna's waist, where it stopped. Hesitantly, Hayley kissed her again as her hand drifted lower. She stroked the skin around Anna's lower tummy, gently pushing her hand under Anna's top.

Anna tingled at her touches, unable to believe they were really doing this. She brushed her hand over Hayley's breasts, breathing hard in between their kisses.

Hayley gasped.

Anna squeezed Hayley's breast a little too hard as pent-up energy came overflowing out of her.

Hayley moaned.

Hayley ran her hand under Anna's top all the way up to her naked breasts and caressed her nipple. Anna stopped, frozen in place, registering the feeling. With arms and legs tangling, in a haze of near desperate clutching and grasping, Anna had never felt anything like this. Her skin was burning up and there was a pool of wetness between her legs.

Hayley's fingers went to places Anna had only dreamed of as they kissed like their lives depended on it. She went into overdrive as Hayley explored her slick folds. It was like Hayley was playing her, completely in control of her pleasure

and her pain. All Anna could do was lie there and absorb the way it felt and how special this was.

But that wasn't enough. Anna put her hand in between Hayley's legs. The wetness devouring Anna's fingers made Anna quiver in pleasure. The look in Hayley's eyes was so different to what was normally there, but also, Anna had caught glimpses of this look many times. She'd just never quite believed it. Fingers fumbled and stroked and rubbed. Hayley felt so good. Anna had no idea what she was doing but she desperately wanted to show Hayley how she really felt about her. To make her see. In a blur of heat and pure need, something clicked into place. This was what she wanted. Their emotional connection was so strong, and now to be doing this it was out of this world. She was definitely a lesbian if being with someone was meant to feel like this.

Her heart raced and her body burned hot with desire and unexpressed passion. She moaned and shuddered under Hayley's touches, unable to meet her eyes. Her breathing became ragged as her body tensed up. It was almost embarrassing to let Hayley see this, but she couldn't control it. Anna erupted in pleasure, unable to contain herself after all this time building up to this moment with her.

In the moments that followed, Anna still couldn't meet Hayley's eyes. Instead, she rolled Hayley onto her back and kissed her just above her navel. She pushed her t-shirt up and ran her fingers along the waistband of Hayley's pyjama bottoms. "Is this okay?" Anna whispered, kneeling between Hayley's legs.

"Yes. Yes. Please."

There was a hunger in Hayley's eyes when Anna glanced up, finally able to look at her. She wanted this. It was incredible. Slowly, she pulled Hayley's pyjamas down her legs and off, feasting on the sight before her. Her smell. Anna inhaled deeply, never having felt anything like this before. Slowly and tentatively, she lowered her mouth to Hayley and delicately kissed and licked. Hayley tasted divine. Was this heaven? Anna got lost in the sensation, in Hayley's folds and

in the wetness under her tongue. She focused on what she was doing, desperately hoping to make her come.

But Hayley tensed up, and not in a good way. Her body went rigid. She stopped making any noises.

“Is this not good?”

“Yes. It’s just. I’m... in my head.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No. No. I want you to keep going.”

Anna nodded. She lowered herself again and reached up and took Hayley’s hand. “If you like what I’m doing, squeeze my fingers, okay?”

Hayley smiled, unsurely. “Okay.”

Anna dipped her head and licked, so slowly. A gentle squeeze on her fingers made Anna tingle and she focused on doing that to Hayley. But no matter what Anna did, it didn’t seem to be having the right effect. Hayley would gasp and squeeze her fingers, only to fizzle out and go back to the start. Anna was at it for so long, she lost track of time. She was getting hot and sweaty, and tired. And embarrassed. Was she not good at this? Maybe she wasn’t. She’d never slept with a woman before.

After an unidentifiable amount of time of increasing shame, Hayley tapped on her shoulders. “Anna.”

Anna lifted her head, feeling her cheeks blush crimson and disappointment set in.

“Could we stop?” Hayley stroked the back of Anna’s head. “It’s okay. Come back up.”

Present day

Anna woke up alone. The campervan was empty. The sun was shining in the window. She kicked the duvet off her. How many times must she go over that night and her failure? It was one of her most painful memories and she didn’t often allow herself to go there. But with all that unmistakable sexual

energy last night, Anna had replayed it over and over in her head for most of the night.

There was no mistaking the fact that Hayley didn't feel that way about her. Hayley just not feeling it had been loud and clear. Asking Anna to stop after nearly an hour of her fruitless touches couldn't have been more humiliating, even if Hayley was perfectly justified in doing so. Either Anna was dreadful at sex, which she'd later proved herself with other women not to be – thank god – or Hayley just wasn't sexually attracted to her. She'd settled on the latter, over the years.

It was as crushing then as it was crushing now to accept it, but she had to. There was no other way to see it, which was why Hayley's lustful eyes last night were confusing. Was Hayley toying with her? Anna sighed. Hayley didn't know how Anna felt back then so she couldn't really be blamed for flirting again. It was in Hayley's nature to flirt and play. Could Anna really hold that against her?

Hayley entered the campervan bearing a cup in each hand. "You're up! Good morning."

"Good morning," Anna mumbled. She pushed herself upright. "Is that coffee?"

Hayley handed her a cup. "Yep. I just made some. It's beautiful outside. Even a bit warm."

"I can see the sun coming in. It feels hot already for this time of the day."

"It's nearly ten."

"Ten! Oh my god, I've slept for ages."

"You were sleeping like a baby when I got up." Hayley sipped her coffee, sitting at the small pull-down table across the camper from her. "I was thinking we could get the paddleboards out. Have our beach day? How's your head?"

"It's a bit sore, actually. Is there anyone around?"

"Nope. Not yet. The sand is white and the water is like a lagoon. This could be the Caribbean."

Anna laughed. “This is a once in a year event. If you’re lucky to be here on a day like this you’ve got to make the most of it. Beach and paddleboarding it is.”

“Woohoo!”

Anna sipped her coffee, glad things weren’t weird between them after last night. A day by the water would be perfect. It wasn’t like they needed to be anywhere. They were in the middle of nowhere with miles to get to anything even if they wanted. “I’ll get my bikini.”

“Perfect. I’ll get the boards out.”

Hayley opened up the storage cupboard and rooted around while Anna continued to lie on the bed. She just watched her. She could look at Hayley forever if she let herself, but she could not. Emotion rose to the surface at the idea of this connection they shared not meaning the same thing to Hayley as it did to her.

“Got them.” Hayley stood back up. “I’ll start getting them inflated.”

“Great. I’ll be out in a minute.”

Hayley lingered for a few seconds and then left her alone in the campervan.

Anna took a deep breath. She got up and put on her bikini, a pair of shorts and a loose t-shirt. This was going to be a good day. All she had to do was to get a grip of her feelings.

Outside, Hayley was kneeling over one of the paddleboards. She had laid the boards out next to each other beside the campervan and had taken her fleece and t-shirt off so that she was in nothing more than her sports bra and pair of very short shorts. Anna’s tummy tensed up and her breath caught. Hayley pushed down on the pump again and again. The muscles in her arms were more visible as she strained against the pressure.

Anna swallowed, feeling her neck and jaw tense up.

Hayley looked over at her. “Why the hell did I buy a manual pump instead of an electric one?”

Anna shrugged. She wasn't unhappy about it. "Easy mistake. We can see if we can buy one in the next town."

"Good idea."

"Let me help." Anna stood beside her.

Hayley continued pumping up and down. The paddleboard was nearly inflated. "Not yet. I'm nearly done."

Anna thought back to their disastrous sex the night before Hayley had left, again. She couldn't stop thinking about Hayley in a sexual way now. It was as if something had shifted between them and now it was all Anna could focus on – even though it was a no-go area that had proved itself to be painfully unrequited.

"She's all yours." Hayley stood up and passed her the pump, satisfied her board was done.

Their fingers brushed. A spark of electricity coursed through Anna's veins. She dipped her chin to her chest and composed herself for a second. She fitted the pump to the valve and got going. After not even a minute, she was feeling tired. It was exhausting. "You made this look easy. It's so hard."

"Well, you're making it look a lot more exciting than I think it's meant to."

Anna scrunched up her forehead as Hayley went into the campervan. Did Hayley just flirt with her?

A short while later they locked up the campervan and headed to the beach wearing wetsuits and carrying rock solid paddleboards. The sand was soft underfoot as they made their way through the long grass. The sea looked calm as they walked towards it.

Hayley stopped and put down her paddleboard and beach bag. "Is here okay?"

The sand was nearly white, and the water was crystal clear. "Here's great."

Before long they were in the water, wading along the tropical-like shore. Anna's feet were cold, though. The setting

was an illusion. “I’m glad of these wetsuits.”

Hayley turned to her and smiled. “I know. Means we can enjoy it!” Hayley jumped onto her paddleboard as though it was a surfboard and managed to stay upright for a good few seconds before falling into the water with a splash.

Anna laughed.

Hayley resurfaced. “Fuck me, it’s cold!”

Anna couldn’t make out if Hayley was shivering or laughing as she managed to climb back on her board.

Hayley’s eyes were bright, and had that naughty, playful look in them that did things to Anna’s insides. “You coming?”

Anna straddled her board. She paddled towards Hayley in the secluded bay. “I might start off on my knees after seeing you fall like that.”

“Wise move,” Hayley said, kneeling on her board and relaxing into it. “Ahhhh, this is so fucking cool.”

The water was relatively calm. A gentle wave came every now and again, barely registering underneath them. “It is. Where do you want to go?”

“Everywhere.”

“What?”

Hayley smiled and lay back on her board. She lifted her knees up and looked up at the sky. “Look up.”

Anna lifted her head. It was very blue. Blinding, even.

“Want to just drift here like this for a bit?” Hayley’s voice was low.

Anna liked the sound of that. “Sure.” She copied Hayley’s position and lay with her back on the board and knees tucked up. The water gently lapped at the boards.

An easy silence opened up between them. She went right back to that night again. Hayley’s lips had been so soft. She was a good kisser. Even though it was ten years ago, it still felt

like yesterday in some ways. Anna shook her head. She had to stop doing this. It was getting tiresome.

Hayley splashed some water over at Anna. It got her in the face. She swallowed a bit of water, tasting salt and seaweed. “Ew!”

Hayley grinned.

“You cheeky little—”

Hayley splashed her again.

“That’s it. I’m coming for you.” Anna splashed Hayley fiercely, getting her all over.

Hayley let out little screams, mostly of delight. “You’re relentless, stop!”

“Never!”

They settled down after a few minutes and paddled along the shore. In the direct sunshine, Anna bathed in the warm rays as she followed behind Hayley. Her chest felt warm and full, but not just from the sunny day and beautiful surroundings.

Standing up, Hayley paddled in front of her leading the way.

Anna stopped paddling and floated on her board on her knees. Hayley had grown and matured into a beautiful, intelligent and passionate woman. Being with Hayley on this trip had given her a new lease of life. Being around Hayley lifted her. It was special. Hayley was special. What they were sharing on this trip had gone beyond Anna’s wildest expectations. Her whole world had lit up. She couldn’t stop thinking about her even though she spent every waking moment around her.

Oh no.

God no.

Fuck.

Anna took a deep breath. She was in love. She had fallen in love all over again, but deeper and harder this time. Not only did she still have feelings for Hayley, but they were stronger

now. So much stronger. Her feelings in the past felt like child's play compared to this. Fuck. She had it bad. How had this happened?

This wasn't good. Hayley didn't like Anna in that way. They'd discovered that loud and clear in the past, in the most painful and embarrassing way possible. No. There was no way Anna was going to put herself in that situation again. She had to get this under control or else she'd only end up right back where she was in her twenties: heartbroken and alone without any desire to move on and meet someone else and without Hayley as a friend.

Back on the beach, Anna got out of her wetsuit clumsily, feeling highly aware of the fact that she was in a very skimpy bikini. Anna kept glancing over at Hayley in her bikini, struggling not to look and annoyed at herself by it.

Hayley lay down on her beach towel and picked up her Kindle. Even with her sunglasses on, Anna could tell Hayley was watching her, but she couldn't tell what Hayley was thinking. It was equal parts exhilarating and confusing.

Anna lay down beside her, too distracted to read or listen to anything. She looked towards the water, gleaming and inviting with the sun shining off it. Her eyes fell on Hayley's mostly naked body stretched out beside her. Hayley's legs were crossed at the ankles. It felt so good to look. Too good. It was torture.

Hayley lay her Kindle on her toned tummy and turned her head towards Anna. She pushed up her sunglasses and stared at her. "How did it go when you came out? With your family, I mean."

Anna's brow furrowed. Hayley stopped replying not long after Anna came out to her in an email. "Er. It went well. My family were great about it. They were supportive and said they weren't surprised. I had it very easy. I was very lucky."

Hayley nodded. "I'm happy to hear that."

"What about you?" Anna asked. Anna had no idea if Hayley had ever even come out. "How did it go?"

“Not great, initially. My mum was more supportive than my dad. He came around after a while.”

“That’s good.”

“He wants me to marry a man, though. He’s holding out for it.”

“Ah.”

Hayley took off her sunglasses. She sat up and crossed her legs. She faced Anna squarely, resting her hands on her knees. “When did you know?”

“When did I know what?”

“That you were into women?”

Anna blinked. How could Hayley seriously be asking her this? Wasn’t it obvious? Anna was tongue tied. “When did I know I was a lesbian?”

Hayley pressed her lips together and nodded.

Anna looked away, emotion taking over her. “Hayley, you know when.”

“No. I don’t.”

Anna was confused. How could she not know?

“It’s okay if you’d rather not say.”

Part of her was compelled to tell Hayley everything. Maybe it would be good to get this out there finally. Cathartic, even. If Hayley wasn’t sure and she wanted to know so bad, why should Anna hide it? “It was when we were at university together.”

Hayley inhaled, and furrowed her brow, absorbing the information.

The truth wanted to be said. Anna couldn’t fight it. “When I realised I had a crush on you.”

Hayley looked down at the sand and didn’t meet her eyes.

“I’d had crushes on a couple of girls before, but I’d never pieced it together until you. You were the first person I felt the butterflies with, so to speak. I liked you so much, in a way that

I'd never felt with any guy, that it became obvious I was only attracted to girls."

Hayley was quiet. Was she not even going to say anything? Anna had planned never to tell Hayley any of this. Now that it was out there she felt vulnerable and exposed rather than better. At least she hadn't told Hayley the worst of it, that Hayley was more than just a crush, that she'd been in love with her, that Hayley was her first love and that it nearly destroyed her when they drifted apart. There was no way she was ever going to tell her that. No way.

"I wondered if it was me. But you never said, so I couldn't be sure."

"Would it have made any difference?"

Hayley's eyes were kind, but she didn't reply. Instead, she just sat there, looking off to the side, running her fingers through the sand – picking it up and letting it slide through her fingers. If they weren't having such a difficult conversation, Anna would have found it therapeutic.

"I'm glad we're talking about this," Hayley said, meeting Anna's eyes.

"When did you know you were bi?" Anna held her breath.

Hayley looked down at her feet then out to the water. She swallowed. "Anna." Hayley found her eyes and held them. "I knew because of you. I had feelings for you. I realised that it was more than friendship towards the end of my time here. I liked you. All I wanted to do was kiss you. But it was confusing. You were my friend. We were so close. I didn't know how you felt. And I had to go home. And when we had sex, it blew my mind. I'd never experienced anything like it. To be honest, I never have since."

Anna was stunned into silence. Her heart was pounding. Hayley knew because of her? Hayley *had* felt that way?

What the fuck?

Hayley continued. "I struggled with my sexuality when I went home. Along with missing you. It took me a while to understand myself fully. But I do now."

“I’m glad you got to that place.” Anna heard herself say the words, still struggling to compute. Hayley saying she had had feelings for her was like a dream come true. Anna’s younger self would have been jumping for joy right now. Part of Anna was, even now. Knowing that Hayley had missed her too, after she’d gone home, brought so much comfort. Anna smiled, feeling better now that she knew more of the puzzle, but she was still confused. What did this mean?

Hayley’s cheeks were burning. Was she blushing? “Yeah, me too.”

Anna couldn’t help it, even though it was horrifically awkward to ask, she just had to know. “But you didn’t... that night, you didn’t, you know.”

“Come?”

A current of electricity rushed right through Anna, causing an unmistakable gush of wetness between her legs. She had zero control over that. Anna cleared her throat, thrown by her physical reaction but trying to hide it. “Yes. You didn’t come. I assumed you didn’t really like me in that way. That you tried me out and it didn’t work for you. Or that I was really bad at sex. And then you sort of vanished – over and above going home. We could have kept in touch. You just disappeared on me.” Anna’s voice was emotional. She hadn’t planned on saying all that and she hadn’t expected to still feel so sensitive about it.

Hayley’s head dropped forward. “I’m so sorry.”

Anna looked away. “There’s nothing to apologise for. We’ve been over this.”

“No, Anna, there is. I should have told you what was going on with me and I didn’t. I shut you out and we never got a chance to figure things out.”

Anna brushed some sand off her toes. This conversation felt so necessary all of a sudden. Why had they waited so many years?

“I disappeared because I was embarrassed and because I didn’t know how to talk about it. It was complicated. I met

Ryan and that prolonged everything and by that point I'd left it too long to get in touch with you about it. And then you were with someone, I'd heard. There was never a good time to talk about this kind of stuff, and then the time had passed."

Hayley seemed cut up about it, as if this had plagued her for years, too. Anna just listened, hoping they could finally make sense of it all and move on for both their sakes.

Hayley leaned forward. "What I wanted to say – or needed to say – was that the reason I didn't, you know, come, when we had sex was because I was feeling overwhelmed and in my head and..." Hayley paused and sighed. "The truth is I hadn't had an orgasm with someone else before. I didn't know how to let myself go with another person. Even you."

Anna tried not to look shocked but was probably failing.

"I wanted to. I was so close. I'd never got as far as that with anyone else before. I'd got so used to faking it with guys but I could never do that with you. You were so beautiful and so sexy. The way you tried to get me to communicate with you. It was all on me, Anna. You were amazing." Hayley paused and covered her face with her hands. "Oh god. This is so embarrassing."

Anna ran her hands through her still damp hair, feeling a mixture of relief, elation, sadness and compassion. This was crazy. She couldn't believe it. Hayley was always so confident. She gave the impression she enjoyed having sex with guys very much. There was such a new understanding between them. Like she could finally see Hayley clearly. Anna took Hayley's hand, instinctively. "You have nothing to be embarrassed about. I understand how difficult this would have been to talk about along with everything else that was going on."

Hayley squeezed Anna's fingers, not unlike how she did when they'd had sex, and smiled with that mischievous grin returning.

Her touch sent more shockwaves through Anna's body. She tried to ignore the heat burning up to the surface as they were

discussing their deepest truths. “I hope this is okay to ask but, is it still an issue for you?”

“God no.” Hayley half-laughed. “That horse has well and truly bolted. I was young. I had a lot of built-up issues with internalised shame around my body and my sexuality. I was so tightly wound in the bedroom, which is ironic because my personality was like the opposite.” Hayley took a breath. “I’ve never told anyone that before.”

Anna smiled. “Thank you for sharing this with me. It really helps.” They were still holding hands. Anna’s breathing was shallow. They hadn’t talked like this for so long. Perhaps ever. It was so refreshing.

“I have no problems letting go any more.” Hayley’s eyes turned a little darker.

Anna gulped. “That’s great.”

“Are we good?”

Anna hadn’t processed any of this yet. Her brain was still stuck on Hayley using the word ‘come’ in a sentence about them having sex together. But there was this new lightness between them. “We’re good.”

Hayley held her eyes. “You know what. We should have dinner here tonight on the beach. Right here. We’ll have wine and cheese and watch the sunset. Would you like to?”

“Yeah.” Anna smiled. “That would be wonderful.”

They were quiet after that. Hayley went back to her book and Anna listened to some music on her headphones. She couldn’t focus on anything other than what they’d just spoken about, though.

A weight had been lifted from her shoulders, not just from the dark cloud that had been hanging over her about ruining things with Hayley, being ghosted by her best friend, and potentially being bad at sex, but from the knowledge that everything they’d shared back then wasn’t completely one-sided. Hayley had liked her too. This was incredible news, even if Anna had suspected. Hayley had kissed her first, after all. But having it confirmed was everything and very

validating. Their emails after Hayley had gone home were very much lacking in maturity and transparency. Anna took a deep breath. None of that mattered any more. It was in the past.

But what about now? Where did this put them? Was Hayley *still* attracted to her? She'd seemed that way last night during the lap dance. Was it just physical or was there something more potentially? Anna's poor little heart didn't know what to do with itself. She sat there, as if suspended in time.

Later that afternoon, Hayley went to the campsite shop for some stuff for dinner. She'd insisted on going herself, and for Anna to stay at the camp and chill.

But Anna could not chill. She hadn't come back down to earth since the revelations. She was freaking out and didn't want Hayley to know about it. How could a simple conversation about how they came out to their families have escalated into such full and explicit disclosures of mutual attraction?

Anna got ready for the evening, taking extra care to moisturise. She even put on some light make-up. Anna's eyes fell on the small bed at the back of the campervan. How were they supposed to share a bed for the remainder of the trip knowing what they now knew about each other? That they'd essentially sparked each other's sapphic awakenings.

Anna took a cold bottle of water out of the tiny fridge and held it against her forehead. In the full glare of the afternoon sun, she sat down on the steps leading into the camper and replied to a message from Kelly asking how the trip was going and how things were with Hayley. Anna struggled to formulate an answer to the latter.

Having an amazing time, thank you! We're on Lewis. It's so beautiful up here! You guys should book a trip soon! Re Hayley, I think I might be going under... I am a total mess for her, nothing's changed on that front, it would seem. I'm a fool for thinking I could handle this!!

And the truth was, she didn't want it to stop. She wanted Hayley so bad. The fact that she was frequently getting

powerful waves of electricity gushing through her core at the thought of them being intimate was a sign there was something going on here beyond Anna's control.

Hayley sauntered back across the sand dunes carrying a canvas bag on one shoulder with a bottle of wine sticking out of it. A rush of butterflies spread through Anna's tummy. Being here with Hayley, this close in each other's space, was exactly where she needed to be right now. Second chances like this didn't come around very often.

Twelve

February 2013

Eighties synth-pop music blared from the speakers at the front of the university sports hall. A giant disco ball hung above the mass of skaters circling the hall, giving out colourful flashes of light. Sitting on a plastic chair at the side of the hall beside the bags, Anna did up the laces on her borrowed skates, tugging them on tight. Satisfied they were on properly, she hung back, and searched for the woman setting her heart on fire.

She found her. Hayley was in the centre of the disco, gliding around with Rose and Lauren, smiling, laughing and skate-dancing to the cheesy music. Her hips swayed gently as she rolled. God, she was so fucking sexy. She was so free in herself. So at ease. So beautiful. Her wonderful and very persistent American friend had begged her to come out tonight. These days, wherever Hayley went, Anna went, and tonight was no different. Roller-skating wouldn't normally be her thing, but for Hayley she would do anything. All she wanted was for Hayley to be happy, to see her smile and laugh, and if Anna's presence at this roller-disco tonight contributed in any way to that, Anna was all in.

But her heart ached day and night. All she wanted was to be close to her. To kiss her, slowly, and get lost in those lips. To touch her, everywhere. To really know her. Fantasising about having sex with Hayley was fast becoming an obsession. She thought about them getting naked together in the shower after one of their runs. Or taking all of Hayley's clothes off, before spreading her legs wide and taking her in her mouth. She thought about sliding her fingers deep inside her and fucking her so hard until Hayley exploded in pleasure. She'd say she'd never been fucked so well, and Anna would hold her in her arms forever. Anna had never masturbated as much in her life. Her crushes in the past seemed quite innocent compared to this.

Not being able to tell Hayley how she felt through fear of ruining their friendship was excruciating. She cared about Hayley too much to put her in that position. This was a one-way thing, Anna was sure of it, no matter how flirty Hayley could be sometimes. No matter how lingering the eyes or tactile the touches. Hayley was very much straight. Anna gritted her teeth thinking about the guys Hayley allowed near her. Anna didn't know what to do, suspended in this in-between world of friendship and feeling something more, so she pretended everything was fine. But everything was not fine. Her whole world was being turned upside down.

Anna stood, unfocused, feeling the effects of the two pints of beer she'd drunk at the pub with everyone before the disco. The wobble in her legs and her arms flailing out to the side for balance as she rolled to nowhere in particular confirmed that she was in no fit state to be trying out a new sport right now, skill level and emotional state included.

"Oh, hell no," Hayley called out, skating towards her shaking her head. "You can't skate?"

"How hard can it be?" Anna immediately faltered, grasping out for something to hold, finding the wall instead. "Okay. Maybe I can't skate."

Hayley smiled affectionately. "You never said."

Anna shrugged, holding onto the wall for dear life. It turned out, being around Hayley on roller-skates did nothing for her sense of balance.

"I'll teach you." Hayley held out her hand. "Do you trust me?"

Anna looked at Hayley's hand then back up at her clever and confident eyes with their steady gaze and that gorgeous hazel tinge. "I do."

When their hands met, Anna felt this giant burst of energy fizz right up her arm and spread through her body, settling between her legs. This sensation had only ever happened with Hayley.

“When it comes to skating less is more. Just take little baby steps and shift your weight from one foot to the other. Focus on your balance as you float along. After a while, you’ll get used to it.”

Hayley let go of her hand to demonstrate. Anna focused on Hayley’s movements, glad of the excuse to look at her whole body. A warm buzz ran through her as Hayley skated in a circle around her, finishing with a little twirl. So cute.

“Now you go.”

Anna tried to ‘float along’ but wobbled again and was dangerously close to falling. Hayley grabbed her hand, which steadied her.

“All right, shaky. You can use the stopper at the front of the boot to brake, if you need to.”

Anna made it part way down the hall, clumsily getting the hang of it, clinging onto Hayley’s hand. They skated one full lap around the hall. Anna was so proud. She glanced at Hayley and let go of her hand. Hayley gave her a thumbs up and a cheesy smile. Adorable. Anna skated on her own for about five seconds before stumbling like a cartoon character slipping on a banana skin. She fell into the wall, just about staying on her feet. So embarrassing. Her shoulder burned. Anna leant against the wall, still feeling those pints.

Hayley appeared. That was fast. She stood in front of her, arms on Anna’s waist, propping her up. She was right up in her space, breathing hard, with some colour in her cheeks. Fuck, she was so hot. Anna was getting wet. This was ridiculous.

Hayley leant into her. “I’ve got you, Bambi. Are you okay?”

Anna laughed nervously, and they locked eyes. Why the fuck was Hayley leaning on her like this? Anna’s whole body was on fire at the connection. “My hero. I’m fine.”

Hayley licked her lower lip and held Anna’s waist tighter. A few moments passed with them just standing there with each other.

“Get a room, you two,” Rose called out, skating by, laughing and rolling her eyes.

Lauren gave them a look and nodded in agreement as she went past too.

Anna inhaled sharply. Had she been too obvious? Was Hayley flirting with her? What did this *mean*?

Present day

Anna sat beside Hayley on the picnic blanket. The waves lapped at the shore further down the beach as a gentle breeze came and went. Hayley poured some more pinot grigio into Anna’s cup as Anna held it up for her. There was a new lightness to Hayley this evening. Perhaps sharing her stuff earlier had been helpful for her, too? It had changed something between them. Anna felt like they were on a date or something. It was crazy.

“Are you warm enough?” Hayley said. “Would you like me to go and get your coat?”

“I’m warm. This is perfect. Thanks.”

“That’s good.” Hayley took a sip of wine. She was wearing a gorgeous white cotton shirt and skimpy jean shorts that made her ass look great. Her legs went on for miles.

Anna was struggling to keep this clean any more. Knowing what she now knew about Hayley had sparked a level of sexual desire she hadn’t felt in ages. Perhaps since university, all those years ago when it felt like all she did was pine for Hayley: in the shower, during class, sitting quietly in the library. She kept thinking back to all the moments they had where the energy between them was like fire, such as that night at the roller-disco. Anna had had so many sexual fantasies about them, and they were all coming back after today’s confessions. Or maybe she was allowing them to come back. For some reason, the idea of gripping Hayley’s hand, hard, while they fucked kept playing over and over in Anna’s head. It was making her wet.

“What are you thinking about?” Hayley asked, glancing over at her. “You’re very quiet.”

“Nothing.” Anna cleared her throat, feeling caught red-handed. “Just enjoying this beautiful setting.”

“Yeah. It’s romantic.”

Anna smiled, feeling it reach her eyes. “It is.”

Hayley ran her hands through the sand, making circles in it with her index finger. She picked up a handful and let it fall through her fingers.

Anna took a sip of wine, lazily watching Hayley play with the sand, staring at Hayley’s hands and gorgeous fingers. To hold hands like lovers, and with that hard grip, would be the most glorious thing ever. Only this time, Anna would do it right and show Hayley what she was capable of. What they could be together.

“So has our trip gone to plan so far, do you think?” Hayley said.

“Sorry?”

Hayley looked up at her in earnest. The sand beside her was a beautiful mess. “Are you happy with how we’ve gone about it? I haven’t made you be too spontaneous? I haven’t annoyed you too much?”

Anna was speechless. Hayley seemed insecure, which was so unlike her. Anna pressed her lips together and smiled. “I’m very happy about how the trip has gone so far. You haven’t sprung too many things on me, no. You’ve been very well behaved.”

Hayley shook her head, smiling slowly. She seemed softer, somehow. It was lovely.

Anna continued. “No seriously. It’s been amazing. You’ve been amazing. It’s your trip, though. Are you happy with how it’s going?”

Hayley leaned towards Anna, coming close to her head, the insecurity now gone from her eyes. “It’s our trip. And I couldn’t be happier.”

Anna held her eyes for a moment longer than necessary as a shot of electricity rushed through her veins and a warmth spread through her chest. Hayley being happy made Anna so happy. It was as simple as that. "I'm glad."

Hayley picked up the second to last oatcake and cheese from the plate in between them and put it in her mouth. "Mmm. I could eat these all day."

"Would you like the last one?"

Hayley smiled. "No, you have it. Why would you deny yourself the pleasure?"

"I want to leave room for the chocolates you got. You have it. You'll enjoy it more."

"Well if you're going to twist my arm then I guess I'm just going to have to."

Hayley ate the last oatcake before tidying up the remnants of their picnic and putting the stuff away in their little basket. Anna watched her, enjoying her every movement, especially her mouth as she chewed. She hadn't even tried to hide the fact that she was watching. To be fair, Anna had given up on that a while ago.

Hayley sighed, contentedly, gazing towards the water. "This is such a beautiful place. I feel so lucky to be here and to share this with you."

"I know. I feel the same."

"I don't want to leave."

"We have time here."

"Yeah."

"Do you feel like you're prioritising joy and pleasure enough on your trip?" Anna said, softly. "Don't want you to feel like you aren't."

"They've been a priority. Very much."

They drifted together on Hayley's blanket. It was getting darker. The side of Hayley's bare leg rested against Anna's.

The skin on skin contact alone was sending Anna's hormones into overdrive.

"And what about our list? How awesome is it that we're getting through it?" Hayley said.

"I know. It's a dream to actually do this stuff. We've done pretty much everything on the list, and we've still got three weeks left to cover the rest of the islands. It should be enough time. I might need to look at the ferry schedules tomorrow."

"I believe there's one more thing we haven't done yet."

"What's that?"

"We haven't been skinny-dipping."

Anna inhaled, sharply. She'd left that out intentionally, feeling too all over the place emotionally to talk about getting naked in front of each other right now.

"I think tonight's the perfect night to tick that off our list." Hayley's eyes were playful in the fading light. Her voice dipped lower. "There's no one else around. It's just us."

Just us. Anna used to love that phrase when they lived together. It meant she'd get Hayley all to herself. And now, tonight, she had just that. Anna nodded, thinking, panicking, looking out to the water, which was shimmering and calm. "What did you have in mind?"

Hayley grinned. "The sea will be freezing so I say we just run in and out once. We both have to go down to our shoulders. But let's not get our hair wet."

"We don't have towels or anything."

"We can go straight back to the camper and get dry. I can light a fire. Or we can take showers right away."

Anna considered it. Somehow, it did feel like the right moment. Any chance to get closer to Hayley at this point was what she wanted. What she needed. "Okay. You're on."

"Aha! We have lift off."

Anna smiled. Hayley's enthusiasm was infectious. Her energy was so positive and happy. Anna fucking loved it.

Hayley stood up and held out her hand. Anna took it, feeling butterflies in her stomach, and stood up. She met Hayley's steady gaze still holding onto her hand. This was happening.

Hayley started unbuttoning her shirt while holding Anna's gaze. Anna watched her fingers move down the buttons, forgetting that she had to get naked too. Her heart started pounding. Hayley slipped out of her shirt and unbuttoned her jean shorts. When she undid the zip, Anna gulped, and had to look away. Crossing her arms, Anna grasped her t-shirt at the bottom and lifted it over her head. She stepped out of her own shorts and glanced up at Hayley, who was now completely naked and watching her.

Anna's lips parted as she ran her eyes over Hayley's body. Instinctively, Anna got rid of her underwear and joined her, completely naked on the beach, free and untethered.

Hayley ran her eyes over Anna's body. It was like she was seeing right through her skin to her very soul. Hayley took her hand, entwining her fingers with Anna's and smiled. "Let's do this."

They walked to the shore, hand in hand, as if to a new era together. It was imperceptible, but Anna could feel that Hayley felt something too. Even though the water was cold and she was feeling exposed, Hayley's hand in hers gave her all the warmth she needed.

Anna turned to Hayley. "The things you get me to do, honestly, woman. You are a force of nature."

Hayley grinned and ran into the water which splashed around her legs. "Come with me, Anna," she called out.

Anna shook her head, smiling, and did just that. She ran in. The water stung but Hayley's smile kept her going. "Fuck! This is crazy."

"Yes!" Hayley said, going in further. "One tiny swim and then we're done."

"I thought we were just going to run in and out?"

“Down to our shoulders. Then we could swim for a minute? Let’s try to make the most of it.”

“Okay. Let’s hurry.”

They pushed in deeper, wading through the ice-cold water and tentatively swam for a few metres. A slight wave wet their hair.

“Fuck!” Anna said. “That’s so cold!”

“So fucking cold.”

They laughed, gazing into each other’s eyes, swim floating with their arms out to the side in the dark sea.

Hayley stared at Anna. She was actually staring. There was no doubt about it. She floated closer. Anna’s heart raced. She wanted to kiss her so badly. Their legs touched underwater. A few beats went by.

Hayley reached out, drifting her fingers along the underside of Anna’s forearm. “Look at us. Naked in the sea together.”

“Yep. Look at us. Getting hypothermia together.”

“All right. Let’s get out.”

They hurried back to the shallow water. The resistance on Anna’s legs lessened and soft dry sand graced her feet. Anna shivered. It was a warm night so there was some relief but without towels this was a struggle. Anna threw on her clothes that were quickly made damp when they touched her still dripping skin. She had goosebumps, and a quick glance at Hayley in the dusk revealed the same. Anna couldn’t let her eyes linger on Hayley’s body, though. It was too much.

Hayley, now clothed and visibly shivering, stepped towards her, arms out to her side. “For heat?”

Anna nodded, wanting to hug her so badly, but at the same time, petrified of what it might do to her.

Hayley wrapped her arms around her, pressing her body flush against hers. They both shuddered when their bodies made contact. The heat from Hayley was instantaneous. Anna clung to her, resting her head over her shoulder. There was

something about this hug that felt different. It felt safe. It felt like home, but that was crazy. Hayley's breasts pressing against hers was frankly sexual. A hot rush of arousal coursed through her, causing her to squirm.

Hayley spoke over her shoulder. "Are you getting warmer now?"

"A wee bit. You?"

"Yeah." She squeezed Anna tighter. It reminded Anna of when she would squeeze her to calm down, but this was more tender. Intimate. She was holding her. "You feel so good," Hayley murmured.

"So do you."

Hayley pulled back, slightly, brushing the side of Anna's face as she did so. Hayley hovered by Anna's cheek for a few very slow seconds.

Anna ached to turn her head and find Hayley's beautiful lips... but didn't. Couldn't.

Hayley stepped away, silently, and picked up the rest of the picnic stuff while not looking at her.

A knot gripped Anna's stomach. Had Anna just ruined an opportunity for them to take this further after all this time? Is that what Hayley wanted?

Propelled by the pressing need for warmth, they rushed the short distance along the sand dunes, not saying much, back to the campervan. It was like they both had something on their minds. Anna knew what was on hers but she didn't know how to voice it.

"I'm going to take a shower," Anna murmured, grabbing two towels and her toiletries bag.

"I will too."

Anna hovered by the door. "Okay."

The shower block was empty. They found cubicles beside each other. Anna undressed, keeping her sandals on. The steaming hot water was divine.

Hayley's sprung on, too. Knowing she was right next to her, through the thin cubicle, naked, was all Anna could focus on. Gently, she massaged shower gel into her body, thinking about how Hayley's breasts had felt against hers, how they had nearly kissed, and the thin strip of hair between Hayley's legs. The image occupied her whole brain. She could sense how wet she already was, and not from the shower.

Hayley's shower stopped.

Anna's hearing was on high alert, imagining Hayley rubbing herself with her towel. Anna wasn't ready to face Hayley just yet so she just stood there under the shower, waiting to decide what to do next. Anna's hands drifted to her breasts. She squeezed her nipple and let her other hand drift lower to find out just how wet she really was. And wow. She was like molten lava. It felt good to acknowledge how turned on she was feeling, even if only to herself.

The sound of the hairdryer filled the room above the noise of her shower. Anna froze. She stopped touching herself as if she had been caught and quickly turned the shower off. She got ready at double speed and opened the door to find Hayley still using the hairdryer at the mirror. Anna's eyes dipped to Hayley's perfectly shaped ass at the sight of her. When she looked back up, Hayley was watching her in the mirror. Their eyes locked.

Anna averted her eyes and joined her at the mirror, blushing that she'd been caught checking her out.

Hayley switched off the hairdryer. The silence that followed was almost loud. "Good shower?"

"Er. Yeah. Feels good to get warm. You?"

"Yeah, good."

Anna towel dried her hair, avoiding Hayley's eyes.

Hayley threw her towel over her shoulder. "I think I might head back to the camper."

"Sure. I'll just dry my hair and be right over."

Hayley lingered before she left, as if something was still on her mind. Picking up her bag, she smiled at Anna in the mirror, and they just looked at each other. The look in Hayley's eyes was soft, cautious and full of want. "See you in a second then."

After she left, Anna let out a shaky breath. Something was happening between them. She could feel it. She blitzed her hair dry, threw on some moisturiser and haphazardly stuffed her things back into her bag. It was like time was both speeding up and slowing down.

It was quiet on the campsite as she walked back to the campervan. She opened the door not knowing how she was going to handle her feelings for Hayley any more. This love she felt was simply overwhelming. An electric candle glowed from the table. The fairy lights lining the wall were on. Hayley was sitting on the bed as if she had been waiting for her. As soon as Anna closed the door, Hayley crossed the campervan and stood right in front of her.

"What's all this?"

"This is what I should have done the moment I stepped off that train."

Hayley came right into Anna's space. There was such affection in her eyes. She was so close Anna could smell her shampoo and see the dark flecks in her eyes. "What if I kissed you right now?" Hayley's voice was quiet but direct.

Anna trembled.

"Would you like that?"

Anna let out a shaky breath at the question. She'd felt it coming but hearing it was still a shock. "Yes." The word was out of her mouth before she could stop it.

Hayley ran soft fingertips over Anna's cheek. It felt so right. She moved her hands to Anna's waist and edged closer to Anna's mouth. "Can I?"

Anna held Hayley's eyes and nodded. Her bag fell to the floor. There was no fighting this. If Hayley didn't kiss her soon she might explode.

Hayley brushed her lips against hers, lightly kissing her mouth. The kiss was slow and tender. Soft. Emotional. Hayley moaned quietly when their tongues met. They sank into one another as if kissing each other like this was inevitable. It was.

Kissing Hayley felt so good. How had she gone ten years without these beautiful lips on hers? Anna dug her fingers into Hayley's back, taken over by pure lust.

Hayley kissed her with more intensity. She pressed Anna into the campervan door, arrestingly taking control. She was all over her, as if finally set free, kissing her hard and running her hands over Anna's body.

Anna gasped when Hayley touched her breasts and ran her hands over them. A flood of arousal ran through her. She was breathless. She was burning up.

Hayley tilted her mouth away, biting down on her own lower lip, breathing hard. Why was she stopping? Was she not enjoying it?

“Anna.”

“Yes?”

“I know this is crazy and we are friends and all but I just... I feel so strongly about you. I really want you. I hope that's okay to say?”

“It's okay to say.”

Hayley kissed her again, deeply. “Fuck. I just want you so much.”

Anna inhaled, as a rush of heat spread through her core. “I want you too.”

They moved over to the bed. Anna sat down on the edge of it. Hayley stood in front of her, hands poised to unzip her hoodie. The difference in Hayley this time was intoxicating. She seemed like a woman who knew exactly what she wanted and exactly what she was doing. Anna quivered at the thought of where this was going to go tonight.

With hands that Anna had looked at a million times before but in entirely different circumstances, Hayley took her clothes

off slowly. Neither of them was dressed to impress but that didn't matter. Naked, Hayley stood in between Anna's legs, brushing against them and gently nudging them open wider. She was so breathtakingly beautiful. Her eyes never left Anna's as she got down on her knees. On her knees! They hovered by each other's mouths, noses touching, dancing, before Hayley inched forward and kissed her, easily finding her tongue. Anna touched Hayley's arms and gave out a small moan. Hayley pulled back and stared at her. The look in Hayley's eyes was full of desire but also with that same affection that was always there.

Anna's heart pounded. "Are we really doing this?"

"We are."

Hayley tugged Anna's top off and removed her clothes. Sitting there naked together made it feel very real, but mostly Anna just needed Hayley to fuck her.

Hayley kissed Anna's neck slowly, down to her shoulder, then down towards her chest. Raw lust took over the second Hayley's lips made contact with her breast. Anna moaned, unable to contain how it made her feel.

Hayley used her other hand to caress Anna's stomach, gently exploring Anna's body, pausing for extra caresses over Anna's Dickinson tattoo on her hip. Anna whimpered. When that hand lowered and touched Anna's curls, a fresh flood of arousal intensified her wetness. Hayley ran her fingers over Anna's wetness, gently at first, and then firmer. She came back up and kissed her, still stroking her folds, driving Anna insane. Her fingers rubbed, stroked and teased, in just the right place in just the right way. It didn't take long for Anna to build so much heat and feel close to the edge.

Anna shifted towards her to give her even more access. Hayley looked into Anna's eyes and slid two fingers inside her. Hayley's eyes were filled with a lustful glaze as she fucked Anna not so softly any more. Anna clenched her teeth together in an attempt to hold it together.

Hayley slowed down, taking a deep breath, and looked at what her hand was doing. She lowered herself onto her heels

and stared at Anna's folds, lips poised. "Oh Anna." She bit down on her lower lip. "I can't wait to do this. I've wanted to taste you for so long."

Anna fell back on the bed as Hayley kissed the inside of her thigh, planting delicate kisses along the fleshy part of her inner leg. When Hayley made contact with her clit, Anna gasped. It was so intimate. Hayley's lips and tongue worked her into a frenzy, soft and hard, all at once. Anna gripped the sheet and moaned the more Hayley did what she was doing.

Hayley pulled back, deep in concentration, and added another finger, before licking her again and fucking her so hard. Anna was no match for this and succumbed to Hayley's expert skills.

"Give me your hand." Anna reached down and held Hayley's free hand. It quickly became a grip, mirroring Anna's fantasy.

Anna built and built until she could take it no longer and came right into Hayley's beautiful mouth, moaning as if she'd never come so hard in her life. She may not have.

Hayley's touches became gentler as Anna arched her back and caught her breath. Anna's wetness was everywhere, all down her thighs and all over Hayley's face.

Hayley stroked Anna's tummy and looked up at her with the same intensely focused expression that sent Anna wild. Anna took a deep breath and leant up. Hayley knelt up and met Anna at eye level again, with flushed cheeks and a look of pure reverence.

Anna kissed her, tasting her own juices on Hayley's mouth, and stroked down her back. She dropped her hands to Hayley's ass, feeling so daring and connected to her all at once.

Hayley straddled her hips, wrapping her arms around Anna's shoulders. She smiled. They fell backwards onto the bed, not letting each other go for a second. The constant contact felt very loving. Anna swallowed, as the intensity of the situation caught up with her. What was this going to do to their friendship? What if Hayley couldn't come for her again?

“What is it?” Hayley whispered.

Anna rolled onto her side, facing Hayley on the pillow. “I’m worried that you won’t feel the same way again. That you won’t—”

Hayley put a finger over Anna’s lips, calming her in an instant, doing that thing she always did. Hayley gently picked up Anna’s hand, and guided it down her body, resting in between her legs. “I want you so badly. Can’t you see?”

Anna gasped. Hayley was so wet and hot. Was that for her? Anna nodded.

Hayley held her eyes and ran her hand up Anna’s body to caress her breasts.

Anna touched Hayley’s wetness, exploring her with her fingers, struck by how turned on Hayley was. Hayley moaned softly, holding Anna’s eyes, then rolled onto her back. Anna pushed herself up onto her elbow and looked at Hayley underneath her, still touching her. She took a moment to appreciate her friend, or whatever she was, in her arms. A feeling so tender spread from Anna’s chest to every inch of her being. It was warm and all encompassing.

Anna bent down and took Hayley’s breast into her mouth while teasing and caressing Hayley’s wetness. Hayley shuddered and tensed beneath her. Anna put her fingers inside Hayley and explored her from within, using her thumb for extra friction on Hayley’s clit. Doing this to Hayley and seeing her in this way went beyond Anna’s wildest dreams.

Hayley wrapped her arms around Anna and gave herself fully to her, spreading her legs wide and moaning in such unselfconscious pleasure. Anna kissed Hayley on the lips, opening her mouth wide and letting herself go. Sensing that Hayley was close, instead of keeping Hayley there and making this last, Anna rode the moment and fucked her hard, and then soft, to drive her crazy, enough to illicit the response Anna so desperately wanted. Hayley’s moans intensified. Her breathing became ragged and strained, Anna refocused on Hayley’s clit and savoured this moment for she knew it would be the most special moment of her entire life.

“Anna, Anna, I’m going to come, oh Anna,” Hayley moaned into Anna’s neck.

Anna pulled back to see Hayley’s eyes.

When they made eye contact Hayley cried out underneath her and came powerfully into her arms, moaning so loudly. Hayley’s body shook and writhed in pleasure in Anna’s hands, all heat and wetness and vulnerability.

Anna kissed her, and Hayley met her right there with it, as she rode out her orgasm.

Hayley rolled Anna onto her back and climbed on top of her. Her chest rose and fell. They just stared into each other’s eyes for a few moments.

Anna caressed Hayley’s hips, in awe of the magnificence of this beautiful woman. Her friend. Her Hayley. She felt such joy but also trepidation. Anna looked off to the side. Where did this leave them now?

Hayley bent down and kissed her on the cheek. Her breasts brushed against Anna’s. “Where’d you go?” she whispered.

Anna met her gaze again and ran her hands down Hayley’s back. “Nowhere.”

Hayley kissed Anna’s neck, finding her pulse point. “Good. Because I need us to do that again. Like right now.”

Anna woke to the sound of birds chirping. From the small amount of daylight sneaking in under the curtains, it was early and going to be another sunny day. Hayley lay sprawled across the bed, naked, and fast asleep, with one arm and leg resting on Anna. Anna smiled to herself. Hayley was definitely getting more comfortable on the bed.

Lightly stroking Hayley’s back, she replayed last night’s events in her head. It was incredible. Better than she had ever dreamed it would be if they ever got a second chance at making a physical connection.

Would she be the same again after what she’d shared with Hayley last night? Did she want to be?

Hayley stirred, making a little noise. She was so pretty like this. Anna preferred her natural look to when she was all made up.

“Good morning,” Hayley said, half-asleep.

“Good morning.” Anna smiled, suddenly more aware of how naked and entangled they were.

Hayley snuggled into Anna. “Did we kiss or something last night?”

Anna turned her body towards her so that they were face to face. Hayley’s eyes were sleepy and full of wonder and playfulness. God, she was so cute. Anna smiled. “I don’t know. Kiss me and I’ll see if I can remember.”

A smile lifted at Hayley’s lips, as if they were the only two people in the world. Sometimes it felt that way. Hayley leant forward and rested her hand on the side of Anna’s neck. She glanced into her eyes and put her lips to Anna’s, kissing her so softly, so tenderly, that it got Anna straight in the heart.

Hayley pulled back. “How do you feel?”

“I’m just... wow.” Anna inhaled. “I feel amazing. You”—she kissed Hayley on the cheek—“are incredible.”

Hayley smiled, as if Anna’s words were a massive relief.

“How are you?”

Hayley stroked Anna’s arm and took a deep breath, nuzzling that bit closer to her. “Is it okay to say that I can’t remember a time when I’ve felt happier?”

Anna nodded, inching closer to Hayley.

“Waking up next to you like this... closer than ever, I’m so happy, Anna.”

“Me too,” Anna whispered, so close to Hayley’s lips.

“I’ve wanted you so much for so long,” Hayley said, quietly, looking into her eyes. “I’m so glad we did that last night.”

Anna held Hayley's waist under the covers. To know Hayley felt that way was a euphoric realisation she hadn't fully come to terms with yet. "Thank you for making the first move last night. I didn't have the courage."

Hayley kissed her, a little harder this time, and deepened it quickly, to find Anna's tongue. In complete silence, Hayley sat on top of her, legs either side of Anna's centre, and gave her a smouldering look that meant only one thing, Anna was fast coming to realise.

Anna reached up and stroked Hayley's breasts, taking her nipples into her fingers and gently squeezing them. They locked eyes. The connection they shared almost made Anna want to cry. Hayley inhaled deeply and leant forward to lie on top of Anna with her elbows either side of Anna's head. When she lowered herself onto Anna, they both moaned in pleasure as their centres came into full contact.

Hayley kissed her on the lips, moving in time with gentle and deliberate thrusts.

Anna tensed her glute muscles and moved them into an even better position, desperate to intensify this feeling and this connection. This was her friend who was now not just a friend and perhaps never was. They were always something more, something that burned hot in the background but could no longer stay quiet.

When Hayley leant over her shoulder and they found a rhythm, it was all Anna could do not to come straight away. They moved against each other, blurring the lines between who was who and building so much heat and wetness that Anna started to sweat. Anna kissed and nipped at Hayley's neck, completely enthralled and at the mercy of every move Hayley made. She cried out Hayley's name as she came to a shuddering crescendo underneath Hayley's body.

Hayley moved off to the side. Anna reached down and touched Hayley's slick wet folds. She fucked her so fast and so hard. She needed Hayley to come as hard as she just had and to see it on her face. Seeing Hayley come for her was her new

absolute favourite thing in the whole world. It was like she was the conductor to Hayley's pleasure, completely in control.

"Come for me," she whispered in Hayley's ear.

The look in Hayley's eyes was desperate and fierce all at once as she rose and rose to the most delicious and strong climax into Anna's hand.

They lay side by side afterwards looking at the ceiling of the campervan holding hands. It came so naturally to keep the connection going. Anna had trouble working out why they hadn't been having sex the whole time. She'd never experienced anything like it.

Anna perched up on her elbow and raked her eyes over Hayley's naked body beneath her, still in some disbelief they were doing this. She rested her hand on Hayley's thigh, caressing her skin.

"You're so..." Hayley said, below her. "It's like this whole other side to you that I've still to learn about. I feel like I've just scratched the surface."

Anna leant into Hayley's ear and whispered. "That's right. There's a lot more you still have to learn about me."

Hayley seemed lost for words. Anna loved having that effect on her.

Anna lay back. Her legs ached as if she'd been doing weights. She wasn't used to this amount of sex, or any sex, for that matter.

Hayley's eyes lit up. "Do you want to take a morning paddle in the bay? This is a special day, and we need to seize it!"

Had Hayley read her mind? For some reason, doing something nice outside again sounded ideal. "I'd love to."

"Yes!" Hayley sprung up. "I'll get the stuff."

Anna followed, pulled like a magnet towards her and willing to do just about anything right now as long as it involved being close. This was a special day indeed.

Thirteen

Anna snuggled into Hayley's chest, unable to think of a time she had felt more at peace. They'd moved south onto the Isle of Harris and had spent their remaining days exploring the island and each other, staying up until the wee hours most evenings and sleeping late in the mornings, all wrapped up in each other. Hayley loved to cuddle, even more so now they were fucking and sleeping naked together. Anna couldn't believe it was possible to be this happy. It was all play and the outdoors and beaches and sex, and on top of that, she was sleeping well and waking up calm and refreshed. She didn't want to come down from this high. She wanted to stay in this bubble with Hayley forever.

It was late. They lay looking up at the clear night sky through the open windows of the campervan. Far away from light pollution, they had an outstanding view of the star-peppered sky.

Hayley stroked Anna's arm in slow lazy circles that reverberated around Anna's entire body. "Tomorrow, we can make a plan for the last two weeks, if you like?"

It was their last night on Lewis and Harris and they needed to start thinking about moving on. Anna was in no rush to leave this place. "Planning. You've changed. Have I had a good influence on you?"

Hayley laughed. "Yes. I know you like to be organised with these things so I thought it might make you happy."

Anna's chest filled with affection. "That's so sweet. But you know what's weird? I'm feeling like I'd rather just go with the flow for the last leg of the trip."

"Have I had a good influence on you?" Hayley grinned.

"Mmm."

"We're good for each other."

Anna nodded. ‘Each other’ suddenly sounded so official but their impact on each other was undeniable. “We are.”

“Will you let me take you back to the mainland and do something super fun? I have a surprise for you.”

Anna snuggled into Hayley that bit more. “Yeah. I will.”

“Ha!” Hayley squeezed Anna’s arm. “That’s brilliant.”

“I don’t know who I am any more.”

“Maybe you’re more chill now that you’re getting sex?” Hayley said, smirking.

“Well if you’re going to fuck me like this then what do you expect?”

“I’m taking that as a win even though I don’t know if it’s my soul that you’re vibing with or my body.”

Anna laughed. “I’m afraid to say it might be a bit of both.”

“Why are you afraid to say that?”

Anna tilted her head. She still hadn’t processed this yet. She didn’t want to think too far ahead. The look on Hayley’s face was so vulnerable, though. “I don’t know. Maybe more sex will help clear my mind?”

Hayley gave her a ravishing look and threw off the sleeping bag in one fell swoop. “Happy to help.”

Water rushed past Anna’s legs as she dangled over the edge of the river gorge. The wetsuit clung to her skin. The drop was steep. The water blazed down the large and smooth rock which led into the pool below it, where Hayley and a guide were waiting. Canyoning was much more fun than she had thought it was going to be when Hayley had surprised her with it yesterday.

In the gorgeous rock pool below, Hayley’s eyes were trained on hers. She had a focused and encouraging expression on her face. Anna didn’t want to disappoint her and she wanted to do this last slide. It did look like fun.

“Are you ready?” Beth, her young guide, asked.

“Yep.” Anna patted her hard hat. She was in position and fully briefed. She was to lie back, with her arms crossed at her chest, and let the water carry her down. Resistance was not only futile but potentially dangerous. “I’m ready.”

Beth, all muscles and good intentions, unclipped the wire above Anna and smiled. “Enjoy.”

Anna used to love water slides when she was younger. Her parents had taken her to a water park in Spain when she was about ten years old. She had flown down the steepest and longest slides without a second thought and loved it. There was no second guessing if she would be safe. She’d just climb the steep steps, wait in line in the hot Spanish sun with the other children, and throw herself down. It wasn’t until she became a teenager that she’d started to overthink everything and turned into a scaredy cat. But these days, that was changing.

“Go for it!” Hayley shouted.

Rob, the other young guide, had a waterproof camera ready for Anna’s slide.

“Here goes!” Anna called while pushing herself off the edge.

The water rushed up to her shoulders very quickly and her body bounced along the rock in a blur of speed and vertical descent. Before she knew it, her feet splashed into the frothy bit of the rock pool, and she was quickly sent underwater with the weight of the river that had so effortlessly carried her.

When she came back up to the surface, she gasped from the cold water her head had been submerged in. She kicked her arms and legs to float, not really knowing where she was for a second.

“Woohoo!” Hayley was there, swimming towards her already.

Anna grinned. That was such a rush. She loved it. Could she go again?

“You made that look easy, Missus ‘I will not be doing anything dangerous on this trip’.” Hayley beamed, holding onto Anna’s waist underwater. “I’m so proud of you.”

Pride swelled in Anna’s chest. She would never have done anything like this if not for Hayley. Her ten-year-old self was happy and felt nourished. Why had she ever stopped doing stuff like this? “Yeah, it wasn’t bad.”

“Oh, stop with the understatement, Anna, you loved it!”

“Okay, okay. I might have enjoyed it a little.”

“I got a good video of you,” Rob said, from the side of the rock pool. “Are you going to do the final jump together? Because I can go down and get it on video too if you want?”

Anna hadn’t checked how steep it was, but this wasn’t the time for health and safety checks. Beth and Rob had been so professional all day that it had filled her with confidence. She looked at Hayley, who was looking at her in what could only be described as wondrous awe and amazement. “Yes, together.”

Hayley smiled.

Anna shrugged. She was having a great day. Why shouldn’t she jump ten metres over a waterfall?

“Nice one. I’ll get into place. Beth should be down any second.”

Anna swam forwards to where she could stand up. There were slippery rocks underfoot. The water was so clear when the sun shone directly onto it.

“You’re glowing.” Hayley touched Anna’s chest, and leaned in for a kiss, but stopped just before Anna’s mouth. Hayley loved to tease her like this. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this relaxed before.”

“Do you mean inside or outside of the bedroom?”

Hayley raised her eyebrow. “Outside. But it’s interesting that your mind went there.”

“My mind always goes there.”

“Hey! How are you both doing?” Beth appeared beside the rock pool.

“All good,” Hayley said. “Gearing up for the big final jump.”

“Awesome. It’s a real treat on this river. You’re going to love it. Also, there’s no rush. Take your time. Enjoy the pool.”

Anna sat on a rock beside the edge and peered over. It was a big jump. Was she really up to this?

“Take my hand.” Hayley entwined their fingers together and pulled her up. “We go together.”

There was an undercurrent of something in Hayley’s tone. Anna couldn’t quite work it out. But she felt its meaning and she felt the strength of Hayley’s calm and steady presence beside her. She was right. Together, they could do anything. At least it felt like that today. Anna spoke softly while looking into Hayley’s eyes. “I like the sound of that.”

Hayley bit her lower lip, her eyes full of life. She called out to Beth and Rob, who both gave them the thumbs up.

“Remember to kick your legs when you drop into the water. You want to get back up to the surface as soon as possible. I think that’s what Beth said, anyway.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Go on three?”

“Okay.”

Hayley squeezed her hand and grinned. “Here’s to life well lived.” She held up Anna’s hand in a sort of celebration. “And much more to come.”

The jump into the next part of the river beckoned them on. Even though her heart pounded and her fear of heights was still there, Anna was all in. They counted together while looking over the edge.

Anna screamed in fear and delight as they flew through the air. Before she knew it, she was underwater again, cold and shocked by the speed of her descent and how deep it took her.

Kicking her legs to get back to the surface, she prayed the darkness around her was temporary.

Finally at the surface, she sprung up and immediately saw Hayley beside her, wide-eyed and splashing around while gulping for air.

Anna rubbed the water from her eyes and found her breath. Her every cell felt alive with possibility. She felt strong and powerful and confident. If she could fly down this canyon, she could do anything.

“Woohoo!” Hayley swam the short distance towards her and put her hands on Anna’s neck, just below her jaw. Their legs brushed underwater. “That was so fucking amazing.”

Anna used her arms to stay afloat, feeling Hayley’s legs kick into hers as they floated a bit further down the river. The waterfall was just behind them. It was perfect.

Hayley dropped her eyes to Anna’s mouth. Her lids became hooded, and her eyes darkened. “I’m so proud of you for doing that.”

Anna licked her lips, wanting to feel Hayley close and touch her all over. These wetsuits were in the way.

Hayley closed the small gap between them and kissed her hard, with a passion usually reserved for the bedroom. Their helmets knocked against each other. Hayley smiled into Anna’s mouth and tugged her to the side of the rock pool.

Anna held on as they floated to the edge. She found some footing on the rocks and unclipped her helmet. Hayley did the same and tossed hers away. Anna threw hers, too, hoping Beth and Rob weren’t watching too closely, but before she could worry about them too much Hayley pressed her back onto the rockface and leaned into her. The look in her eyes was dark and full of desire.

Anna bit down on her lip, staring at Hayley’s inviting lips.

“My sweet Anna. I think you like it when I test your limits. You like straddling that line with me.”

Anna put her hands behind Hayley's head and pulled her towards her. She tilted her head to one side and quickly found Hayley's tongue. The tips of their tongues danced as Anna ran her hands down Hayley's back and squeezed her, grinding their hips together. As time went on, the kiss became softer, and Anna became more aware of their surroundings.

Pulling out of the kiss, Anna looked over Hayley's shoulder. Beth and Rob were on the other side of the river, respectfully looking in the other direction. Oh shit. Since when did she kiss people in public?

She turned her head towards her friend. Her lover. Hayley was grinning, with a satisfied smirk and bedroom eyes.

“Hayley, that line is long gone.”

The ferry rumbled along at the pace of a sea anemone, despite its loud chugging. Anna didn't mind. She leant on the railing while looking out at the water and the islands they were passing. Hayley stood behind her, pressing into her back, resting her head over Anna's shoulder with her arms clasped around Anna's front. The wind blew some of Hayley's hair onto Anna's face. Anna squeezed Hayley's hands, trying to mark this moment in her mind.

“I love it here. I never want to leave this place,” Hayley said, wistfully.

Anna tensed up. Hayley shouldn't say things like that unless she meant them. Because she didn't. This was all they were ever going to have. These days in each other's company without a care in the world were numbered. A lump formed in Anna's throat, but she pushed it away. She would manage her own expectations here, as Hayley was clearly determined to just live one day to the next. Nothing new there. Anna would do the same.

The Isle of Mull jutted out of the water like a giant explosion. Its hills were unlike anything Anna had seen on the other islands. She was so grateful for Hayley giving her this opportunity to explore her own country. These things took

time and money, both of which weren't always in plentiful supply. But this was the real deal. This trip had been something special. It was still something special. Anna didn't want it to end, either, but voicing any of it felt too hard somehow, because what it meant was too scary.

"We are sailing," Hayley sung, over her shoulder, quietly. "We are sailing. Home again, across the sea. We are sailing, stormy waters. To be near you, to be free." Hayley giggled.

Anna turned her head. "You did not just sing Rod Stewart at me."

"I did."

Shaking her head, all Anna could do was turn her head and kiss Hayley on the lips. "I didn't know you were such a sook."

"What's a sook?" Hayley said.

"I dunno. Someone who is overly sentimental and isn't afraid to show it, or something."

"I'm not. You seem to bring it out in me."

Once they'd docked and waited in the van to disembark, Hayley drove off the ferry ramp as if she knew where she was going. She normally relied on Anna for directions when she drove.

"Where are we going?"

Hayley grinned. "I have a surprise for you."

"Really? What is it?"

"You know I'm not going to tell you, right?" The smirk that accompanied Hayley's words was annoying but sexy.

Anna returned her eyes to the road and the beautiful scenery all around them of rugged hills, green glens and a view of the sea. Before long, Hayley turned into an upmarket and boutique five-star hotel. It had to be the best hotel on the island.

Hayley parked and jumped out of the camper. She opened Anna's passenger door. "I booked us in here for two nights. I

thought we deserved a bit of luxury after roughing it in the camper for so long.”

“You didn’t.”

“I also made dinner reservations in the restaurant for tonight.”

“You fucking rockstar.”

“Your thirst for travel planning is rubbing off on me. I also thought it might be romantic?” Hayley hesitated, slightly.

Was Hayley feeling nervous about this? It was strange even hearing Hayley suggest they do something romantic, but not unwelcome.

Anna stepped out of the camper and wrapped her arms around Hayley’s waist. “It is very romantic.”

A slow smile spread across Hayley’s lips. Anna kissed it, wanting to do more but not in such a public place. She hadn’t completely lost it yet.

They checked in and walked hand in hand to their room. It had a beautiful sea view and a large en-suite bathroom fit for a luxury spa. The upmarket handwash and moisturiser made a nice change from campsites, too. The bed was huge and inviting. There was a bottle of champagne chilling in a bucket on the glass desktop beside a plate of delicious looking chocolates on a slate platter.

“This feels like a honeymoon suite,” Anna said, running her fingers along the high thread count cotton sheets.

“Only the best for you.”

“I had no idea you were such a sugar daddy.”

“I can be anything you want me to be, baby.”

“See, now you sound like a very different character. I’m thinking Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*.” Anna smirked. “You actually sound a lot like her. That sexy American accent of yours. God, I love that I can say that so openly now.”

Hayley threw back her head, laughing. “I’ll take it.” She opened the bottle of champagne, poured out two glasses and

handed one to Anna. “Cheers.”

The champagne tasted perfect and hit the spot. The bubbles went straight to Anna’s head.

Hayley moved closer, sliding her hands around Anna’s waist.

Anna picked up one of the ornate chocolates, wanting to see Hayley enjoy one before her. “Would you like a chocolate?”

“Yes please.” Hayley opened her mouth.

Anna gently placed the chocolate on Hayley’s tongue. Hayley chewed and moaned in pleasure, holding Anna’s eyes the entire time. She was such a flirt. “You cannot do that in the cold light of day.”

“What?”

Anna leant on the desk and pulled Hayley onto her, dangerously close to the exact right spot. “You can’t make those noises and those eyes at me.”

“Not my fault. You taste one.”

Hayley picked a chocolate out and placed it in between Anna’s lips. Anna bit into it, making a similar noise as the sweet taste hit her tongue.

Hayley raised a very sexy eyebrow.

“Okay. You’re forgiven,” Anna said. “They are very good.”

“I love your mouth.” Hayley lightly brushed her thumb along Anna’s lower lip. “I can’t get enough of it.”

“I’m still eating.”

“I’m not sorry.”

Anna laughed.

Hayley sat down on the edge of the bed, watching her.

“Yes?”

“Nothing. Just looking at you.”

Anna put down the next chocolate she was about to eat.

Hayley stretched her arms back on the bed, baring her neck and chest.

Anna was pulled towards her. At the foot of the bed, she reached down and caressed Hayley's neck, brushing some strands of hair back over her shoulders. Anna pulled her in close for a hug, so that Hayley's head was in between her breasts. Hayley nuzzled into her, placing her ear on Anna's sternum. They stayed like that for some time, just hugging each other and being together.

"I can hear your heartbeat," Hayley said.

"That's embarrassing."

Hayley looked up into Anna's eyes. She was so vulnerable and so open. Anna had never seen quite such a look in Hayley's eyes before. It spoke of a connection that went beyond what either of them possibly understood. Anna bent over and kissed her on the lips. She lingered at Hayley's mouth, gently brushing her lips against hers. Anna moved to Hayley's cheek, her neck, and then kissed the top of her chest, under her collar bone.

Hayley rubbed Anna's sides and moaned a little. She dug her fingers into Anna a little harder than Anna was expecting.

Something had changed in Hayley since they'd started sleeping together but Anna didn't want to let herself hope that the change was because she too was falling in love. Hope hadn't been kind to Anna when it came to Hayley. Wasn't it precisely because she no longer hoped that things could work out between them that something was actually happening?

Shaking those thoughts from her head, Anna exhaled and came back to the present. Anna kissed Hayley's collar bone then back up her neck, pausing at her pulse point. She wanted to kiss Hayley all over, to run her tongue over her skin and make the most delicious of connections. She'd been thinking about it non-stop lately. Anna hadn't gone down on Hayley yet. She was too scared of it not going well so had shied away. Desire and fear together were funny sometimes.

Desire won out this time as Anna found herself taking Hayley's clothes off and lovingly undressing her friend who had become so much more. Anna knelt in between her legs. She could smell Hayley's arousal which only increased the wetness pooling between her own thighs. But what if Hayley didn't like it again?

Hayley caressed Anna's cheek. "I'm right here. You don't have to do this if you're not ready."

Anna swallowed, nodding. "No, I'm ready. I want to."

The first lick was incredible. Hayley gasped and her head fell back. Anna spread Hayley's legs wider. The second lick was even better, as Hayley's wetness engulfed Anna's tongue. Anna traced a long line from the bottom of Hayley's folds right up to the top of her clit. She slipped her tongue inside and Hayley let out a deep and satisfied moan. She tasted delicious.

Hayley buckled underneath her as she flicked her tongue on her clit. With each lick and kiss time stood still, and the past was slowly erased. She reached up and stroked Hayley's breasts as she buried her face in Hayley's wetness, her tongue slipping inside and her nose pressing into soft curls.

Anna's confidence grew as Hayley's moans intensified. Hayley's body rose and arched, searching for release. She kept Hayley right where she wanted her for so long that it started to feel a bit cruel, but that was no reason to allow her to come. Having Hayley under her complete control like this was such a turn-on.

"Anna. Please. I can't. Take this. Much longer."

But she did go for longer. Anna kept her there, intentionally, loving every second of it. The heat from Hayley's skin grew hotter, as did the sweat prickling on Anna's back. When Anna added two fingers to the situation and fucked her inside while still licking her clit, Hayley moaned so loudly it was almost a grunt.

"Anna. Fuck. Oh my god."

Hayley gripped the bedsheets as she came, hard, into Anna's mouth, rolling around underneath her. Anna dipped her tongue inside, desperate to wring every ounce of pleasure out of this moment for both of them.

When fingers ran through Anna's hair, she looked up. Hayley was flushed, biting down on her lower lip. One final lick caused an involuntary arch of Hayley's back.

Hayley stroked the back of Anna's head. "Come up here."

Anna hovered above her, on all fours, smirking. Making Hayley come like that might have been one of her proudest moments. She raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"Sit on my face."

Anna's mouth opened. Her smirk disappeared.

With a dark look, Hayley put a finger inside Anna, and then another. She curled her fingers, pulling Anna towards her. "Now."

Hayley's dominant side was everything. Anna obeyed and crawled over her. She placed her knees either side of her face.

Hayley hooked her hands around Anna's hips and inhaled before pulling Anna down onto her mouth. She pressed her lips to Anna's clit and gently flicked her tongue, sending Anna wild with each stroke.

Anna gripped the headboard and stared at Hayley between her legs, kissing and sucking with expert precision. A moan escaped Anna's lips. Hayley looked up and they held eye contact for so long it caused another gush of wetness between Anna's legs. When Hayley put her tongue inside Anna, slowly licking up every drop, all Anna could do was hold onto the headboard for dear life and let Hayley have her way with her.

Her heart pounded. She moved her hips over Hayley's mouth, almost unable not to. She searched for release, but Hayley was teasing her, alternating long languorous licks with faster strokes on her clit from side to side. Anna squeezed her own breasts, straightening up and letting her head fall back. When she looked back down, Hayley's brow furrowed in concentration as she increased her pace.

Anna's thighs tightened around Hayley's head as she gave herself to the moment and let herself go completely. Her whole body tensed up, still searching for release. She cried out in pleasure as her orgasm ripped through her. Her body trembled, she was in no rush to stop feeling this good.

It took her a few moments to gather her breath and her senses while holding onto the headboard above Hayley's sweet lips. She moved back down Hayley's body, hovering above her, feeling emotionally and physically shaken.

Hayley's mouth was covered in Anna's juices. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were wide and bright. She reached up and stroked Anna's face with the back of her hand. "Kiss me."

Anna dipped her head and sank into a deep kiss that went on and on, tasting a mixture of her own juices and Hayley's.

When they finally came up for air, Anna looked at Hayley in pure lust, cupping her jaw, in awe of what was happening between them. They faced each other on their sides, like magnets. Hayley's pupils were large. A deep sense of peace came over Anna. She couldn't believe how hard she'd just come or how easy it felt being together afterwards. "This feels so good."

"I know," Hayley whispered.

Anna's stomach fluttered.

Hayley opened her arms and Anna slid into them, nuzzling into her shoulder. She'd never felt so simultaneously excited and safe before. This connection they shared was extremely powerful.

Anna wrapped a leg around Hayley's waist, cuddling into her. Hayley softly caressed her arm. They lay together like that until Anna was no longer sure where she ended and Hayley began.

Hayley checked her watch and frowned. Her movements pierced the stillness. "Uh-oh. We'd better get ready if we want to make it down to dinner. Did you want to, ah, take a shower together, to save time?"

“I think we both know that’ll ruin our chances of getting anywhere on time. You go first.”

“Okay.” Hayley smiled. “I’ll try to be quick.”

Naked, Hayley glided around the room getting her toiletries and things out of her bag. Anna watched on, admiring how confident in her body Hayley was and how beautiful. To think they were fucking each other was still hard to get her head around. To think it felt like so much more than just sex was too scary to deal with.

Hayley popped a chocolate in her mouth, and then another.

“Hey, leave me some.”

“I can’t promise anything.” Hayley flashed her a grin and disappeared into the bathroom.

Anna pulled her clothes back on and sat on a chair by the window, looking out towards the sea. She tucked her knees up to her chest and hugged them, listening to the shower and admiring the view. The hotel room was so nice. It was the perfect place to have this experience.

Anna could still feel Hayley even though she was in the next room. Her soft touch still lingered on her skin. Her taste remained deliciously in her mouth. Her spirit seemed constantly in dialogue with hers. Anna’s entire being felt changed, like it would never be the same again after this. Being in love with her ten years ago was like being trapped inside a muted painting whereas this was like walking together hand in hand among a wildflower meadow in full bloom. The past had no claim on them any more. They were free.

Fourteen

The candle on the table flickered between them over dinner. Anna sipped her wine while listening to Hayley's stories about living in Brooklyn and working in Manhattan. Sometimes she just liked to listen to Hayley talk about her life. It was funny because a lot of the time Anna forgot Hayley was from a different country, but maybe that was because Hayley was so enthusiastic about everything, it never felt like she was more invested somewhere else. Hayley made Anna feel special. But maybe Hayley made everyone feel that way. She did have a ton of friends and people fawning over her all the time. It was easy to love Hayley and, from Anna's understanding, a lot of people did.

Hayley leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. Her hair fell around her face. She couldn't have looked more beautiful tonight. "Don't get me wrong, I loved living there. I did. And even the job for a while. But you know me, I'm always on the lookout for the next challenge. I don't want to stay still for too long."

"Uh-huh."

"There's so much going on in the world, you know. Things to see. New things to learn. It makes me crazy."

"How do you mean?"

"I feel like there's not going to be enough time to do everything I want to do in one lifetime. There are so many careers I'll never get to do. Places I'll never visit. Languages I'll never learn. So many people I'll never meet. I already have a lot of great friends I don't have enough time to see very often."

That stung. Was Anna going to be put in that camp again soon? She'd already spent ten years there and knew exactly what it felt like.

Hayley continued. "To be honest, it stresses me out when I really think about it."

Everything Hayley had told her about her life in the last ten years and what she knew of her screamed of one thing. Hayley lived life intensely: long hours at the office, a full social life, going out for dinner all the time, drinks, a six in the morning workout club, deep diving into a new skill like graphic design, jetting off for weekend breaks every chance she could. Living life at that pace would be exhausting to Anna. “Do you ever stop and do nothing?”

Hayley sat back in her chair. “That depends on your definition of doing nothing. When I’m not working, I’m usually doing something, although I don’t like to have too much structure. I like to be more spontaneous, to keep my options open and to see where the wind takes me.”

“Be free.”

“Exactly.”

“Why do you think that is?”

Hayley studied her for a few moments. “In all honesty, I think it’s because I’m afraid of myself in some way, of being on my own for too long.”

“What are you afraid of, about yourself?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a feeling. I’m afraid of ever feeling bad and I’ll do anything to avoid that. So I sign up for things and get pulled in loads of different directions. I don’t know how to stop doing it.”

Anna was blown away by Hayley’s honesty and self-awareness. Hayley had never told her anything like this before. “I had no idea you felt that way.”

“There’s just something about you that makes me want to tell you things. Always has been.”

“I’m here for you. Always will be.”

Hayley smiled. God, she was so beautiful. “Same.”

“I wonder if it might reduce some of your stress to focus on one or two of your interests at a time. I know it seems basic, but it might help?”

“I’d find that difficult to do. But you might be right about that. Take right now, for example. I’m focusing on this trip and”—Hayley paused—“us. It feels very nourishing and right. Like there’s nothing else I’d rather be doing right now.” A blush crept onto Hayley’s cheeks. “Getting to spend this time with you is very special, Anna. I hope you know that.”

Hayley’s words should have been comforting but they weren’t. Anna didn’t want a special, one-off situation. Although she didn’t know what she did want either. But her feelings were real, and they ran deeper than she cared to admit. Was this all Hayley could ever offer her? A fun but temporary time where she comes into her life and shakes everything up and then leaves again? Was that all this was to Hayley? The thought was like a kick to the stomach. She crossed her arms over her chest and sat back in her chair. “I’m glad you’re enjoying the moment.”

Hayley smiled.

Anna couldn’t return it.

“Life is just the moments we make, right?” Hayley looked into Anna’s eyes, dreamily. “It’s all we remember when we look back.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t mean the daily humdrum isn’t important. It’s the small things that all add up.”

“I love how grounded you are.”

“I don’t know about that. My anxiety.”

“It sure seems like you are.”

“I mask it well.”

“With me?”

“Actually no. I am less anxious when I’m around you. Talking to you makes my anxiety disappear. You have a good impact on me.”

Hayley smiled. “I’m very happy to hear that.”

Anna smiled, slightly uncomfortable at how vulnerable she’d just made herself.

Hayley reached across the table and held her hand. “Well, you make me feel grounded. I feel like I’m more centred in myself when I’m with you. Being around you just feels so good, Anna.”

The waiter came to take away their main course and dessert menus were quickly placed on the table. Hayley studied hers while Anna quietly contemplated the impact of their statements. It was true. Hayley calmed her down. She was better around her. Perhaps even the best version of herself. And apparently she made Hayley feel more centred, too. It was amazing and inexplicable.

But they were so different. Hayley wanted to live an adventurous life and to travel around. That didn’t suit Anna. She didn’t want that. This trip was pushing it a bit far for her, and it was only in her own country. Anna wanted to settle down and start a family with her future partner. Hayley had said she would be open to a version of that life one day, but Anna couldn’t picture what Hayley had meant by it, even if it had sounded good at the time, the way Hayley had described it. Kids needed to stay in one place, didn’t they? Stability.

“Are you having any dessert?” Hayley looked right into Anna’s eyes over the candlelight, as if thirsty for her attention again, bringing Anna back to the present.

“Oh, right. Yes.”

After they spoke to the waiter, Anna continued to focus on Hayley, trying to better understand her. That was all she wanted, really. To understand her. To know her. To love her, in whichever way was best for both of them. Given the fact that she was now a fool in love running dangerously close to the edge of breaking her heart again, it made sense to dig a little deeper on Hayley’s future plans. Hayley couldn’t travel around forever, could she? “Have you had any more ideas on your next step, career wise? You had a ton of different options the last time we spoke about it.”

Hayley smiled. She reached out and held Anna’s hand across the table again. It was such a small act, but for Anna it felt very loving.

“I have been thinking about it. I’m leaning towards starting my own business. Doing stuff online. I could do freelance design and travel vlogging. Maybe start a YouTube channel. I would be quite happy working as a digital nomad from anywhere in the world. The longer I spend on this trip, the less I can see myself going back to a real job.”

“What’s the design stuff? I meant to ask.”

“I took loads of courses in digital media and design. I set up a few accounts and a website and built up some skills on the side. Basically, I can do the graphics for anything people want to display online. I even did a couple of book covers for my friend who’s just starting out as an author. It could be a way to do something useful and help people out in a fun and creative way. And I could use it for my travel vlogging stuff. I thought, why not combine the two? Travel and design.”

“That all sounds great. It suits you.”

Anna was happy that Hayley would be doing things that made her happy and living the life she wanted. But it didn’t stop Anna from feeling disappointed. Ultimately, they wanted different things and different lives. They were going in different directions. And it made Anna sad. When it came to Hayley, it appeared she would never learn.

“By the way, I have loads of photos and videos of our trip already. Would you mind if I shared some pictures of us together? I’m thinking of starting a new Instagram account about my travels.”

“No, not at all. Just don’t post anything too unflattering, and I’m good.”

Hayley, who was still holding her hand, ran her thumb over Anna’s knuckles. “Literally nothing about you is unflattering.”

Their desserts came. Anna finished hers first. Hayley savoured every bite. In the end, Anna just sat there staring at Hayley’s mouth. Some things between them would never change. She was powerless in the face of her love for Hayley and too tired to fight it after such a wonderful day together. Reality and impending doom could wait a little longer.

A gentle breeze caressed Anna's face as they walked hand in hand along the shoreline all the way until the rocks blocked their path where they turned and started coming back. After amazing trips to the islands of Lunga to see puffins and Staffa to see the ethereal Fingal's Cave, they'd made it to Islay, their last stop. Anna clung to Hayley's arm. Hayley would be gone soon. It scratched at her peace and enjoyment of these last few precious hours. Life was going to rip them apart again. It was so fucking shit.

"How lucky are we that we get to see this beautiful sunset on our last night?" Hayley said.

Anna stopped by a sand dune, not feeling lucky about it being their last night but admiring the sky anyway. "Very lucky. Would you like to sit here and watch it go down?"

"I'd love that!"

Anna unfolded the blanket she was carrying and placed it on the soft sand. The sky turned a mixture of orange, red, pink and purple as the sun sank over the horizon. They sat close together. Hayley rested her head on Anna's shoulder and draped her arm over Anna's legs. Their hands entwined. Hayley's body felt like part of hers now. They'd spent the last leg of the trip mostly having sex or cuddling in the campervan. She wanted to breathe Hayley in and never let her go. Sometimes she felt like Hayley was as essential to her as air.

Anna caressed Hayley's arm. "I really enjoyed our visit to the distillery today. I don't visit other ones enough."

Hayley lifted her head off Anna's shoulder. "Would you ever consider working at another distillery?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Just that you seemed super interested today."

"It's my passion, I guess. But no, I'll never leave Glenbuinidh."

"Mmm." Hayley rested her head back on Anna's shoulder.

They were quiet after that. The moon got brighter and the daylight faded.

Hayley stirred. She raised Anna's hand to kiss the back of it. Her lips were warm and soft and delicate against her skin. "I want you to know that I love every second we get to share together like this." Hayley's voice was quiet and seemed full of emotion.

Anna's heart filled with warmth and happiness. "That means so much to me, Hayley. I do too."

Hayley looked at her. Her face was so close to hers. Her eyes were dreamy, and wistful, but also serious. And a tiny bit sad? "You look so beautiful tonight, Anna." She leant over and planted a soft and slow kiss on Anna's cheek, near her mouth. She stayed by Anna's face, and took a deep breath, as if something was on her mind. She pulled back.

The tide was going out. It was nearly imperceptible, but the sea was retreating, a bit like their time together. The thought unsettled her.

What they were sharing was amazing in every sense, but was it real? How did Hayley feel? Anna hadn't verbalised much of what she was feeling. The intensity of what they were sharing was damn near overwhelming. She couldn't shake the fact that their time together was only temporary. She didn't know how to handle it.

After Hayley dropped her off at Balbuinidh, she was leaving to go to Europe and, beyond that, her new path to freedom. She'd made no promises to Anna about anything. She'd even said as much when talking about the chocolates that incredible day they arrived in the fancy hotel room. The chocolates were insignificant, but something about the casual way Hayley had said those four words, 'I can't promise anything', had been echoing around Anna's mind since. Was a holiday romance all that Hayley wanted? And if so, would their friendship ever recover?

Would Anna?

“You’re very quiet,” Hayley said, gently bumping her shoulder.

“Sorry. Got a lot on my mind.”

“Like what?”

The moon shone bright in the twilight. “I’m thinking about us, to tell you the truth.”

There was a long pause. “And?”

“How do you feel about us now?”

“I’m fucking ecstatic. Can’t you see I’m, like, smiling all the time? I’m so thrilled we’ve started this new dimension to our relationship. We started out as friends, yes, but this feels like it was destined to happen. I’ve never felt this connected to someone. The way we just fit each other. It just works. It feels right to me. I mean I never expected in a million years that this would happen. I didn’t even know if we would still get on like we used to. I wasn’t sure if you were going to be the same way with me or not. I also wasn’t sure if you were still going to force feed me cups of tea every five minutes, which I’m sorry to say is still the case, but I am willing to accept it.”

Anna laughed.

“See. I make you laugh. That’s a good sign.”

“You do make me laugh.”

“And you are highly entertaining to me.”

Anna raised an eyebrow.

Hayley continued. “We get on just like before, if not better now.” Hayley leant over and kissed her softly with her eyes closed. It was so sweet. She opened her eyes and pulled back slightly. “It’s the best thing that could ever have happened on so many levels. I’m so glad I came back. I’m absolutely flying here. How about you?”

Anna just sat there, quietly absorbing the impact of Hayley’s words. The waves lapped gently at the shore as the tide continued to drift away. She undid the zip on her backpack, turning away from Hayley to do so, and felt around

for the bottle of whisky she'd bought at the distillery today. She fished it out and offered Hayley a sip. She declined with a slight shake of her head. Anna put the bottle to her lips and let the fiery liquid warm her up. She was careful not to spill a drop, much like her feelings. The whisky offered some fleeting relief to her inner turmoil at hearing Hayley say such incredible things despite Anna's endless doubts and anxieties. She took her time in replying, trying desperately to make sense of her thoughts and feelings. No such clarity came, but one thing was for sure. She loved Hayley and she was happy they got to share this experience together, even if she had no idea where they were headed.

Anna found Hayley's eyes, which were trained on her. "I'm happy too. So happy that I might just be able to overlook the tea comment."

Hayley grinned and exhaled, as if in relief. "You must be, if that's the case! I know not to mess with you Brits and your tea." Hayley laughed. "No, seriously. I'm so happy that you're happy about us. You're amazing, Anna. I've never met anyone like you. You are so sweet and kind. You're fucking awesome!"

"Oh stop it. These lines are awful."

"I don't want to. And they're true."

"Really hadn't pegged you as such a sap."

"Like I said, you do things to me, Anna."

"Like what?"

Hayley gulped. It took her ages to say anything.

Anna waited, patiently.

"I think I just said."

"True."

Hayley's shoulders relaxed. "I've changed my mind. Can I have some, please?" She reached for the bottle and Anna passed it to her, their fingers brushing. Anna got tingles. Her whole body came alive around Hayley. It was that simple.

“I’m glad we checked in about this, Anna.”

Anna was still holding back so many of her fears. She didn’t want to spoil the moment or ruin their vibe. “I’m glad too.” Anna put her hand on Hayley’s upper thigh, near the crease with her hips, unable to hide the slight tremble in her voice. It wasn’t just her body that came alive around Hayley; their connection transformed something in Anna from the inside out.

Hayley gazed into her eyes. “Can I kiss you?”

Anna nodded. Thrilled. Contemplating her doubts about what came next made her want to forget about it as soon as possible. Kissing would help.

Hayley leaned towards her and kissed her gently. She put her hand on Anna’s neck and tentatively kissed her lips, as if this was their first time again.

Anna was getting emotional. Thank goodness it was dark and she could hide her feelings. Lust replaced or added to whatever it was she was feeling, the longer and deeper they kissed.

Hayley lay down and pulled Anna down beside her with such care. She lay on her side, resting her head on one arm and putting the other around Anna’s waist.

Anna mirrored her. They moved closer, legs entwining, bodies pressing together. They were in no rush. Holding each other protected them from the cool air settling in for the evening on the exposed beach. It was warm. Immediate. Intimate.

Hayley pulled her closer in the cuddle, shoring up the remaining distance, as if claiming her. Would she ever, though? The fire between them stabilised and softened into the most comfortable embrace. It felt like home. How was Anna going to live without this? She pushed that painful thought away and nuzzled into Hayley’s neck. The soft rise and fall of Hayley’s chest brought her back to where she wanted to be. Right here. Right now. Wrapped up in Hayley’s arms.

Anna lost track of time. In the quiet hum of their embrace, the connection between them became even more intense. Hayley's breathing became deeper. Anna ran hot with heat and want.

Hayley found Anna's lips and kissed her. They picked right back up where they left off, as if they had been kissing this whole time.

Hayley ran her hand over Anna's body possessively, feeling under Anna's clothes, stroking the skin along her hips on the lower part of her tummy, where her tattoo was. Anna squeezed her abs, instinctively. The sensation made her feel powerful and sexy. She wanted Hayley inside her. The idea of it alone sent her wild with hot desire.

Hayley undid Anna's button and zip while still kissing her and pushed Anna's trousers down to her knees. She was inside Anna so quickly, invited in by the wetness between Anna's legs. Anna felt like an open book. Her feelings were clearly coming out in places she couldn't control. Man, she had it so bad for Hayley and there was nowhere to hide.

When Hayley sank her fingers knuckle deep and back out again, Anna moaned.

Hayley brought her index and middle fingers to her own lips and ran them along them, before putting them inside her mouth. It was like she was doing it for her own pleasure or because she thought she was hidden in the dusk.

"I can see you do that."

"I want you to see."

Anna inhaled.

"You taste so fucking good."

Hayley's eyes were full of desire. It was so fucking hot. She reached down and touched Anna between her legs again. "You are so wet. You're all over my hand."

"Shut up," Anna murmured.

Hayley perched up on her elbow. "You don't want that."

Anna smiled with her lips pressed together.

Hayley leant towards her and kissed her so gently it was making Anna emotional again. Tasting herself on Hayley's lips was so intimate. When their tongues met, another rush of wetness flooded Hayley's hand.

Anna lay on her back in surrender. Hayley slowly ran her fingers around Anna's slick folds, dipping inside sometimes, like she had all the time in the world. Not once did she touch Anna's clit. It was maddening.

"Last night of the trip. I think this calls for something special," Hayley said this while touching Anna. That alone caused a gush.

"What did you, uh, have in mind?"

"This. Sex on the beach." Hayley ran her fingers upwards, stopping just short. Her voice was low and commanding. "Have you ever had sex on a beach before, Anna?"

Anna fought away a moan. The setting, Hayley's voice, and what she was doing to her was perfect. "No. No, I have not."

"Good."

Hayley unzipped Anna's fleece and pushed her t-shirt up so that it bunched around Anna's neck, exposing Anna's breasts. She squeezed Anna's breast before taking a nipple in her mouth. The light breeze and Hayley's mouth opening up around her breast was like fire spreading through Anna's chest all the way down to her tingling centre. Hayley's hair stretched across Anna's skin. It was soft and wild, like Hayley. Hayley touched Anna again, sinking her fingers deep inside. She fucked her so hard, while kissing and sucking Anna's hard and erect nipple. Was this really happening? Was anybody coming? It was dark but they were totally exposed. Anna was completely at the mercy of Hayley's every touch, twitch and lick. This burning desire was only getting worse, not better. How the fuck was that even possible?

Hayley switched to the other breast. Licking, sucking, kissing. The flick of her tongue matched the deep strokes inside her. Fuck, it was so good.

“Yeah,” Anna breathed. “Just like that.”

Hayley stopped.

“Huh?” Anna pleaded, confused, so aroused.

“Who’s calling the shots here?”

Anna frowned, pouting, blinking, desperate for Hayley to resume her wonderful touches. “You are.”

“That’s right.” Hayley sank her long fingers deep inside, fucking her harder, with more deliberate thrusts. “Open your legs wider for me.”

Anna did as she was told, spreading her legs wide.

Hayley put her fingers in her mouth again, licking every drop of Anna’s juices from them. “Fuck, I can’t get enough of you, Anna.” Hayley returned her fingers to Anna’s pussy, dipping inside again, but this time, her thumb started rubbing Anna’s clit. Hayley pushed herself up and settled between Anna’s legs, hovering above her, still fucking her, still touching her clit with her thumb. Long delicious strokes gripped Anna’s desire and brought her towards release. There was nothing Anna could do but let Hayley have her hard, demanding way with her. Hayley teased Anna’s breasts with her free hand. This connection they shared threatened to destroy Anna from the inside out. There was nothing she could do about this heat ripping through her body but let it happen, let Hayley see how much she needed her. Ached for her.

Anna bit down on her lip as she came for Hayley, holding her eyes the entire time. Her back arched towards her lover who took her over the edge with her skilled fingers. Anna’s heart raced as she breathed heavily after coming so hard. A few moments passed as they looked at each other, the breeze taking Hayley’s hair every now and again. Anna swallowed, feeling so exposed and like she’d only scratched the tip of the iceberg of what she needed from Hayley tonight, or perhaps ever. “You have way too much power over me, you know.”

Hayley grinned above her, still fully clothed. “Fucking yes, I do. I love it.” She lay down on the blanket, relaxing onto her

back. “But I wouldn’t say way too much. Just the right amount.”

Anna sat up and straddled her lover. Her knees sank into the soft sand underneath the blanket. She needed to reset the balance a bit here. The power of being on top after coming so hard was such a rush. Doing this outside was such a rush. She leant down and whispered in Hayley’s ear. “Listen, forget all that shit before. You’re mine now.” Anna shifted over and rested her thigh in between Hayley’s legs, rougher than she ever had before. Even through clothes there was such heat coming from Hayley.

Hayley’s brow furrowed with a look of desire and sexy concentration. “Yes, ma’am.”

Fifteen

It was unsettling seeing the big roads and towns again. The outside world hadn't changed. But everything between her and Hayley had. They were on their way to stay with Anna's parents before going on to meet up with Rose and Lauren tomorrow night. Introducing Hayley to her parents in her current state was less than ideal but it made sense since they were driving past, and a grilling from their old flatmates on what had happened on the trip was the last thing Anna needed right now. The meal had been arranged for a while. It was the right thing to do.

Hayley was quiet, making only passing comments about the sights they drove past or the traffic. Perhaps she was feeling it too, this sadness about leaving their little piece of heaven behind. Anna didn't want to bring it up because she wasn't prepared for where that conversation might lead. Not yet. Not until they'd had the visit to her parents and the dinner with their old flatmates out of the way.

The more logical part of Anna couldn't believe she was taking Hayley to meet her parents. Especially after everything that they had just been up to. But she wanted Hayley to meet them. It felt important that she did, somehow. She gave Hayley directions to their house and tried not to freak out. She'd thought her hometown would provide some calm, but so far it wasn't working.

Hayley perked up the closer they got to Anna's parents' house. The radio had been put back on. A pop song played in the background. It was surreal to have Hayley drive her about the outskirts of Glasgow like this.

"This is so exciting seeing where you grew up." Hayley looked out the window to her right as they waited at the traffic lights. A local high school was coming out. It wasn't the one Anna had gone to but it was similar. "It's so green and leafy. It's like the epitome of perfect suburbia, but it has some life about it."

Anna snorted.

“I mean that in a good way. It’s so beautiful. The houses look different but it’s similar to back home. I like it.”

Anna let out a breath and tried to relax her shoulders. “Sorry. I’m just a bit tense. My parents can be a bit much.”

Hayley reached over and held her hand. “Please don’t worry. It’s all going to be fine. It’s me who has to be worried, if anything.”

The lights changed to green and Hayley set off.

“Turn left at the end of this road.”

“Roger that.”

“They will love you. There’s no doubt about that.”

“And I’m sure I’m going to love them. They raised you.”

Anna swallowed.

She and Hayley had already agreed not to say anything to her parents about them. Hayley had seemed relieved, and Anna was happy about the plan. There was no need for her parents to know, and Anna didn’t want them to. But being so up in her feelings, she was worried they were going to notice anyway.

“It’s at the end of this street.”

The campervan made its way through her childhood neighbourhood towards her childhood home. It wasn’t just her parents catching on that she was madly in love with her friend that she was nervous about. Showing Hayley this part of herself was terrifying. What if it changed the way Hayley saw her? A magical and sex-filled holiday romance was one thing, and her Scottish parents who had lived by the same routine for thirty years was another. Her parents were going to bring them right back down to earth. Was this where their romantic bubble burst? Maybe it had to at some point.

“This is it.”

“Aw.” Hayley scanned the front of the house and the garden. “It’s delightful.”

Her mum was at the living room window peeking through the blinds. Her dad opened the front door and waved. He was already walking down the garden path before Anna had got her seatbelt off.

Anna opened her door and greeted her dad. He gave her a big hug. "Hello, darling."

Hayley appeared from around the campervan and her mum arrived behind her dad, smiling.

She gave her mum a quick hug. "Hi, Mum." Anna looked between her parents and Hayley, who looked so sweet and innocent. "Hayley, these are my parents. Mum, Dad, Hayley."

Her dad stuck out his hand and shook Hayley's. "Good to meet you. I'm Martin," he said to Hayley, before nodding to the camper. "That's some van you've got there."

"Thanks! It's all down to Anna. She picked this little beauty out."

Her dad glanced her way. "Well done. It looks solid."

While Anna knew he would be happy to see her and Hayley, she also knew he was massively interested in finding out more about the campervan. He did well not to give it a full service within the first minute.

"Lovely to meet you," Anna's mum said, going in for a hug. "And I'm Aileen. We've heard a lot about you."

Hayley raised an eyebrow. For a second, Anna's stomach knotted. Her mum had only met Hayley for two seconds and was already nearly embarrassing her.

"It's so nice to meet you both!"

"Do you need help bringing any bags in?" her dad asked.

"No, thank you." Hayley shook her head. Seeing her be all polite was endearing.

"Don't worry about it, Dad. I'll come back out in a bit and get them."

"Anyway, come in! Come in!" Anna's mum said. "Let's get you both a nice cup of tea and you can tell us all about your

holiday.”

Her parents set off back towards the house. Hayley smiled, delighted.

Anna rolled her eyes. It was like she could tell exactly what Hayley was thinking. “After you.” Anna gestured for Hayley to walk ahead.

“Why thank you,” Hayley said.

Anna took a deep breath. Between Hayley and her parents, she had her work cut out tonight. She wished she hadn’t told them about Hayley all those years ago. They knew that Anna had been heartbroken after Hayley had left and that this continued for longer than would be normal for a friendship. It was why they were not surprised when Anna finally came out to them. Her mum had even asked her if it was ‘because of Hayley’. Anna had had to gently correct her mother that being a lesbian wasn’t caused by someone else. You were either made that way or you weren’t. But now they were getting to meet Hayley in the flesh. Anna sighed. What had she got herself into?

Over tea and biscuits, they chatted about the trip. Hayley sat beside her on the two-seater sofa across from Anna’s parents.

“Did you get a clear view of the sky up in Lewis? I hear they are pushing for dark-sky status,” her dad said.

“We did. It was incredible,” Hayley said. “We saw the milky way. I couldn’t believe how clear it was. It was one of the highlights of the trip. Totally.”

Her dad nodded, engrossed. “And what about the midges? Did you get eaten alive up there?”

“No, Dad, they weren’t too bad this year.”

Her mum sat there quietly taking Anna and Hayley in. Anna knew her mind was working on something.

Hayley kept looking over at Anna, smiling, and tapping her leg sometimes.

Anna wanted to hold her hand and sit closer. It was hard to go back to acting like just friends.

“I love these cups,” Hayley said, spinning hers in her hand. “They are so unique.”

“My mum made them.”

Hayley’s eyebrows shot up, and she looked at her mum. “Wow, that’s so cool! Did you take a class?”

“Yes, years ago. I have a workshop in the garage. I can show you, if you like?”

“I would love to see it!”

“Right. I’ll go and get dinner ready.” Her dad left the room.

“Is that you at school?” Hayley said, standing up and walking over to Anna’s high-school picture on the wall, complete with braces and an ill-thought-out fringe. “You were so cute.”

Anna blushed.

“Yes, Anna became very sensible in her teenage years, the complete opposite of what she was like when she was in primary school,” her mum said, walking past. “Shame, that.”

In her mum’s workshop, Hayley and her mum talked for ages about her mum’s pottery stuff. There were shelves and shelves of trinkets her mum had made along with materials and books. A lot of small paint pots and slender brushes were still scattered around. Her mum was never one to clear them up. There was a faint ceramic smell lingering, as usual. It was like home. Hayley was so charming, the way she was all interested in her parents and her home like this. Anna could hardly take her eyes off her.

“Anna used to do her homework in here while I worked on some bits and pieces. Or she would make her own things.”

“Oh yeah. Practically grew up in here.”

“And now you have your very own workshop in the garden,” Hayley said, smiling at her.

“Like mother like daughter,” Anna’s mum said, looking proud.

Anna smiled. This was nice. Being here with Hayley and talking to her mum, Anna felt happy.

“What’s that?” Hayley pointed at the large chest filled with random sports things near the door to the garage.

“What?”

Hayley crossed the room and picked up Anna’s old skateboard, stacked up vertically next to the chest. “You had a skateboard, that’s so cool! You never said.”

“I haven’t been on it in like twenty years or something. I’m surprised it’s still here.” Anna turned to her mum and smiled at her, shaking her head. It was so sweet of her parents not to throw it out. It reminded Anna of endless hours playing on the driveway and in the street, skating around and falling off loads. She got okay at it, at one point, then stopped playing on it for some reason.

“You loved that thing. Of course we kept it.”

Hayley picked it up and came back to them, turning it around in her hands, inspecting it. “It’s vintage. Super cool! Look at all these stickers. Anna, I need to see you on this.”

“Oh no, no. I was rubbish then and I’ll be even worse now. You’ve seen me on roller-skates, I’m awful.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s just for fun. And I’ll catch you if you fall, anyway,” Hayley said, putting the skateboard down and stepping on one end, lifting the other off the ground. “I mean, look at these killer wheels, they are begging to be spun again.” Hayley beamed at Anna.

Anna could not stop smiling. There was something about Hayley that made her feel like an excitable little kid again. “Okay. Maybe just for five minutes.”

“Awesome.” Hayley picked up Anna’s old skateboard and put it under her arm.

They opened the garage door and Hayley put the skateboard down. She gently rolled it towards Anna. They

were like kids going out to play in the street. Anna put one foot on it, tentatively, then another. She fought to find her balance and managed to stand up. Hayley and her mum were looking on. Anna couldn't stop smiling, but she didn't care. She bent her knees and used her right foot to push away from the ground.

“You're doing it!” Hayley said.

Anna laughed. “I am! This is great. It's coming back to me.” She laughed again when she lifted one end of the skateboard up and turned around like she knew what she was doing and didn't fall off. “Fuuuuuck.”

“You're a natural, Anna. Tony Hawk would have been worried all those years ago.”

Anna laughed. “Damn right. Here, do you want a go?”

“Yeah!”

Her mum looked between them with an affectionate expression. “Okay, I'll leave you both to it. Remember to bring your bags in and put them in your rooms. Martin will have dinner ready soon.”

Rooms. Plural. The idea of being apart from Hayley tonight didn't appeal. She'd miss her so much.

Hayley frowned, and then replaced it with a smile.

“It's fine. Hayley can sleep in my room. I'll bring the mattress in from the other room.”

Her mum raised her eyebrows then nodded. “Oh. Okay. Yes, whatever you want.”

Upstairs, after an exhilarating time playing on the skateboard, of all things, Hayley helped her move the mattress. Once it was safely positioned on the floor and tucked in beside Anna's single bed, they hovered in Anna's old bedroom.

Hayley looked around. “I half expected to see posters from your teenage years and stuff. This room is not that. It's very sophisticated.”

“I grew up in this room, but they made it into a guest bedroom a few years after I moved out. The only traces of my time here are that pile of books, the mirror and the chest of drawers.”

Hayley picked up one of the books. “The Well of Loneliness.” She smiled, turning it around in her hands. “I’ve read this, too.”

Anna smiled. How did she not know that about her? “You are full of surprises, you know that?”

“I’m very happy to keep surprising you. I think it’s wonderful.”

Downstairs, her parents had got out their best cutlery and crockery for the meal, and the best wine glasses. It was very sweet of them.

Over dinner, Hayley rested her knee against Anna’s leg underneath the table. For such a simple gesture, it set Anna’s heart aflutter.

“So Hayley,” her mum said. “What are your plans after Scotland?”

Hayley paused, fork in mid-air. “I, um.” She looked at Anna, hesitantly. “I’m going to travel around Europe for the summer.”

And that was it. Her mum burst the bubble. Anna took a large drink of wine.

“Lovely. What an amazing opportunity. Where are you going to first?”

Hayley put her fork down. “I’m getting a ferry to Amsterdam from Newcastle.”

“Interesting,” her mum said. “And then?”

“I want to spend some time in the Netherlands and Scandinavia. Then I’ll go to Germany. Austria. Italy. Maybe Switzerland if I can plan the route right. France. Then back up to England crossing the channel at Calais in the ferry to Dover. I’d like to explore the south of England for a bit before I sell the van.”

“That sounds absolutely brilliant. I hope you have the time of your life.”

“Thanks. I’m sure I could spend a lifetime visiting all of the places over here. I’ll only scratch the surface on this trip.”

“We tend to only holiday in Europe these days,” her dad said. “So many places to see. We love France, in particular. Go there every year. Spain more so in the past. Portugal recently.”

“We travelled a lot when Anna was little. She used to love exploring new places with us,” her mum said, looking at Hayley. “But she hasn’t been away with us for a long time. In fact, you haven’t been abroad in years, Anna, have you?”

“I guess not.” Anna frowned. Why was her mum making such a big deal about her lack of holidays?

“Shame that. You used to be such an adventurous little soul.”

Hayley’s knee was still resting against Anna’s leg. Her chest felt heavy. Why did Hayley have to leave? She pushed her food around on her plate, no longer hungry, while everyone enjoyed the meal. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t known Hayley was leaving. She’d been actively avoiding it.

“Right,” her mum said, once everyone had finished and forks hadn’t been touched in a while. “Who’s for coffee?”

Hayley helped her mum clear the table. So polite. Anna just wanted to go to bed now and hold Hayley close.

Anna made the coffee while her mum and Hayley tidied things away and put four cups on the dining table. It wasn’t surprising how effortlessly Hayley inserted herself into the situation. She was always so good with people, so at ease with herself. Anna loved it.

Her mum rooted around the sideboard and pulled out a photo album.

Please, god, no.

“This is Anna when she was little. Would you like to see?”

The full beam smile that took over Hayley's face was almost dazzling. "I would love to see!"

Her mum pulled up a chair beside Hayley and laid the old photo album on the table. 'Little Anna' was written on the front. The visit had gone from bad to worse.

"This was Anna as a baby. I sometimes bathed her in the kitchen sink over there."

"Mum. Please. What the fuck?"

Hayley grinned, her eyes sparkling with glee. "That is the best photo ever."

"Or this one. I love this one of you, darling."

The page displayed a five-year-old Anna going high on a swing. Her hair was curly, and she had a toothy grin.

"I love how spirited and excited you look. Although I'm amazed you didn't insist on wearing a crash helmet."

Her parents both laughed. Hayley really was a hit, which of course Anna knew she would be.

Later that night, after more childhood photos and stories had been shared and spilled with Hayley, never to be taken back, they were in her bedroom with the door firmly shut.

"I love your parents. I've had the best time tonight. You"—Hayley pulled her close on the bed with her—"are the cutest. Like, I feel like I know you even better now after this. The real you."

"I'm glad you're having fun." Anna didn't know how to answer Hayley's lovely words. "Thanks for being so great with them. I'm sorry you had to endure so many pictures."

Hayley smiled. "I loved them all."

They lay there, on the single bed, cuddling into each other. Anna didn't know what to do except hold her. Her heart was starting to ache with the uncertainty they were wrapped up in. She didn't have the strength to analyse it or communicate about it right now. Instead, she switched her bedside light off

and re-joined Hayley on the pillow they were sharing.
“Hayley?”

“Yes?”

Anna spooned into her. “Sleep well.”

The streets of Edinburgh were a complete change of pace. Anna drove the campervan with relative ease through the traffic. She said she would drive because it was harder driving in a city and especially with the large camper it just made sense for Anna to do it. Hayley hadn't put up a fight.

“Can we drive by our old apartment before we get there?” Hayley said, out of nowhere. “I really want to see it again.”

“Oh. Um. Yes. We'll have to take a bit of a detour, but we should be able to fit it in before we meet them.”

When they got to their old street, Anna felt strange. Not only did it feel like an eternity since they lived there together, but with Hayley back again and everything they'd shared on the trip, it was like they were living in a whole new reality. She and Hayley had finally got together, and it was even better than she'd ever dreamed it could be. They'd come full circle. But what next?

Hayley stared and stared at the block of flats. “It's insane being back here.”

Anna blew out a breath. “I know what you mean. I feel the same. Why do you feel that way?”

“I've thought about this place a million times over the years. I really loved my time here. I loved spending it with you. We were so young.”

“We were babies.”

Hayley turned to her. “I'm so grateful I got to come back and see you again.” She had a serious tone. “I'm grateful our story didn't end here. Because for a long time, I thought it had.”

Anna let Hayley's words sink in. Sometimes it was hard to see how Hayley felt because she was so in the moment and focused on having fun. But the more time they shared with each other, the more it seemed like Hayley was invested. Anna's heart rate picked up. She reached over and held Hayley's hand. "I'm glad you came back. I'm glad we get to continue our story, too."

Hayley caressed Anna's hand with her thumb. "How do you feel about being back here?"

Anna thought for a few moments. "I always wondered what it would be like to be with you and now I am. Maybe I feel a little bit triumphant." Anna smiled and stroked the inside of Hayley's wrist. "I got the girl and she's sitting right here with me."

Hayley grinned. The familiar playfulness was returning to her eyes. "Tell me more about this wondering you did. Feel free to be as detailed as you can, please."

Anna laughed a little and started the engine. "No. I'll tell you later if you behave tonight. We'd better get going if we want to get there on time."

In the Indian restaurant, Anna and Hayley sat across from Rose and Lauren. A plethora of plates and bowls were spread across the table along with copious amounts of naan bread and beer. Anna had caught up with Rose and Lauren before Hayley arrived in Scotland. At that meet up, it was all about Lauren getting engaged and Hayley's upcoming visit. It felt like ages ago.

"You are a complete fucking legend. I always think of you killing it in the corporate world over there while I am in a classroom full of screaming six-year-olds," Rose said.

"I was just another number in the end. They've already replaced me and forgotten all about me. Makes me wonder why I put in all that effort."

"You were quite high up, though, weren't you?"

"I was."

“Then at least you got good money out of it, I assume. I earn shit money as a teacher and I can’t afford to buy a house, but hey-ho.”

“I quit.”

Rose regarded Hayley closely. “That just makes you even more of a badass.”

“That’s true,” Lauren said. “Being able to walk away and start on your own path is very inspiring.”

“I’m just having a long vacation at the moment, guys. I haven’t tested my own path yet.”

“You will,” Lauren said. “I’m sure it will all work out for you.”

“Thanks, Lauren. So how did you get engaged? Can I see the ring?”

Lauren extended her hand as Hayley made excitable noises at the small rock on her finger. “We went to Paris. He got down on one knee with the Eiffel Tower in the background.” Lauren blushed.

“That’s awesome! Congratulations!” Hayley said.

What type of engagement would Hayley love? Would she want the fairytale engagement like Lauren had, or something more unique? Anna didn’t know the answer, and it bothered her that she didn’t know.

The talk moved onto Lauren’s wedding plans and then about parties in general. Going to parties and navigating life together was their shared interest while at university, so there was a lot of ground to cover.

“You remember that time we had that hippie party towards the end of your year here?” Rose said. “That was such a great night. Who was that guy who showed up with all the weed? He was the perfect addition to that night. It was like we all manifested him into being then never saw him again.”

“He’s become like university folklore in my mind,” Lauren said.

“We took some great pictures from that night. I still have them,” Rose said. “Especially of the two of you.” She looked at Anna and Hayley. “You were so cute together.”

Anna had never told Rose and Lauren that she had been deeply in love with Hayley all those years ago. They suspected and were never shy about saying so, which on some level always grated on Anna.

Of course, that they had thought something was going on between them used to give Anna hope that maybe Hayley felt the same. And now she knew that Hayley had. Anna still hadn't fully come to terms with the enormity of finding that out. She probably never would.

“Anna was looking particularly beautiful that night,” Hayley said.

She remembered every detail of that party but would rather not think about it. That night had been one of the most painful nights in her not-so-unrequited love story back then.

“So, you two shared a campervan for two months? How did that go?” Rose said.

Hayley glanced over at Anna. “It went very well.”

“What the hell does *that* mean?” Lauren said.

“Yeah, there's something going on with you two,” Rose said. “The tension is off the charts. You've got to tell us.”

Anna gave Rose a scolding look. She could be quite tactless at times.

“So, nothing much has changed then,” Rose said. “The sparks are still flying between you two.”

Hayley smiled and shook her head.

What the hell was going on? Was Hayley enjoying this? Did she see them as some sort of fun joke with her old university friends? Anna was hanging on by a thread not knowing where all this was leading and what they were doing. And to have to pretend that nothing had happened was testing her.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” Anna said, rising out of her chair.

In the peace and quiet of the empty bathroom, she looked at herself in the mirror. Was any of this good for her?

The door to the bathroom opened. It was Hayley. “Are you okay?” Hayley came up behind her and cuddled into her in that way she often did.

Anna met Hayley’s eyes in the mirror. They were concerned. “I’m fine.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Anna held her eyes. In a restaurant bathroom on a night out with friends wasn’t the time or place.

“I just want to go home.”

“Back to the camper?”

“No. Home to Balbuinidh.”

Sixteen

Hayley helped Anna take her things out of the campervan and into the house. Removing her presence on Hayley's trip stung like crazy. The reality of their time together being over was hard to take.

"Where do you want this?" Hayley held up Anna's paddleboard.

"You should keep it. You might need it if you meet someone and want to go with them. I hear the lakes in Italy are amazing in the summer."

Hayley frowned. "Anna. I'm not going to go paddleboarding with someone else."

"You can't mean that."

Hayley walked past her with the deflated paddleboard under one arm into the house.

Anna closed the door to the campervan and locked it. A heavy feeling settled in her chest as she looked longingly through one of the windows. The only thing she'd left was her blanket. Or Hayley's blanket.

"What are you thinking about?" Hayley said, from the doorstep with her arms folded at her chest.

"I'm sad that it's over." Anna faced her. They stood looking at each other for a few moments. A torrent of mixed emotions was raging inside Anna. She was triggered and didn't know how to broach the subject of what was next for them. All she could think about was the fact that Hayley was leaving her.

Again.

"We need a drink," Anna said, stepping past her into the house.

"Yes, ma'am."

After they'd taken a seat on the sofa and some whisky had been poured and drunk, Anna still couldn't relax. Everything

was playing on her mind. Her body was tense. Her thoughts were black and white. Another large gulp of whisky provided marginal relief until she saw Hayley softly gazing at her beside her on the sofa.

“Are you okay?” Hayley said.

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you lie down and rest your feet on me? I’ll give you a foot rub.”

She lay down and got comfortable while Hayley moved to the other side of the sofa and gently picked up her foot. Her touches reverberated around her whole body. She took Anna’s sock off. Anna got lost in the soothing pressure that Hayley was applying. For a moment, her worries fell away. But she couldn’t let herself get sucked into a false sense of security. Anna took a deep breath. They had to have a proper conversation, no matter how uncomfortable it was to face this.

“Hayley. What are we now?”

Hayley looked up. “What do you want us to be?”

“I asked you first.”

“I want us to be together.”

Anna’s breath caught. She had not expected Hayley to say that. “You want us to be a couple?”

“Yes. Don’t you?”

“I didn’t think it was an option.”

“Why?”

“Because we live in different countries, and I don’t want to lose your friendship again. What if a relationship doesn’t work out?”

“We embody the lesbian stereotype and stay friends for life either way. Nothing will ever change how I feel about you, Anna. I’m here for you. You and I are forever, either way.”

Anna smiled, feeling instantly calmer.

“What else is worrying you?”

“Was this just a holiday romance for you? Some fantasy or something.”

Hayley considered Anna’s question while still massaging her foot. She squeezed each of her toes absent mindedly. It was so soothing. “At times it did feel like a fantasy coming true, I’m not going to lie, but no, this isn’t just a holiday romance for me. If it was anyone else but you, then yes, maybe I might be feeling differently. But you’re you. We’re us.” Hayley tilted her head. “Did you really doubt that?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just I know who you are, and I know what you want out of life, and it isn’t me. Here.”

“Anna, please don’t tell me what I do or do not want.”

“You’re leaving soon. Where does that leave us?”

“I don’t know. Part of me doesn’t want to go any more.”

“You don’t? You’re having second thoughts?”

“How could I not be?”

“But this trip is your dream.”

Hayley’s hands stopped moving on Anna’s foot. “It is. But so is being with you.”

Anna’s whole body froze.

Hayley continued. “What was it to you? Was it just a bit of fun before I headed off on my merry way?”

That Hayley didn’t know the answer to that question threw her. She steadied herself on the armrest of the sofa. Perhaps she’d done too good a job at hiding her feelings over the years and the past few months. It wasn’t right that Hayley didn’t know, even if it was scary to admit. It just wasn’t right.

“Hayley, it was everything to me.” Anna’s cheeks burned hot. “It still is.”

A smile spread across Hayley’s face. “It’s everything to me, too.”

Anna couldn’t look at her. They were broaching relationship territory. Doing that with a friend, even though it

was Hayley, was a different feeling. She felt way more vulnerable and exposed.

“Let me stay here for a bit longer. I can delay my trip. We can spend more time together and hopefully figure some things out.”

Her heart was screaming yes but something at the back of her head remained wary. She ignored it. “Yes.” She smiled. “Please stay. I would love that.”

“Yay!” Hayley crawled across the sofa and up Anna’s body to give her a massive hug. “This is amazing!”

Anna wrapped her arms around her as Hayley rested her head over her shoulder. It was deeply comforting to hold Hayley like this. Anna could finally relax for the evening.

Hayley kissed her on the cheek then went back to Anna’s feet. She picked up Anna’s other foot and began kneading Anna’s arch.

Anna moaned unselfconsciously. “That feels so good.”

“I have the magic touch on you.”

“Hayley?”

“Yes?”

“I’m really happy you’re staying. And not just for the free foot rubs.”

Hayley squeezed her foot and grinned. “Who said they were free? I’ll be expecting some rubs in return.”

Anna laughed.

Anna went back to work while Hayley stayed at home. She was apparently going to do all the laundry and then go for a potter around Balbuinidh. They’d had sex all over the house last night. Even for them, it had been epic. She kind of liked the idea of Hayley waking up in her bed, all fucked out from the night before, picking up the pieces, and waiting for Anna to get home so she could fuck her again. That would be some life. But such ideas were dangerous. Because what was going

on right now between them was only temporary, surely. Balbuinidh couldn't hold Hayley's interest for long.

The distillery was in the peak of the summer season, so it was all hands on deck at work. It wasn't possible to do her usual routine when she'd got in, given everything that needed to be done and the number of visitors in the building. She didn't have time to catch up on her emails or even to chat properly with any of her colleagues, not even Kelly. It flew past in a blur, and she'd felt unusually off kilter for most of the day.

It wasn't just that it was her first day back in two months or that it was busy. She was unsettled, knowing Hayley was at home but imminently leaving. As the day ticked on, everything that was going on between them came crashing down amidst the reality of being back at work, back to normality.

By the time Anna got home she longed to be back out on the road with Hayley or watching a sunset over mountains somewhere, like how they were before reality had hit.

"You're back!" Hayley called out from the kitchen.

"Hi!" Anna put her keys on the table by the front door. There was music playing in the living room. One of their songs from the trip about cold water swimming. For a moment, it took her right back to their amazing trip.

Hayley came through to the hall. She was wearing a crop-top and denim shorts. She looked so fucking beautiful.

Coming home to Hayley was surreal. Anna paused to savour the moment as Hayley wrapped her arm around her waist, lovingly.

"I missed you." Hayley leaned in and kissed her once on the lips. She smelled of cooking and relaxation. Her skin was warm and glowing. "How was it being back?"

Anna could get used to this. Why did Hayley have to leave when all they needed was right here? It made no sense to her.

"You're awfully pale. Are you feeling okay?"

“I’m fine. It’s so good to see you.” Anna shook her head and shrugged out her shoulders. “So you know that grace period I said I was hoping for when I got back to work?”

“Yeah?”

“Not happening. So much stuff has built up while I’ve been away. This whisky business is more serious than you’d think.” Anna laughed, hesitantly. “I might have to work longer hours this week. I’m really sorry.”

“No problem. I can start working on my business and get the equipment I need. It makes sense to put that stuff in place now so I can pick up work while I’m travelling.”

Travel. Anna suppressed a sigh. Sometimes Anna felt like them not being in the same place was the most certain thing about them. “That’s handy then.”

“I made dinner.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

“And I did all the laundry from the trip, yours as well, and tidied up. I hope you don’t mind.”

Anna did a double-take. It was hard to believe Hayley had wanted to spend the day in Anna’s little house and town. “Playing house with you feels so surreal. But thank you for doing all that. And for cooking.”

“It feels pretty good to me.” Hayley wrapped both her arms around Anna’s waist and ran her hands up and down her back.

Anna pulled her in close for a hug. “Does it?”

“It absolutely does. Why do you sound so unsure?”

“It’s just hard to get my head around.”

“Get your head around it. I have housewife potential in me.” Hayley laughed. “Let’s eat!” She strode off.

Anna stared at the incredible woman walking towards her kitchen. Hayley was happy on day one but would surely grow restless the longer she spent in captivity. What would they do then?

At bedtime, they went about their routine getting ready for bed. It was all so normal and domestic, two things Anna never thought she would experience with Hayley.

“Which side do you want?” Hayley said, at the foot of it. “I forgot to ask you.”

“Either.”

“Let’s just see what happens then.” Hayley got under the covers.

Hayley was so firmly now in the centre of Anna’s life. But something wasn’t right. She couldn’t fully relax. Why wasn’t she happier that her dream had come true?

“Are you getting in?” Hayley said, making herself comfortable.

Anna slid under the covers and rested her head on the pillow. She lay on her back, quite rigid.

Hayley stroked her neck and smiled with that glint in her eye. “I’ve been thinking about you all day.” She traced her finger down the centre of Anna’s neck and chest, all the way to her tummy button.

“I’ve been thinking about you, too.”

“Oh yeah?” Hayley cuddled into her.

Anna’s mind tortured her with thoughts of the future. Why couldn’t Hayley just move in and get a job at the distillery and tell her she loved her ten times a day and never leave? Why was Hayley not acknowledging the block in the road when it came to them? What the fuck were they doing pretending that things were going to be okay?

The next day at work Anna struggled to concentrate, which didn’t help since she had a lot to get done. She hadn’t slept well. When she got a spare moment at lunchtime, she messaged Hayley and they chatted for a bit. Hayley was at a shop in town buying new camera and video equipment for her next adventure. This dampened Anna’s spirits even further.

She hid in the back office attempting to do some invoices and failing miserably to get anything done. What was she

doing getting so attached to a woman who wasn't sticking around? Even if it was Hayley? *Especially* because it was Hayley. Her heart was so vulnerable. It wasn't a given that the friendship would be unaffected if things didn't work out, despite what Hayley had said about that. And how could she bear a friendship with someone she loved so deeply? She hadn't known her feelings for Hayley were going to come back and grow into something so beautiful and overwhelming like this. But even if she had, she would have been powerless to have acted any differently. And she wouldn't have wanted to. What they shared was special, and she would cherish it for the rest of her life. Maybe this was all they were ever going to have. Because a real relationship with Hayley could go nowhere. Was she trying to mentally detach, trying to convince herself that it couldn't last, as a way to make it less painful when Hayley chose freedom over her? Hayley had left her ex because she felt stifled. Tiffany had left Anna because she felt caged. Anna wanted to protect herself from the pain that Hayley's rejection would inflict. Because she might never recover a second time.

The anxious feeling in her gut wouldn't let up. It got worse and worse each hour, it felt, while Hayley was living her best life getting all excited for the next part of her trip. She went about the rest of her day feeling sad and trying not to let her feelings show to her colleagues or visitors. She took her job seriously and maintaining her reputation as upbeat, friendly and professional was important to her.

Around four-thirty Kelly came into the bar, all smiles and bright eyes. It was so good to see her.

They hugged and Kelly took her usual spot on a stool at the bar. "So, you got together? How are you feeling? How was the trip?"

Anna sat on the stool next to her friend and boss. "I had the time of my life." She smiled. She couldn't help it. "It was incredible. But I feel like I'm sleepwalking into a disaster, and I don't know what to do about it."

"What do you want? What does Hayley want?"

“We want different things. That’s the problem. She wants to travel and live this carefree spontaneous life and I, well, I don’t want that. She wants to keep her options open. She’s just going to leave me, eventually. I can feel it. I don’t know why life has put us in this impossible fucking situation.”

“Have you talked to her about any of this?”

“Not really.”

Kelly gave her a gentle but disapproving look.

“I know. I know.”

“Would you consider going travelling? Or moving to America?”

Anna thought about it. “I might. But to be honest, I don’t really want that. I want to settle down. Here, preferably.”

“How is she?”

“She’s delaying her trip to Europe to stay with me for a bit longer.”

“Well that’s a good sign, isn’t it? Talk to her.”

“Do you think I’m a fucking monumental idiot for getting involved with her?”

“Oh, Anna. Of course I don’t. The heart wants what it wants.”

“We connected on so many levels, it was fucking insane. I fell in love with her again. But this time, so much harder and so much deeper. I don’t know how I let this happen again.”

“You poor thing.”

“I just don’t know if it’s going to work out.”

“Do any of us know that for sure?”

Anna took a sharp intake of breath. She felt uneasy. “Hmm. Good point. I can’t picture what our life would be like. A long-distance relationship? Me following her around the world or to the US? I can’t see her staying in Balbuinidh. She’s not going to be satisfied with Scotland, or any one place, when she

could literally go anywhere in the world or go back to the States where her family and friends are.”

“Hey. I grew up here.”

“Sorry, but you know what I mean. It’s so small. She would get bored in a week, if she isn’t already.”

“Yeah. I do know what you mean. Christ knows how many times I tried to leave in the past.”

“Exactly.”

“But if she falls in love with someone, she might want to stay. It does happen.” Kelly smiled.

“How are things with Myla?”

Kelly beamed. She really was glowing today. “She’s great. Anna, we got engaged!”

“What! That’s amazing! Congratulations!” Anna hugged her, making excited noises. “When did this happen? Who proposed to who?”

“At the weekend. I wanted to tell you in person. I proposed.”

“How? Where?”

“We went down to London to go see Myla’s favourite band at The Apollo and visit her aunts. I booked out a private area at the top of The Shard for an hour, after a very fancy dinner. They set up the most beautiful space for us decorated with candles, lanterns and hundreds of rose petals. With a panoramic view of London, I got down on one knee and proposed. We sipped champagne and slow danced at the top of the world. It was perfect. But guess what?”

“What? That’s so romantic by the way. Good going.”

“Myla had picked out a ring too! She didn’t have it with her, but she was going to propose when we got home at the top of our mountain!”

Anna laughed. “That is the most lesbian thing. You two are so fucking sweet.”

Kelly held out her hand for Anna to see her ring. It was a gigantic diamond ring that Anna couldn't believe she hadn't spotted immediately.

“Remember I said to you last year that I was really happy when Myla and I first started sleeping together?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I still feel like that but it's even better now. I can't imagine my life without her.”

“And neither should you. Kelly, this is amazing.”

“Thanks, Anna.”

Anna smiled. “I'm so happy for you guys. Have you set a date?”

“Not yet. We want to take our time with it. We're going to keep things pretty low key. Myla doesn't want a big wedding. I'll be happy with something small, too. We're thinking of having it at Glenbuinidh House.”

“Aw, that sounds fucking perfect.”

“I'm not going to have any bridesmaids. Neither is Myla. I wanted to let you know because if I was going to have any, I would be asking you.”

“Fuck convention, Kelly. You guys do whatever the fuck you want.”

Kelly laughed. “We're going to walk each other down the aisle. We're two grown women who are jointly going into this.”

Anna stood and went behind the bar. They needed to toast this. “I love that.”

Anna opened one of their finest bottles and poured a dram out each. Smiling from ear to ear, Kelly picked up her glass with such hope and optimism in her eyes. Seeing her get to this point with Myla warmed Anna's heart.

“Congratulations, Kelly.” Anna tapped her glass to her friend's. “This is the best news ever!”

Anna stopped by the supermarket on the way home and had a brief chat with the cashier, her neighbour of a few doors down the street. Afterwards, she sat in her car in the car park ruminating and worrying about her relationship with Hayley before heading home. While she was over the moon for Kelly and Myla's engagement, it did draw her attention to how far she and Hayley were from such a commitment. She still felt like she was in some sort of holiday romance with Hayley when all Anna wanted was steady, unglamorous, real love that didn't stress her out all the time.

Parking next to Hayley's campervan, Anna's anxiety was peaking. Her thoughts raced. Soon, the camper would disappear and all that would be left was a few emails and messages which would probably taper off too. The thought of that made her feel sick and lightheaded.

"Hey!"

A smiling Hayley appeared by the car. She was wearing her denim shorts and a casual t-shirt. Her hair was wavy and wild, just like her. Everything about her was radiant and glowing.

Would Anna ever recover from this heartbreak?

Anna got out of the car and before she could close the door Hayley was already hugging her, tightly.

"Hey, you," Anna said into Hayley's shoulder.

"I was going to play it cool and wait for you to get inside but I saw you pull up and I just couldn't contain myself." Hayley took the bag of groceries out of her hand. "I've been waiting for you for hours. God, I can't believe I said that."

"You were?"

"That and sorting my trip around Europe. All that planning you did made our trip ten times better so it motivated me to plan Europe. I have my route all mapped out and my ferry tickets booked."

Anna had whiplash. One second Hayley was acting like a loving girlfriend, and the next, a passing guest on a bigger adventure. They needed to talk, but Anna was terrified of the

conversation. “Great. Let’s go inside and you can tell me all about it.”

Hayley had notes all over the dining table. Her laptop and phone were positioned like she was working. Papers and travel guidebooks were scattered everywhere. Seeing her take up space in Anna’s real life was wonderful and heartbreaking at the same time. Anna wanted it so much to be the real deal, but it wasn’t.

Hayley put her hand on the kitchen counter. “I zoomed with Olivia today.”

“Oh. How is she?” Anna had heard a lot about Olivia. She was Hayley’s friend from college who now worked in a publishing company in New York.

“She’s great.”

“Did you tell her we got together?”

“Yes. I told her.” Hayley smiled. “It’s pretty much all we talked about.”

Being the topic of conversation was hard to get her head around. Being in a romantic relationship with someone you were friends with first was complicated. “All good, I hope?”

Hayley furrowed her brow. “Of course. What else would it be?”

Anna leant against the kitchen counter and folded her arms over her chest. “I don’t know.”

“Do you want to go out tonight? I thought maybe we could go to the little pub around the corner? Like we did on my first night?”

It had started already. Anna put the groceries in the fridge, a crushing feeling in the pit of her stomach. Hayley was bored of her and her small life already and hoped to find more excitement in the local pub. Going out was the last thing Anna wanted, given how things were between them and how busy things were at work. She was in no mood for it. “Would you mind if we just stayed in? I don’t feel like going out tonight.”

“Sure.” Hayley seemed to force a smile.

This was exactly what them being in a relationship would be like. Hayley pushing Anna to do more than she wanted, or Hayley being held back and becoming more and more resentful until she finally had enough and left her. It had happened before with her last girlfriend. It could happen again. “It’s been a long day. I’m tired.”

“What would you like to do instead?”

“Nothing. Watch TV. Unwind together.”

“Right.”

“And you were going to tell me about your trip.”

“Oh yeah.”

Anna felt her forehead furrow. Hayley just wasn’t on the same page.

“I’ve booked the ferry from Newcastle to Amsterdam on July fifteenth.” Hayley paused, tentatively. “Which means I will be leaving in a week.”

“Uh-huh.”

Hayley eyed her carefully. “Anna. You know how I feel about leaving. I’m so conflicted. Part of me doesn’t want to go but another part of me is super excited.”

“Hayley. You’re going. There’s never been any doubt about that. It’s fine.”

The atmosphere dimmed somewhat after that. Hayley told her about the plans she’d made, and Anna did her best to be supportive all the while feeling this heavy sadness expand in her chest.

Seventeen

Anna headed towards the car park. It was a lovely summer's evening with not a cloud in the sky. The manicured gardens of the distillery were in full bloom and smelled so fragrant. The distillery grounds looked majestic on nights like this.

Hayley's campervan was parked next to her car. She was sitting in the driver's seat with the door open and her leg hanging out the van. Anna's tummy did somersaults. It was so great to see her.

As soon as she saw Anna she jumped down and ran towards her. "Hey, you." Hayley kissed her on the lips, briefly. "How was work?"

"Hey. It was good, thanks. What are you doing here?"

"I thought we could go for a picnic? It's such a nice evening and we've got hours of light ahead of us. I brought some food and the camper," Hayley said, gesturing towards it. "Obviously."

Anna smiled. Hayley was so sweet. "That would be lovely."

Leaving her car at work, Anna got in the campervan and they set off towards their favourite loch, which would be perfect on a night like this.

"I kind of feel like I'm kidnapping you. Are you sure this is okay?"

"I'll let you know how I'm feeling if you try and smuggle me out of the country."

Hayley laughed, nervously.

Driving through the hills and relatively empty roads to the loch was a bit like being back on the trip. Anna missed the fun and freedom she'd experienced. Normal life had returned far too quickly since being back.

"This is us," Hayley said, parking up.

“I’m impressed you knew where you were going. Did you check the route beforehand?”

“I did. I’m a changed woman.”

“You are.”

Inside Hayley’s picnic was a selection of cheeses, olives, grapes, oatcakes and little sandwiches. She’d found Anna’s favourite chocolates and had a bottle of white wine in a cooler. Hayley spread the blanket on the sandy shore and carefully arranged it so that it was flat and even. There was something different about her tonight. If Anna didn’t know any better, she’d have to say that Hayley seemed a bit nervous. Anna’s heart went out to her. She cared about her so much.

“Ta-dah!” Hayley swooped her arms open and bowed.

“This is so beautiful, thank you.” Anna sat down and crossed her legs. “It’s very romantic.”

Hayley beamed. “That’s what I wanted.”

They enjoyed the picnic and the gentle breeze and the views over the loch and the picturesque mountains all around them. She really should come here more often on nights like this.

“Anna.” Hayley’s voice was more hesitant than normal. She spoke, not meeting Anna’s eyes. “I’ve noticed you’ve been a bit more distant since we got back. Is everything okay?”

“It’s just been a bit hard being back at work.”

“And having me around.”

“No. That’s not it.”

Hayley met Anna’s eyes. “You know, you never answered my question.”

“What question?”

“You asked me what we were now and I asked you what you wanted us to be.”

“Oh.”

“I said I would like us to be a couple. To give this a shot. Because that’s what I want. Seeing you again has only made my feelings grow. Long-distance doesn’t have to hold us back. Plenty of people do it. Who knows what the future holds?” Hayley picked up Anna’s hand. The sincerity in Hayley’s eyes made Anna’s breath hitch. “All I know is that I want to be with you, and I couldn’t be happier that I’m getting to know you in this way now. It feels like the missing piece of the puzzle and I love how we fit together.”

Anna sat very still. Part of her wanted to cling so tightly and never let go. But she was terrified of getting hurt again. Hayley had disappeared out of her life once before and Anna wasn’t convinced she wouldn’t do it again. Some wounds cut too deep. Her head hurt.

Hayley waited patiently. “Is that what you want?” she said, after a while.

“I’m not sure.”

Hayley froze. All the colour seemed to drain from her face.

Anna shifted around to face her directly. She stroked Hayley’s hand and rested her other hand on Hayley’s leg. The energy between them was strong and powerful. “I love that you feel that way. I feel the same. I have no intention of seeing anyone else but I’m not sure that making it official is going to solve anything.”

Hayley frowned. “Solve what?”

“You’re leaving.”

“I can come back. And you could come and visit me in different countries. You could fly out on the weekends or on your time off. It’s not far.”

Anna sighed. “It’s still the same issue.”

“We can work it out.”

“Can we? You have said countless times how you want the freedom to go wherever you want on this trip and in your future. You don’t even know where you’ll be in three months, for example.”

Hayley was quiet.

Anna continued. “Can’t we just enjoy what we have together right now?”

Hayley frowned. “That sounds like something I would say to someone I wasn’t into.”

“I am into you.”

“But not enough to be with me?”

Anna looked down at the picnic blanket. “You’re going away again.”

“Come with me. It could be just like the Scotland trip. Do you think you could get the time off work?” Hayley’s eyes were growing desperate.

As good as it sounded in theory, given more time together Anna would only fall more in love with Hayley which would result in a more catastrophically painful separation when Hayley moved back to the states. “I don’t think I can get more time off work unless I quit.”

“Then quit. I will take care of you. You wouldn’t have to worry about money.”

Anna couldn’t believe Hayley was suggesting she quit her job and become financially dependent on her. That she would even suggest something like that blew Anna’s mind. It was crazy and a terrible idea. Did Hayley really mean it? “I like my life here. I like it in Balbuinidh and at the distillery. And having my own money is obviously very important to me.”

“I wasn’t suggesting—” Hayley tucked some hair behind her ears.

“That you be my sugar daddy?”

“I could think of worse things.” The smile that returned to her face was what Anna wanted to see, even though they were having a hard conversation. Hayley perked up. “You’re making me sweat here.” She exhaled, as if purging the bad vibes from her body. “What if we go crazy and take a year and go all around the world? We could start with the tour around Europe, then sell the van, and set off east. I’ve been thinking

about it. I think it would be incredible. Can you imagine? You and me exploring the world together? Think of all the fun we could have. It would be so special to share that with you. It feels so right to me.” Hayley’s eyes were both pleading and steady.

The question of Anna going with her on the rest of her trip had hung between them unspoken for a while now. Hayley wouldn’t make such an offer lightly. Anna felt queasy, but not from the picnic.

“I’m so sorry but it’s not what I want. I’ve loved our trip around Scotland and I’m so grateful to you for it. But I want to be here. I want to spend my days in a place that feels like home and put down some roots. Would you consider giving up your plans to stay here with me? We both know you would find that boring and that it wouldn’t be enough for you. Hayley, I’m so worried that we want very different lives on a fundamental level.”

Hayley turned her head away and looked off into the distance.

The very idea of them being in the same place and being together properly felt so far-fetched. Could Hayley not see that? Anna hated herself for coming to that conclusion. But what was she supposed to do? Anna wanted safety. Routine. Family. Hayley wanted spontaneity and risk. Hayley wasn’t going to settle down with her here. She wanted to explore the world and a new career, not watch films together on the sofa. How could they hold that against each other? How could she ever ask Hayley to change? She loved her too much to get in the way of her plans. She’d loved Hayley so deeply and for so long that it was part of Anna’s DNA, but for some reason changing everything to put Hayley at the centre of her world when she had left her high and dry once before felt like a step too far.

“I don’t see why any of this stuff matters. You either want to be with me or you don’t.” Hayley’s voice was smaller and more vulnerable than Anna had ever heard it. It was heartbreaking.

Anna rubbed her neck. This was so difficult for both of them. It was like they were locked in an impossible situation. “It’s not as simple as that. I don’t want a long-distance relationship while you travel the world. And I don’t want to hold you back.”

“You wouldn’t be holding me back.”

“It’s not just that you are leaving. We are so different. We want different things out of life.”

“Difference is good. We balance each other out.”

Anna held her eyes, unsure if it was. “I’m afraid it won’t work out and I can’t bear to risk our friendship. I know you think we would stay friends but it’s not a given when feelings are involved. I’ve seen it happen.”

“Is that how you think of us?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what the solution is here.”

“Neither do I.”

Hayley stood and packed up the picnic and blanket. The drive home was quiet, tense and sad. There was this heavy and low feeling that hit Anna right in the gut.

Once they got home, Anna didn’t know what to do. She was in limbo, a state of flux and anxiety. Was she going to lose Hayley forever again? She couldn’t see a way through this.

Hayley paced the living room, having not sat down since they got home. Anna was leaning forward on the sofa, hugging her own waist, trying not to be sick.

“Anna.” Hayley stopped pacing and sat right in front of her on the coffee table. “Listen to me.”

Anna straightened up and looked at Hayley sitting in front of her, hoping she had the solution.

Hayley’s eyes were wild and fearful. But there was something else in there too. There was love. Anna breathed it in but was it enough?

“I came back here thinking it was Scotland that I needed. That it was Scotland that had made me feel happy. Most

myself. Most free. But it wasn't. It's you. You are what ignites me. You make me feel so seen and accepted for who I am. I want you to know how I feel about you because this is real. This is so fucking real to me, Anna. I love you. I'm in love with you and I always have been. You're the only thing that's ever made sense to me."

Anna's heart pounded.

Hayley continued. "You remember that conversation we had in that restaurant about what we want in a partner? We both described each other. I can't stop thinking about that. Can you? I've fallen for you so hard. I never expected it, but at the same time I realised it was always there. I was always in love with you. What we have is so precious. We had this between us all those years ago and we squandered it. Maybe it just wasn't the right time, but it is now. I can feel it. Being in Scotland was the last time I felt happy because that was the last time I was with you. Let's not waste another second of life not being with each other and making each other happy. We could have everything together if only you'd have more vision for what life could be like and take a risk. Take a risk on me. For me. Please. I'm begging you."

"Hayley..."

Hayley knelt in front of Anna and rested her forearms on Anna's thighs. Her fingers gripped at Anna's legs.

Leaning forward, Anna lifted her up and hugged her tight. To be loved by Hayley was the best thing in the world. But Anna's heart ached already at the inescapable reality of them splitting up one day. Anna pulled back and looked into fearful eyes that probably mirrored her own. She tucked some hair behind Hayley's ear, feeling an excruciating mixture of love and fear. "Why does this feel so painful?"

"It doesn't have to be painful. We could have everything together."

"You want us to be a couple yet you're leaving and giving me no promises about anything except making me a kept woman living a nomadic lifestyle that I don't want."

“Ouch.”

“I’m terrified you’re going to get bored of me. Your idea of fun is going out and doing new things all the time, but I need more downtime. I’ve been making an extra special effort for the trip but I’m not sure I can live like that twenty-four seven. I like to cosy up, and I want someone who doesn’t make me feel bad for not going out all the time. Magnify that on a round-the-world trip and I’d be exhausted. You’d see me for who I really am – you’d find me boring.”

Hayley moved back from her. There was hurt in her eyes. “I know who you are and that’s what I want. I think we are great together.”

“You say that, but I’ve seen how disappointed you get. It’s a constant tension between us. It makes me feel guilty that I’m holding you back.”

Hayley looked down at Anna’s thighs.

Anna continued. “Where will I be if I quit my job, my home, my life, and follow you around the world and it doesn’t work out? I’ll have even less time to move on and find someone to settle down with. I want to have a baby. A family. I’m ready for it. I just don’t want to travel and live that life. Can’t you see that?”

Hayley didn’t say anything.

“I’m so sorry.”

“This wife you keep saying that you want to find... maybe you don’t need to look any more because I’m your person, Anna. I love you.”

Anna opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out.

“And if you want to meet someone you need to get out there. You won’t find them sitting at home wishing for it. But you don’t have to go through all that because I’m right here. I want all the same stuff as you do one day. You’ve already found her.”

Anna’s old wounds rose to the surface, jagged and scalding. “You said you were my person once before and then you

disappeared on me. How do I know it wouldn't happen again? You said we would keep in touch before and then I didn't hear from you for years. On the one hand, we were just two friends who drifted apart, which I understood and it was fine, but on the other hand, we were never just friends and you left me. You left me, Hayley. You were my person already. I don't think you know how much that hurt me. I didn't go on about it and I did forgive you. You explained what was going on for you and I got it. I get it. But that doesn't change the hurt that's still there. It worries me. I'm just not sure I can trust you not to leave me again. I think it might destroy me."

"Anna, I would never just disappear on you again. Please believe me."

Anna's breathing was shallow. She was burning up and slightly dizzy.

"Are you okay?"

"No. Not really. Are you?"

Hayley shook her head and sighed. "No."

Anna tried to take a breath and gather her scrambled thoughts. Anxiety smashed into her at the possibility she was ruining everything.

Hayley's face turned harder. "Is safety and certainty really what you want? Aren't you just letting fear dictate your life?"

"I'm trying to be rational and see this objectively."

"Then why did you get close to me again? Why did you make me feel like this was a possibility?"

"Because I'm in love with you."

Hayley stared at her. After a long time, it seemed, she finally blinked.

"If I let myself, I'd cling to you so much you would find me suffocating. I'm one tiny step away from giving you everything, but I just can't. When we were on our trip, I loved every second we spent together. Even when you were making me fly through trees or swim in freezing cold water." Anna paused and took a deep breath. It did nothing to settle her. "I

couldn't stop myself from getting close to you. I'm sorry. I did try."

Hayley held Anna's hand and searched her eyes, feverishly. "You love me. I love you. That should be all that matters."

Anna felt close to tears. "It's too risky."

"The only thing that's certain in life is that there is no certainty. You're a fool if you think otherwise. We're in love. We have fun together even when we're not really doing anything. I don't need all that external stuff when I have you. I've made my case around the future and wanting the same things as you but you keep ignoring that. I don't know what else to say." Hayley stopped. She took her hand away. Her eyes turned cooler and it sent shivers down Anna's spine. It was like watching the sun set, not knowing if it would ever rise again. "I will not beg again."

Anna held her breath. Hayley was slipping through her fingers and there was nothing she could do about it. Anna sat forward and held her head in her hands. Tears threatened but she pushed them back down. They sat in silence for what seemed like an eternity, neither able to make this better and go back to the way it was.

Hayley stood. Her stance was rigid. "It's late." Her voice was cold. "I'd like to go to bed please. I'd prefer to sleep on the couch."

Eighteen

The door clicked shut behind her. She triple checked her bag and her pockets that she had everything with her. She did. Her brain wasn't working this morning. While it was super inconvenient that her car was still at work and she had to walk in, a bit of fresh air might help clear her head. She'd hardly slept last night. For hours she'd tossed and turned, desperately wanting to go through and start up the whole conversation again to fix it this time, somehow, or to just hold Hayley close. Her heart ached knowing that she couldn't do either of those things right now.

Hayley was still sleeping when Anna had left. Anna couldn't tell if she was actually asleep or just pretending to be. Either way, Hayley had her back to her as she got some snacks from the kitchen. She cursed that she had to go to work today as she and Hayley had so much to unpack. Not that she knew what to say to make any of it better.

Hayley had said that she loved her and Anna had said it back. It was everything that Anna wanted, although she wished they'd said it to each other under better circumstances, yet there was this thing that she couldn't let go of. This fear.

The walk helped, marginally. At work, it was just one thing after another and very little of it held her attention or interest, which was unlike her. She let her emails pile up and asked Greg to cover a tour so she could sit and ruminate in her office. She couldn't stop thinking about Hayley and what was going on between them. Anna got her phone out and typed a message to Hayley then deleted it. She did this for several minutes before settling on one.

*Good morning. How are you feeling? Can we talk?
Thinking of you xxx*

Three hours later, she still hadn't heard anything back. The message remained unread. An uneasy feeling set in. Her chest was heavy and tight. Her stomach felt hollow. She finally got

away from work and drove straight home. The campervan was not there when Anna pulled up outside the house.

There was a knot in the pit of her stomach as she opened her car door. She hurried inside. Hayley's things were gone. The dining table was clear and her backpack was no longer in the wardrobe.

Hayley was gone.

Anna wandered around her small house in a futile search as her heart sank further with each step. Nothing was resolved. Everything was still up in the air. How could she leave like this?

The picture frame of her and Hayley by the loch had been placed in the middle of the coffee table. A bit of paper sat in front of it. Anna grabbed it and unfolded it.

Anna,

*I changed my ticket to get an earlier ferry.
The keys are at the back door under the blue
plant pot.*

*Yesterday was hard. Maybe you're right.
Maybe we are not meant for each other as
romantic partners. Please know I will always
love you and I will always be here for you. I
have made my feelings more than clear. But
right now, I think we need some space. It pains
me to do this but I have to go. You made
yourself clear. You've given me a lot to think
about. Maybe it's better we've been so honest
with each other like this so soon.*

*My dear Anna. I hope you find someone who
makes you truly happy and you get to live the
life that you really want.*

*I'll be in touch at some point. But for now I
think I need to regroup and focus on myself.*

Please take care.

All my love,

Hayley

Anna refolded the letter and placed it on the table in the same spot, like she hadn't read it. She sat on the sofa, resting her arms on her knees and put her head in her hands. She felt numb. Frozen. Hayley was gone again.

Gone.

Gone.

Gone.

The house was quiet except for an intermittent drip of the kitchen tap. Their conversation last night was raw and brutally honest. It reverberated around her head. It had been so frustrating to leave Hayley on the sofa last night, right in the middle of it, and now, to have Hayley just up and leave before they'd resolved anything was infuriating. The look of hurt in Hayley's eyes and how they'd turned colder as she'd asked to sleep on the sofa had sent chills down Anna's spine. It was that look that had made Anna back off.

Hayley's letter felt like a goodbye.

Tears pooled in her eyes.

How had they got here?

Was Hayley okay? Was she safe? Anna had never been entirely happy about whether it was safe for Hayley to be travelling on her own, and now she would be driving south upset. Anna picked up her phone. Still no sign that she'd read the message. It killed her not knowing how or where Hayley was.

Anna paced the house going over everything they said to each other last night and in the last few months. If only Hayley had waited for one more day they could have had more time to talk things through. Not that Anna knew what else she could say.

Anna sat on the kitchen floor, as good a place as any. Maybe Hayley was right. Maybe they did need some space from each other. How could she have gone down a path with Hayley that went against everything she wanted? It was too much, even if she was in love. She just couldn't do it.

Anna had the next day off work. She went to the gym and tore the place up, feeling like she was going to burst from all this pent-up nervous energy. She added more weight and more repetitions to every exercise and didn't rest much between sets. The burning and straining in her muscles provided momentary relief from what was going on inside her head and heart.

A bead of sweat dripped down the inside of her arm as she completed a set of back squats. She walked the bar back onto the rack and added more weight plates before slipping underneath it again and struggling back to standing. It was torture knowing she couldn't have a proper relationship with Hayley while simultaneously feeling like she couldn't live without her. Pushing her body to its limits normally quietened her mind, but not today. The situation with Hayley weighed down on her, much like the barbell on her shoulders. She managed two repetitions before yielding. It was too heavy, and slightly dangerous. She avoided looking at her face in the mirror as she walked the bar back onto the rack, feeling like a failure in so many ways.

Why was she feeling this crushed? If it wasn't meant to be with Hayley, why did it feel like her whole world had collapsed? Anna kept going at the gym, this time stabbing the buttons on the treadmill and ranking up the speed and incline. She ran and ran, appreciating the pain in her legs and lungs.

After the gym, Anna tried to relax in the bath at home but her feelings were all over the place. She couldn't regret having said something. Wouldn't it have been worse if she had kept quiet? It was true what she'd told Hayley. If she'd let herself, she'd have followed Hayley to the ends of the earth and completely lost herself in the process. She would have stuck to her like glue long after it was clear that things weren't moving in the right direction for Anna and then where would she be? It

would have destroyed Anna's heart, her future, and their beautiful friendship. She was certain of it. If only Anna had held back and not let anything happen between them, she wouldn't be feeling like this. The bath had turned cold. She rested her hands along the side of it and pushed herself up to standing as the water dripped off her.

Work came around far too soon. She spent the morning helping to organise Glenbuinidh's presence at the Balbuinidh Highland Games at the end of July. Last year had been such a success with the launch of their new bottle, Queen of Spirits. The pressure was on to make this year's festivities equally as successful. Normally she'd be super excited but today she couldn't generate any enthusiasm. It didn't sit well with her that she was like this. She'd never been apathetic about her job at Glenbuinidh. Her whole life felt like it was crumbling around her from her own lack of interest in it. She sighed. Hayley had done it again. She'd broken her.

In the afternoon, Anna sat with Kelly on a bench in the garden in front of the visitor entrance over lunch. It was a beautiful and sunny day, but she couldn't really enjoy it. She wasn't hungry so she watched Kelly have a sandwich while she sipped coffee. She brought Kelly up to speed, knowing they both had things to get back to after lunch. Anna spared few details except how much sex she and Hayley had on the trip. No one needed to know that.

Kelly puffed out her cheeks. "Jeez."

"I know."

"I'm so sorry."

"I'm struggling to make sense of it all. My head feels like a mess. It's all jumbled up."

"It sounds very intense."

"I guess it's been building up for years," Anna said.

"Maybe you both needed to get it all out there? Your true feelings, I mean, your deepest fears."

"Mmm."

“Give her time. Give yourself time. Then see how you feel? It might not be over.”

“It feels over. I can’t see what’s going to change to make it not be. A relationship with Hayley is a risk I’m not willing to take. I can’t believe I was so stupid.”

Kelly pressed her lips together and smiled but it was more like a grimace.

“Hayley’s letter was pretty clear. We both know there are things between us that can’t be changed. Maybe we both just need to accept it.” Anna clenched her jaw and frowned.

“I’m so sorry, Anna.”

Anna unclenched her jaw and her lower lip trembled. Tears formed but she shut them down. “I just have to accept it and then things will be fine. Then I’ll be able to move on.”

“Is that really what you want?”

“It has to be. I don’t have it in me to risk this.”

“Taking a risk will be involved with anyone you date next.”

“It’s different with Hayley.”

“How so?”

Anna was quiet for a few moments. The sun shone on her face, and for a second, she remembered how it felt to be loved by Hayley, and then, to be left by Hayley. “I’ve never loved anyone as much as I’ve loved her. Being with her, even as a friend, is the best feeling ever. I nearly didn’t recover the last time she left. I can’t go through that again.” Anna paused, feeling like shit. “Fuck. To be honest, I am going through it again, only it’s worse this time.”

“Oh Anna.”

“It’s fine. It’s for the best. It has to be.”

A month later, there was a big storm in Balbuinidh. High winds brought dramatic clouds of rain, thunder and lightning.

Anna watched from her living room window during the night as the rain lashed at the window and battered Joyce's flowers.

The next morning, Kelly messaged. A tree had fallen down and was blocking the road leading onto the estate. Anna went over to help clear the road.

The chainsaw was deafening, even over the ear protection, as she sliced the tree into manageable chunks. Despite her regular gym sessions, her muscles ached as she strained to hold the machine in place. It felt good to be able to help her friends out, plus, it was amazing to use a chainsaw. She had only ever used one once before. Myla and Kelly threw the chunks into a dumper truck. It was just as well Myla was building an animal shelter on the estate and had bought a whole shop's worth of construction equipment. They took it in turns with the chainsaw, carrying logs, and driving the dumper truck back to the log shed. It took hours to clear the road of all the debris. It was hard work, but worth it.

"Thank you so much, Anna," Myla said, when they finished. "It's so great of you to come around and help us out at short notice like this."

Anna placed the chainsaw in its case. "It's no problem. Seriously, I've loved it. Thank you for getting me out of the house."

Myla smiled, taking her safety glasses off. "We make a good team."

They loaded the tools and brooms onto the truck, and Kelly got behind the wheel and turned the engine on. "Great work, guys. I'll see you back at the house."

Kelly rumbled down the small road, as if living her best life. Anna laughed quietly and took her own safety glasses off. She and Myla trailed Kelly's slow-moving vehicle towards Glenbuinidh House. The road was littered with fallen twigs and leaves. The air felt clearer, though. It felt like summer was over now, which was kind of sad. It would still be very hot in southern Europe for another month or so. She and Hayley were so far apart.

Anna shook off the sad thought and turned to Myla walking beside her. “So, do you guys have a date yet for the wedding?”

“Um, not quite yet,” Myla said, shyly. “I’m thinking of building an extension to the stables and turning it into a wedding venue. I thought Kelly and I could get married there first, and then it can be open to the public. I think people would like it.”

“Wow, that’s so cool!”

“But I wanted to get the animal sanctuary completed first, so it will probably be well into next year. We’re okay to wait. At least, I hope Kelly is.”

“She’d wait an eternity for you. You’ve no worries there. Seriously, I love that idea. For you guys and for Balbuinidh. We do need a wedding venue here. It’s the perfect place for it. The hotel is too small. People will love it, I’m sure.”

“Thanks, Anna. It should create more jobs in the area too.”

“You’re like Balbuinidh’s guardian angel, you know that?”

Myla glanced over at her. “It’s what anyone would do.”

“It’s really not.”

They approached Glenbuinidh House. It seemed larger than normal, probably because they were walking up to it, rather than driving.

“Who’s for drinks?” Kelly said, dismounting the vehicle in her plaid shirt and gardening gloves. She looked so different from how she usually dressed for work. “I think we all deserve one after this.”

An hour later, they were all stretched out on the many sofas in the large living room. Barley was resting his adorable golden head on Myla’s lap. Anna had a nice buzz from the wine. This was a perfect way to spend a Saturday.

“Are we wanting another glass of wine?” Kelly asked, standing up.

“Yes, please,” Anna said.

“Shall I just bring the bottle through?”

“Bring the bottle,” Myla said.

Kelly left the room. Anna made herself even more comfortable on the plush sofa. “How are the baby trees that you planted last year? Were they okay in the storm?”

“They survived. Thankfully the stakes supported them without damaging them. Thanks for asking. I was really worried about them last night.” Myla smiled.

“That’s brilliant. I know how fond of them you are.”

“They’re my babies.” Myla stroked Barley’s head, causing a lazy wag of his tail. “Along with this guy.”

Anna smiled. It was so awesome that Myla seemed to love Barley as much as Kelly did. And it was so awesome to have made a new friend in Myla as well. “Did you enjoy the Highland Games?”

“We had a great day,” Myla said. “I’m really happy they went well again this year.”

“Yes, but not as well as last year,” Kelly said, appearing in the doorway. “That was pretty special.”

More wine was poured and sipped. Myla talked more about their plans for the wedding venue. It was nice, just sitting and hanging out with her friends.

“What about you?” Kelly said. “How have you been feeling about you and Hayley lately?”

Anna inhaled. There was no her and Hayley. It was like there was this giant hole in her heart where Hayley should have been. Her chest had this dull ache in it all the time. No matter how much deep breathing or mindfulness she did, nothing seemed to help. “I thought I would be feeling better about it by now, but I’m not. I thought I’d be happy with Hayley going off and doing her own thing and me getting back into my own life, but it doesn’t seem to be working out that way.”

“How so?” Myla leant forward.

Anna blew out an unsatisfied breath. “I guess I’m hardly leaving the house except for work or groceries. Everything

reminds me of her. It's like I'm suspended in a permanent state of post-Hayley blues. The whole thing sucks. It's like I know I can't have a proper relationship with her but at the same time, I feel like I can't live without her."

"Are you sure there's nothing you can do to make it work?" Kelly's eyes were kind.

Anna shook her head. "I don't think so. I just can't see it."

Kelly and Myla were both quiet.

"What?" Anna said.

"Are you sure?" Kelly said, switching into her boss of Glenbuinidh face. Anna knew it well.

"She asked me to quit my job and my life here to go travelling and live some nomadic life. It's crazy. I can't risk my whole life. You know that all I want is to live a quiet, family life in Balbuinidh. It's the complete opposite of what she wants. I'm doing the sensible thing."

Kelly took a drink of wine and was quiet for a few moments.

Myla stared at Barley, stroking his back, looking very uncomfortable.

"Anna, you know that I love you. You know I want what's best for you, right?" Kelly said, back with her kind eyes again.

"I know that." Anna nodded.

"I don't think this is the sensible thing. I think you're creating the risk you say you don't want. No one knows what's going to happen in life. If you find love, you do everything you can to protect it and hold onto it. Do you really want to risk losing Hayley a second time?"

"She's left me already."

"Anna, you can be a bit stubborn sometimes. Did you give her a choice? Did you even try to shift a millimetre? Or did you assume she would leave, act like an arse, then pat yourself on the back for being right when she did what any rational person would do when faced with an immovable object?"

Anna scoffed, feeling so called out, but also immensely cared for by Kelly even though she was being brutal. “I don’t know how to be any other way.”

Anna gripped the handle of the axe positioned high above her head and smashed it down on the log. It cracked into pieces with a loud clap and fell away from the stump. The weather had turned cooler. Summer was well and truly over now that they were into September. Winter was on its way. She had to get her pile of logs ready. She usually holed up over autumn and winter and took some time off during the low season. It couldn’t come soon enough.

She picked up the newly chopped bits of wood and threw them into her stack by the side of the house before placing a fresh chunk on the chopping block. It was more satisfying to chop her own wood and keep a good supply of dry wood on the go. There was something about sourcing it locally and doing it herself that felt good.

But things hadn’t been good lately, in the general sense of the word. She hadn’t seen her parents in ages and had flaked on Rose and Lauren twice. It was hard to let people see her when she was struggling with something. She’d completely stopped going to her running club and to the gym. Even Jamie from the pub had texted to see where she was. What would Hayley think of her right now?

Pushing Hayley away was eating her up inside. She felt so bad about what she had done. Time only intensified her guilt. It was worse during the night. She dreamt about Hayley often but even the dreams didn’t bring her relief, only more misery about what she had done. She was back to not sleeping well.

Anna smashed the wood into pieces. The contact of the axe on the wood reverberated around her hands and arms. It felt good to be doing something with her frustration. She was no further forward. All that had happened was over two months of zero communication. Not a single word. This lack of communication was so typical of Hayley. Didn’t this prove Anna right? That all Hayley ever did was work her into a

frenzy of love and lust and then leave her to pick up the pieces? Part of Anna wanted to hear from her just so she could tell her off for being so non-communicative. What happened to them being friends no matter what?

Of course, Anna hadn't contacted Hayley either. Each time she went to do it, nothing would come forward. On some level, she'd wanted or needed to hear from Hayley first, but the longer it went on, the more she questioned the validity of that thinking. It was Anna who had prevented them from taking the next step. This mess was all on her.

The only thing stopping her from marching over to Europe right now and hunting Hayley down was Hayley's Instagram account. After a particularly dark thought, Anna had created an account just to check that Hayley was alive. But seeing what Hayley was up to, and in what country, quickly became the only thing keeping her going. She spent her evenings following Hayley's journey, which provided some relief in terms of knowing that she was safe. Her pictures were stunning. Mountains, cities, architecture, sunsets. Hayley wasn't posting any photos of herself, however, which was hugely disappointing. Anna found herself browsing Hayley's Instagram page more often than she cared to admit.

She didn't post that often, but she was clearly having the time of her life. The number of countries she had got around was incredible. Anna was losing count. From what she'd seen, Hayley had spent time in the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Poland, Austria, and Slovenia. There was a group trip walking in the Swiss Alps. She would be getting ready for Italy soon. She had been looking forward to visiting there. She'd talked about it so much. It was mind-boggling what Hayley was getting to experience. It was indeed the trip of a lifetime.

To think Anna had turned it down to sit on her sofa in sleepy Balbuinidh and pine for Hayley like this didn't seem right, but that was what she was doing.

The campervan must have been so hot over summer, and still hot now that she was in southern Europe in mid-September. Hayley probably wore very little. She probably

looked incredible sauntering around Europe without a care in the world.

No.

Anna couldn't let herself go there. It was too painful to think of Hayley in that way any more. It wasn't right. Anna hadn't had an orgasm since Hayley left. All the feeling had left her in that department.

Anna gripped the axe again and threw it down with more force this time. She had to use three swings to open this chunkier bit of wood. When she finally got it broken, the loud crack was satisfying.

After an afternoon spent chopping wood, Anna left some soup to simmer on the stove as she curled up on the sofa listening to the songs they listened to on their trip. Even though Anna had lived in this house on her own for a while, it felt empty without Hayley. There was no joy. No fun. No life. But it was her life. This was what she chose over Hayley. She shouldn't be feeling this bad. She'd done this to herself. She had pushed Hayley away. She had chosen to be miserable when the woman of her dreams had asked her to take a leap of faith and be with her for real.

It wasn't just that Hayley was an amazing woman who set her heart on fire, she was also her best friend. Her soulmate. Anna was rarely as happy as when she was with Hayley. She thought of floating in the sea on their paddleboards together looking up at the sky, and that night they had a picnic on the beach and went skinny-dipping. If Anna really searched herself, she knew, deep down, that being with Hayley felt like home. Her smile. The way she gently teased Anna for being the way she was, the way she would cuddle into Anna while they were sleeping, and her deep breathing on her neck as she slept.

Anna lay on her back. A cushion fell onto her face. She hugged it to her chest. She missed Hayley's touch so much. It was maddening knowing how good it had been between them. How could anyone compare with that? Their intimacy wasn't even about sex. The things they shared with each other went

beyond anything she'd ever experienced. Their connection was on a cosmic level. No one calmed Anna like Hayley did. No one made her feel so safe.

So why the fuck had she gone against her true feelings and played this safe? There was protecting herself and there was plain self-sabotage.

Anna picked up her phone. Nothing new since the last time she checked. What she wouldn't give to hear something from Hayley soon. She tapped into her camera roll and went through her pictures of Hayley again. Hayley at the castle, Hayley in bed in the campervan, Hayley roasting marshmallows by the fire with a goofy grin on her face. Hayley in her sexy little bikini. The two of them together at the seafood restaurant all rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes. That had been such a special night.

She rested the phone on the cushion and stared at the ceiling. Thinking about how wonderful it felt to fall in love with Hayley and letting those feelings in again filled her heart with so much warmth. The way they got to know each other again in a new stage of their lives and found out they had even more in common now – a love for nature and the outdoors, a shared taste in music, wanting children one day. All that talking and laughing they did. Sitting around campfires and gazing into each other's eyes while harbouring their secret love. The look in Hayley's eyes when they finally got together that night after skinny-dipping.

Anna let these special memories play over and over in her mind as a single tear rolled down the side of her face. She missed Hayley so much it hurt. She couldn't stop the tears that followed and this time, she didn't even try.

The gym was empty today, which suited Anna fine. It was her first time back in ages and everything seemed that bit harder. She was slower in the way she went about her routine. Much like her life these days. Life had become very dull. Days felt longer, and she felt more sluggish the more she missed Hayley. It was a strange feeling.

A bird landing on the ground outside a window in the gym caught Anna's attention. It had a black mark around its neck and was a pale, pinky-brown grey. Was it a Collar Dove?

Anna shook her head and refocused on the kettlebell between her feet. It wasn't going to swing itself. A message flashed up on her phone beside her keys and water bottle on the floor. She put the kettlebell back down and picked the phone up. Adrenaline coursed through her as she stared at the message on it.

Hi Anna. How are you? I'm in Venice. Thinking about you.

Anna gripped her phone and sat astride a bench. Hayley had been gone for a few months. Anna replied immediately.

It's so good to hear from you! I hope you are loving Italy as much as you thought you would. I've been thinking about you too. How is the trip going?

Anna couldn't explain herself through small messages. The only thing that mattered was that Hayley was okay.

Trip is amazing. Been to so many countries. I'm on a gondola at the moment. I wish you were here. I'm sorry I left so abruptly. It was shitty and I wish I hadn't done it.

It's okay. I'm just glad you're safe and well. I'd like to hear from you more often, though. I've been going out of my mind here.

I'm sorry. I wasn't in a good place when I left. I will text more. About the letter I left on the table, I don't know what else to say other than what I wrote. I don't know how to make things better.

Anna bowed her head. This was such a mess.

Neither do I.

I miss you so much, Anna.

I miss you too.

Nineteen

May 2013

The loch shimmered in the afternoon sun as jagged mountains surrounded them in a sort of cocoon. She hadn't seen anything so beautiful since the first time she'd seen Hayley fall asleep. That was something special.

“Hey!” Anna squealed, jumping backwards on the beach.

“You're so unguarded. And ticklish.” Hayley grinned. “A perfect target.”

Anna narrowed her eyes. “You're a predator.”

“I have to get my kicks somehow.”

“I am not your plaything, despite what you may think.”

“I thought that was our whole dynamic?”

Anna shook her head, secretly loving the exchange, unable to prevent a little smile from escaping her lips. It was times like these when Hayley was so flirty that Anna got the feeling that her unrequited love might not be so unrequited after all. Wouldn't that be amazing? Her little heart could only dream. And dream it did. Maybe it wasn't all in her head? There was just something about the way Hayley was behaving lately that got her thinking she might like her back.

Hayley moved a few paces away from the water and sat down on a rock. She patted the small remaining space beside her. “Will you sit next to me?”

Anna looked from the small space back to Hayley and back again. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. Her hesitation was more to do with the nervous excitement at the prospect of sitting so closely. Outside their platonic sleepovers, such contact during the day was less frequent, although to be fair, Hayley was more tactile with her than she was with anyone else.

Hayley eyed her closely. “I’m sorry there’s nowhere else to sit. I should have brought my blanket or something.”

“No. It’s fine.”

As Anna sat down, the side of her body brushed against Hayley’s and her whole body tingled. Squeezed together on the tiny rock, Anna struggled to get her heart rate under control. Hayley smelled so good. She focused on her surroundings and took a deep breath. The water was so still, unlike the turmoil inside her. The views down the loch really were stunning. Hills criss-crossed down the water into the distance.

“I love it here,” Hayley said, softly.

“Me too.”

“I wish we could travel around. Just you and me. It would be amazing. Don’t you think?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s make a list right now of all the places we want to go together in Scotland.”

“We don’t have enough time. You’re leaving soon, remember?”

“I’ll come back one day to visit, and we can do it then. It’ll be awesome.”

The idea of Hayley going away and only seeing her through short visits instead of all the time was just too sad. Anna pushed that thought aside and chose to indulge in the fantasy instead. She took off her rucksack and got out a bit of paper and a pen. “Okay. Let’s dream.”

Hayley put her arm around Anna’s shoulders and snuggled in close. “That’s the spirit.”

There was such a warmth between them. It spread all over Anna’s body and settled in her heart. At least they would always have this moment. She would cherish it forever. She smiled, feeling content, despite all the inner turmoil she was perpetually going through these days. “Right, my wanderer. Where do you want to go?”

Hayley turned her head towards her. Her lips were dangerously close to her cheek. “I want to go everywhere with you.”

Present day

Anna sat at her parents’ kitchen table, staring at a gorgeous photograph of a loch somewhere up north in the travel section of their newspaper. It put her in mind of the loch she and Hayley had visited years ago where they’d taken a photo after they’d made the list.

She couldn’t get Hayley out of her mind. Not even when spending time with her parents, who she loved so much. Her mum was gardening. It was sunny today. Her dad had his back to her at the cooker. He was cooking a fry-up. The hot oil spat and sizzled in the various frying pans he had on the go. Anna knew exactly what her dad was putting into the fry-up because his recipe hadn’t changed in forever: square sausage, black pudding, haggis, eggs, potato scones, mushrooms, tomatoes, and baked beans. Copious amounts of toast and butter would be added. The ‘full Scottish’, as he liked to say.

She ran her thumb over the picture, as if it were indeed the same loch they’d visited that time. She’d been so in love with Hayley that day. It was one of her happiest memories of them together which was why she loved having the picture in her living room.

Hayley was still in Europe, and Anna didn’t know what was going on any more. They were messaging every now and then. Each message was the highlight of Anna’s day. They were keeping things light. Anna appreciated that. Because pushing Hayley away had achieved nothing except self-induced heartbreak. While Anna missed the sound of Hayley’s voice, she wasn’t ready for a full-blown conversation as it would undoubtedly lead to things Anna didn’t have an answer for.

Anna was growing less sure by the day why she was punishing them both because their love didn’t fit with her strict vision for her future. Could Anna let her over-cautious

head decide something of such significance? Or did she have what it took to have a real relationship with Hayley?

Anna hadn't said much last night around her parents. They'd watched a film together and then she had sat up late with her dad watching the Saturday football highlights. Thankfully, they weren't pressing her on her one-word answers. Her head and her heart were at war making small talk near impossible. She loved them so much, especially when they just let her be like this when she wasn't feeling on form.

"Anything interesting in there today?" Her dad said, with his back still to her.

Her parents got the same newspaper every Sunday. They had been doing this for as long as she could remember. "Not really. The usual. There's a nice picture here of a loch."

Her dad turned around and peered over from the kitchen, spatula in hand. Anna held up the paper so he could see. "That's a beauty, that is. We should go for a walk soon." He went back to his pots and pans.

"We should," Anna said, getting hungry now. She looked at the back of him. He was getting a slight stoop. His slippers were frayed at the seams. He'd had the same type of slippers for over twenty years, a shoe-like style that he never took off. He kept getting the same pair and that suited him fine. She would get him a new pair soon. "Do you need any help with breakfast?"

"Could you do the toast please?"

Anna fed the toaster bread by the window overlooking the garden. She loved this garden. It was big enough to have different areas, and they'd cultivated some gorgeous flowers over the years. A Virginia Creeper was turning into its luscious red over the wooden fence to the rear. They'd been in this house her whole life. She knew every inch of it, its history, and its eras. Being home with her parents like this could be so comforting sometimes. Only being with Hayley had ever made her feel similar to this, which, when she considered what she was comparing it to, was a startling thought.

“This is what I like to see.” Anna’s mum came inside and took off her gardening shoes by the back door. “You two working hard to cook me my breakfast.”

Her dad laughed. “Ready in two minutes.”

“I’ll go wash my hands.” Her mum left the room.

“I love how well you and Mum get on.”

Her dad nodded. “The key to a happy marriage is to have a strong friendship first and foremost.”

Over breakfast, Anna listened as her mum and dad chatted about their upcoming holiday to France.

“There’s something we’ve been meaning to tell you.” Her mum put her fork down. “About our plans for France.”

“I think I already know them in full-HD by now.”

“There’s more to it than a holiday.”

“What do you mean?” Anna’s senses shot to high alert.

Her mum’s expression turned serious. “Your dad and I have made some decisions about what we want to do in the future.” She reached over and held his hand. “We want to sell the house and move to the south of France.”

Anna’s jaw dropped. “You’re joking.”

“We enjoy it there very much, as you know.” Her mum’s voice was steady and practised, as if she had the whole speech prepared. “We’ve been talking about doing this for years, although we haven’t shared that with you. It’s the right time for us. We want to enjoy our last years.”

Anna’s ears rang in the silence. She could not believe they were going to up and leave her and sell her childhood home.

Her mum continued. “We also want to buy a small flat nearer the centre of Glasgow. We would rent it out and come back once a year for a few months.”

“It’s what we want, darling.” Her dad looked so apologetic.

She’d pictured having them nearby as active grandparents to her children. Her family. She’d pictured her children

playing in the garden she'd played in as a child. This was her home, her safety net.

Anna took a sobering breath. "That sounds very exciting. Of course you should do whatever you think will make you happy. I'm really pleased for you."

Her mum stood and gave her a hug. "We know this is hard. But we want you to come and visit as often as you can, and we will be back every year."

"You've got to do what's right for you."

"Thanks for being so supportive, darling," her dad said.

Anna knew she had to completely stand on her own two feet. She was in her thirties and it was long overdue. She just liked having them near, even if it was a three-hour drive. It was reassuring. But it wasn't exactly next door, and it wasn't like she was giving them grandchildren anytime soon.

"We've already got some viewings lined up," her dad said. "We hope to sell this place and complete the move early next year. We'll just need to see how it goes."

"I'll have my fingers crossed for you guys."

"Think of all the wine," her mum said, sitting back down.

Anna laughed. "Every cloud, Mum, every cloud. It is very exciting. The whole thing. I'll get used to it. I might just need a moment."

Her mum's serious face returned. "Anna, if you do choose to start a family, we know this means we won't be around as much. But you could visit, and the child could learn French. Being bilingual and knowing about other cultures are good skills."

"You don't need to sell it to me, Mum. I just want you guys to be happy."

Her parents both sighed as if in relief. It felt good to give them that. They had supported her in everything she'd wanted to do in life, even in her moving up north to Balbuinidh which had meant seeing them less. Giving them her blessing was the least she could do even if it rocked her very foundations.

“I’m glad you’re being so open-minded,” her mum said. “Change isn’t always easy for you.”

“Mmm.”

“We’ve had the same lifestyle for years now. We’ve loved it but we need something new. A lot of good can come from freshening things up. That’s why we’ve decided that France is for us. We want the sunshine and all the new experiences that living in a new place will bring. I can’t wait to visit the French markets every day and start a garden. And have I mentioned the wine?”

“Once or twice.”

“If we stay here, we’ll be doing the exact same thing until it’s our time to go.”

“I didn’t realise you guys were so bored of the same routine.”

Her dad interrupted. “I wouldn’t say bored. Just understimulated. It’s hard to describe. You only get one life. Why do the same thing for all of it?”

Her parents looked at each other, as if they had something else to drop on her. Her mum spoke. “We know you have your friends and your community up in Balbuinidh. But you are on your own. We worry about you.”

“What are you saying?”

“We’re switching it up, darling,” her dad said. “You can do the same. Get out there, my love. You’ve done it before.”

“I went on a two-month road trip around the country this year.” Her voice came out a lot harsher than she meant it to. This was hitting a nerve. “I don’t need to go out all the time to prove that I’m living my best life.”

“That’s not what we meant,” her dad said, shaking his head.

Her mum’s eyes were kind. “We just want you to be happy, Anna. Enjoy your life.”

Anna took a deep breath. Being snarky at her parents was out of order. “I’m sorry. I’ve been struggling with some stuff

recently. It's not an excuse, I know."

"What with?"

Anna grimaced. She couldn't tell them about her and Hayley. It was too personal. Too raw.

"Oh honey." Her mum stood and gave her another cuddle. "You look so sad."

In her mum's arms, Anna wanted to crumble. Instead, she pulled back, leaning away from her.

"Is it about Hayley?"

Anna furrowed her brow.

Her mum glanced at her dad before looking back at her. She tilted her head and her features softened. "From the short amount of time we got to spend with Hayley we both really liked her."

"Why did you think this was about her?"

"Because we've never seen you so happy and relaxed. You were full of life. You were glowing."

Anna raised an eyebrow and took a breath. It felt like a good, deep, and cleansing sort of breath. "Was I?" Her curiosity was piqued.

Her mum nodded. "It was good to see you like that again. It's been far too long. It was like seeing the girl you were when you were a child, before you changed as a teenager."

Anna was speechless. Her teenage years had been hard. She became highly anxious, withdrawn and prone to bouts of depression, in stark contrast to her happy, outgoing and carefree personality as a child. Not knowing she was gay was a painful way to experience her adolescence, she'd come to realise. Forcing herself into believing she was attracted to boys was dissociating and confusing.

Her mum continued. "And you've been down ever since Hayley left. Not unlike the last time. If there's something going on between you two, we couldn't be happier. She was so happy to see your childhood photos. What a nice and genuine

girl. I think she's good for you if she can bring out that side of you again. She clearly balances out your, you know, rigidity."

Anna's mouth fell open. Was she that bad?

"Great girl," her dad said. "Is she still in Europe?"

"She is."

He took a sip of tea from the same blue mug he always drank out of. "When is she back?"

"She's not coming back."

Her mum and dad grimaced in solidarity with her. She appreciated the gesture so much, and the lack of judgement.

"Oh honey," her mum said. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"I am too." Anna cleared her throat. "Anyway, back to you two." She was desperate to change the subject. "Tell me more about these plans. Maybe I can help with the Glasgow flat."

After breakfast, Anna wandered around her parents' back garden, past the plants she had grown up with, the newer vegetable garden and the seating area around the firepit they all loved. The idea she wouldn't get to see her favourite flowers again next year filled her with sadness. Plates and cups rattled as the dishwasher was loaded, her parents dancing around each other through the kitchen window. She'd seen this scene a million times from this garden, in different seasons, over the years. How was she going to give up her childhood home? To think her own future children would never know this home was hard. Her parents were doing the right thing for themselves. Starting a new life somewhere they knew they'd be happier and breaking from the same old routine was inspiring, in a way. Even if Anna hadn't seen it coming.

She sat under her favourite tree. It was a large oak that had been there long before she was born and would be there for many more years to come. She had sat under this tree so many times, although not for a while. It used to be her space to breathe.

The branches were thick and knotted. She hadn't really looked at her tree in a while, come to think of it. Maybe she

had taken the tree for granted. It felt rough to the touch like it held a thousand secrets. It stretched up into the sky. It always looked that bit bigger directly underneath it. That hadn't stopped her as a child. She smiled. She'd climbed this tree countless times when she was young. She would sit on a branch, looking out towards the sunset or just being a passive observer of the leaves playing in the breeze. She once tried to turn it into a treehouse but there was really no space and her parents made her dismantle the wobbly platform she'd attempted to install.

As she traced her fingers over the familiar footholds and the best branches from which to start an ascent, she couldn't remember the last time she'd climbed it. As a child, Anna never used to worry about heights or falling, or about anything really. She used to be so adventurous and free. It was a wonderful feeling. In many ways, it was her truest self. She had long since forgotten about it, but it was the truth.

Anna put her foot onto the first wedge and pulled herself up by the first branch. She climbed and climbed until she got to her favourite spot and settled herself onto the branch. It was hard work, but fun. It was high up. How the fuck did she do this so easily when she was nine? Little Anna was fearless. She was impressed with her younger self. And she was impressed with her current self for climbing it again and not being afraid of falling. There was something about sitting in the same spot as she had all those years ago that shifted something in her. It had never left her. She was the same person she'd always been, deep down.

The leaves in her parents' garden and in the neighbours' had turned orange and red. It was chilly, but she didn't care. She was seeing things so clearly. She'd thought her risk-averse ways were helping to manage her anxiety, but perhaps they were the cause of it. What if she'd taken the risk to trust herself that she wasn't interested in boys? Perhaps her anxiety was caused by cutting herself off from her true self, starting with her sexuality and then her inner child. And now it was making her miss out on life. She was capable. She could take risks and handle things just like the little girl that used to climb

this tree. Spending time with Hayley this year had reminded her of that. She'd just chosen not to see it. But now she saw.

She took a deep breath in and let out a long exhale. She swung her feet in the air below her, for warmth, and because why not? What sort of life could she lead knowing these things? Wasn't it better to feel stronger in herself before she ever finally did start having children? There were bound to be many unknowns involved in raising a child, so in many ways, she had to move past her anxious approach to life once and for all. It was the healthy thing to do for her, and her future family.

Was she still happy up in Balbuinidh? She had been so wedded to a vision of how her life should be there. Maybe she could take some time to explore this side of her? It wasn't the right time to settle down and start a family just yet, not when it felt like she had so much more to experience. A bit like how Hayley was living her life.

She stopped swinging her feet. Everything came back to Hayley. And Hayley brought Anna back to her truest self. Anna could be fully herself around her. Like that time Hayley got the skateboard out and encouraged Anna to get back on it. Like that time Hayley jumped into a supermarket trolley when they were on their trip and demanded that Anna push her about the car park. It was so silly, but it was so fun. She'd felt like a little kid again, breaking the rules. Anna would never have even thought of doing something like that. Hayley made Anna feel more connected to the little girl that used to climb this tree. Anna had never had this type of connection with anyone else. It was all that mattered in the end.

Anna was still as the simple truth presented itself. Hayley, and everything she offered in terms of them being together, was perfect for her. Her love for Hayley had grown and deepened since they were younger, even though they'd spent much of that time apart. Anna still had that same feeling in her chest but now it was bigger and burned so much brighter after everything they'd shared on the trip, and through all the pain of the last few months apart. She still loved Hayley. She would never not love Hayley. A world where she didn't love Hayley

seemed cold and impossible. What a terrible thing she had done by not believing in their love.

Could Anna have been wrong about not wanting to travel? She'd got so comfortable in her world that she'd let her curiosity about the wider world dim. She'd got so used to avoiding change to manage her anxiety that she'd forgot how to live. She'd stopped seeing the wonder in things.

Regret filled every corner of her being. A horrible knot gripped her stomach. She'd chosen safety over the love of her life. There was no denying how unforgivably stupid and cowardly she had been. She'd made the worst mistake of her life in turning Hayley away.

She had to make it right.

Anna had to concentrate extra hard on her drive home to Balbuinidh after seeing her parents. The lights changed from red to green, much like what was happening inside her heart. Her thoughts raced. Everything she thought she wanted was up for grabs. She felt like she was becoming the brave wolf she always wanted to be.

She had to stop clinging to a certain idea of what her life had to be like in order for her to be happy. Taking a leap of faith and exploring a new life with Hayley felt expansive. Her old self and the things she used to want didn't feel right any more. It was time to drop her strict conditions and just go with this feeling. Maybe life with Hayley could be even better than she could imagine right now? Wasn't that worth fighting for? As long as she was with Hayley, did it even matter where they lived?

The idealised image she had in her head of her and a new partner making a life in Balbuinidh and raising children was a hangover from the breakup with Tiffany. Holding tight to that dream probably helped her deal with the end of that relationship. And maybe she only wanted that settled life to help her feel more settled in herself, to calm the inner turmoil of the loss of Hayley in the first place?

Had all that talk of her future wife been a protective mechanism to keep her from getting hurt again? Because she'd pretty much ensured Hayley would hurt her again by behaving the way she did.

Hayley wanted children and a family one day. Maybe they could have those things together, when the time was right? When she thought about her future, all she could see was Hayley. She loved Hayley. She wanted Hayley. Their love was special, and they both deserved to take their relationship to the next level just like it had been inescapable for them to explore their physical connection on the trip. Anna had fallen in love with life again after being around Hayley. She was the most incredible woman she had ever known. Her spirit, her passion for life, and her kindness blew Anna's mind away.

When Anna got home, she threw her keys in the bowl and washed her hands roughly. She had made a mistake in pushing Hayley away. And Kelly was right, she had taken a huge risk. How could she have been so weak?

Anna sat down on her sofa in the exact same spot they'd had their final conversation. She held her head in her hands and allowed herself to feel what was truly inside of her.

Pain.

At the core of this, she hadn't healed from ten years ago. It still felt heavy. There was a sense of loss and abandonment. Loss at what could have been and years wasted. Years they could have spent and shared together. Hayley's abandonment still stung, which was incredible since her head didn't see it that way and she thought she'd moved on long ago. She didn't blame Hayley. In many ways, things couldn't have been any different.

But the more Anna allowed herself to feel her feelings about it, the more apparent it was that she had carried the pain of losing Hayley all this time. It had sat in the background of her daily life. Always there. Like the low hum of a refrigerator. Sometimes louder, sometimes quieter, but always there in the background, if she dared to stop and listen. It had defined Anna. Picking herself up after Hayley ghosted her had

made her the person that she was today. She was proud of that in many ways.

More waves of acceptance washed over her the longer she sat there. It was warm and powerful and such a relief. She lifted her head and wiped a tear away. Hayley had hurt her in the past, but that was then, and this was now. Things were different now. They'd both grown up. What they'd shared this year went way beyond how they were at university.

Everyone was right. There were no guarantees in life, for anything. Everything was a risk in one way or another. All that mattered was that they loved each other for who they had become, which were only positive evolutions on who they once were.

Anna had refused to take Hayley at her word out of a sense of duty to her younger self. But there is no point in being loyal to an old wound that no longer serves you. It only keeps you stuck and living in the past. Healing from this and moving on was what she wanted now.

The way Hayley would hold Anna so tenderly and the way she respected her boundaries spoke volumes. Hayley had shown she was a safe person to be around, a safe person to be vulnerable with. Anna had found it hard to believe in Hayley, but as time went on, it became crystal clear. Hayley had proved to her that she was trustworthy. She couldn't blame her for leaving for Europe. It might have been a bit sudden and untimely, and in the middle of an important conversation, but it didn't mean Hayley couldn't be trusted. Perhaps she just thought there was nothing more to say that could resolve the issue.

That Hayley was now messaging from her trip every now and then was a good sign. Like Hayley had said, they would always be in each other's lives. Hayley was her person. That she was showing up for Anna and keeping in touch, despite everything, was the sweetest thing ever.

Hayley had repeatedly said that she loved their differences and liked how Anna grounded her. Maybe Anna just had to take her at her word and believe that too. Hayley had changed

even on their short trip together. By the end, she was calmer and was even making plans. Hayley hadn't constantly insisted they be busy and do things to the point that Anna felt overwhelmed. All the doubt Anna had when they got back to Balbuinidh was just her fear. Hayley could be forgiven for still being excited about being in another country and wanting to do things. What did Anna expect her to do?

Hayley deserved so much more from her. Had she lost Hayley for good this time? Had Hayley moved on already? Had Anna blown their one chance to ever be together?

Anna glanced at her laptop. All that mattered now was sorting out this mess. Her heart started pounding. She marched across the living room and picked up her laptop. Clarity and urgency propelled her to take action. She perched at the breakfast bar and let her fingers fly.

Twenty

The next day after work, Anna knocked on Kelly's door, hoping she hadn't gone home yet.

"Yes?"

Anna went in. Kelly was sitting at her coffee table looking at her phone, smiling slightly. She looked up. "Oh hi. What's up?"

"I might be quitting the distillery. I'm not sure if I am yet but I wanted to give you a heads up. I've changed my mind about me and Hayley. I'm ready to fly to the moon and back with her if that's what she wants. I'm going to go for it."

"Yay! Love wins!" Kelly put her phone down. "This is huge."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I understand. You want to be with her."

"That's if she still wants me."

Kelly tilted her head, kindly. "You know she does."

"I'm not sure that I do."

"Have you talked to her yet?"

"Not yet. I wrote her an email last night. I told her how I feel and what I want. I've apologised for being an idiot."

"You weren't an idiot. You were right to air what was on your mind."

"I'm scared she's going to say she's moved on or she's had second thoughts. What if she just wants to stay friends from now on and nothing more?"

"There's only one way to find out."

Anna sat down at the coffee table. "Do you mind not telling anyone at the distillery yet? I don't know what's going to happen, if anything."

“I won’t tell anyone. Please don’t worry about us. We support you.”

Anna exhaled. “Thank you so much.”

“No problem. Let me know when you know more. We could even look at another sabbatical, if that’s something you’d be interested in.”

Anna hadn’t considered that. “Kelly, you’re the best. It might be.”

“There’s no point in running a family business if you can’t look after your own. I’m sure everyone here will feel the same.”

Later that night Anna read over her email again.

From: Anna McIntosh

To: Hayley Pearson

Date: October 24th 22:45pm

Subject: My stupid fears

Dear Hayley,

I hope you got to Chamonix and are enjoying the stunning scenery over there. How is the campervan holding up with all those miles you’re putting in?

I wish that I was with you right now. I miss you so much. You are the most amazing woman I have ever met. I still can’t believe how lucky I have been to know you.

I want you to know that I understand why you left. I’m so sorry for the things I said. I let my stupid fears get in the way of my heart. I’ve been a fool.

But I’m listening to my heart now, and my heart wants you, Hayley. I love you so much. I am happy wherever we go, as long as I’m with

you. I can't believe I got all crazy about the future so soon. You didn't deserve that and I understand why you ran for the hills.

You told me that you wanted all that stuff too and I believe you now. I'm sorry that I kept acting like you were twenty-two and still just wanting to party all the time. Again, my stupid fears. I'm so sorry!

I don't have all the answers or know exactly what us being together is going to look like, but I want you to know that my answer is one hundred percent yes – I want us to be a couple. I'm so sorry it took me so long to get here.

I hope that's still what you want too but I would understand if things have changed for you. Could we arrange a time to call or FaceTime soon? I would love to hear your voice and talk. I'd also love to hear more about your trip and your thoughts on the places you are visiting.

Take care of yourself out there.

All my love,

Anna xxx

Hopefully it was enough to start to repair some of the damage she'd done and get them thinking about what might be next for them. Because all Anna wanted now was to dive headlong into a relationship with Hayley and be open to all that came with that. Anna prayed that this was the beginning of something truly wonderful.

An anxious wait to hear back followed. The days were nothing but an obstacle in getting to that moment when an email from Hayley landed in her inbox. Not hearing from her was excruciating. She'd put her heart on the line.

The email arrived just before Anna was going to bed on Wednesday night. Adrenaline coursed through her as she

tapped on Hayley's email with bated breath.

From: Hayley Pearson

To: Anna McIntosh

Date: October 27th 22:05pm

Subject: Re: My stupid fears

Hi Anna,

I'm in London. I'm staying at a hotel just off Covent Garden. I've been doing some sightseeing and exploring the south of England. I've sold the van. It held up admirably.

I've decided to cut my trip short. I'm going back to the US in a couple of days. Going back home feels like the best thing for me right now. The trip has been great, but it didn't make me as happy as I thought it might. I'll stay with my parents for a little while and focus on my design business.

I didn't run for the hills because you were talking about the future so soon. I left because you made it clear that you didn't think we would make it as a couple without even giving us a chance. That hurt. I'm not sure you know what you want. Maybe it's for the best I go back home and regroup.

I'm sorry that's not the answer you wanted to hear. I'm not in a great place right now. Maybe we can talk once I get home? I can tell you more about the trip then.

Love,

Hayley

Anna put her phone down on the table and rubbed her forehead with both hands. Closing her eyes, she pressed her fingers into her temples as a knot of anxiety formed in the pit of her stomach. She completely understood where Hayley was coming from, which made this even more unsettling. She'd lost Hayley's trust. It was devastating.

If she was going to convince Hayley that she was all in, she had to do something big or she might lose her chance forever. She had to make Hayley see that she was seeing things differently now. That *she* was different now.

Anna stood up. Her body demanded action. There was only one answer. Anna would drive down to London right now and find her in Covent Garden. There was just about enough time to get there, find her, and talk things through if she left now. The window was closing fast. She'd better move quick.

Anna texted Kelly to let her know she was going down to London to save her relationship with Hayley before it was too late. She packed her things in a hurry and threw on a hoody and some trainers. In less than fifteen minutes she was in the car heading south with her pyjama top still on underneath her hoody. In the flurry of getting ready, Anna knew she had changed, because she had never done anything this impulsive before. She did know what she wanted now. She wanted an exciting life with Hayley that went beyond her wildest dreams. There was no doubt in her mind.

If she drove for a few hours she could stop at a service station and sleep in her car for a bit and get going again at dawn. She could feasibly be there by early tomorrow afternoon.

The drive south whizzed past in a blur given it was so late, dark and quiet. Apart from the occasional lorry, the roads were empty. Hayley could not get on that plane in two days. This had to work. Anna had to show her that she was serious, or she might never get another chance. Did she have enough time to get there and win her back?

Why was Hayley giving up on her dream to travel the world so soon? It was concerning. It didn't sound like her at

all. It was sad to think that Hayley wasn't on top of the world right now after such an amazing trip. That Anna might have had something to do with that was even worse. She would spend the rest of her life making this up to Hayley, if she would let her.

Anna pulled up at some services at around half past three in the morning. She physically couldn't keep driving through tiredness and Anna was a stickler for doing things right, and that meant safety first, even if she was taking a huge risk by driving down to London in the middle of the night. She found a parking space right outside the bright lights at the entrance. It was quiet but well-lit. The services were open all night and she felt secure enough. She lowered her seat back and drifted off to a light sleep, at least partially comforted by the fact that she knew she was doing the right thing by rushing down to fight for Hayley.

A few hours later, Anna woke to daylight and a busy car park. She swallowed. Her throat was dry. Her head hurt a bit. She'd dreamt about Hayley. Nothing specific or coherent, just her presence and them smiling together. It seemed so real and like home. Anna sat up and straightened her chair. Today was a big day. She got a large coffee and some chocolate-chip muffins for breakfast to have in the car on the way down.

After a couple of hours of non-stop driving, she hit the rush hour traffic on a huge stretch of motorway further into northern England. As her car slowed down to a very unwanted stop, Anna tried not to catastrophise the situation. It would get moving again soon. She still had time.

But the traffic may as well have remained stationary. Sloths moved faster than this sea of cars. Where did all these people come from?

When Anna had almost given up, the cars in front picked up speed. Yes! *Finally!*

Hours of super-focused driving led her further south. The roads grew busier and the drivers more ruthless, undertaking and cutting in and making it impossible to keep the required distance from the car in front. Her eyes stung with

concentration. Too afraid to blink, she watched the cars as far ahead as she could as they formed an 80mph queue to overtake a bunch of lorries.

Brake lights, hazard lights. Something was going on ahead. She eased off the accelerator. The tailgating Audi driver behind her was too close. She put her hazards on for a bit. Red brake lights shone from each lane. She continued to slow. The Audi finally backed off. Anna crawled towards the slow-moving traffic ahead. Not again. A large lorry ground to a halt next to her. Just four miles from the M25, the southbound carriageway mimicked a car park.

After minutes of not moving at all, she turned on the radio for traffic news. An accident. She hoped it wasn't serious and that everyone was okay.

She turned her engine off when it was clear they weren't moving anywhere soon. She could message Hayley to let her know she was on her way, but she didn't want to do this digitally. They needed to see each other in person. It was the only way. There was still time. As long as the traffic started moving soon, there was still time.

After three hours, she was past where the accident must have occurred and moving towards the heart of the beast, to busier roads and bustling-with-life Greater London. The whole place was far bigger than anything she came across in Scotland. There was so much going on as the evening closed in, but it didn't overwhelm her as much as it might have done had she not gone on the trip with Hayley. Getting out of her routine had given her the confidence boost she hadn't even known she'd needed.

Leaving the car in a multi-storey car park in Kilburn, Anna walked to the underground and got on the next tube. Sitting down so long had made her stiff and lethargic so it felt good to stretch her legs. The back of her eyes ached with tiredness as the carriage swayed her side to side. Not sleeping properly and doing the intense drive was a bit much. But it would hopefully be worth it, so it didn't matter. She hadn't been sleeping well for ages, come to think of it, not since she was with Hayley in the campervan on their trip.

Nerves rose as she walked up the steps from the underground. What if she couldn't convince Hayley that she meant what she said? What if Hayley's mind was already made up? It was nearly seven in the evening. She was running out of time. What if this couldn't be fixed?

As she approached the pretty square, the nerves intensified. There were so many hotels in the area and no guarantee she would just magically bump into her. Getting there had been the most important thing, and now that she was, she didn't have a plan, which was so unlike her. Anna liked the idea of surprising Hayley in her hotel and them instantly connecting and making up, but such fantasies were things of fiction. She had no idea where Hayley even was.

Anna took her phone out of her pocket and messaged Hayley instead. Sometimes technology made life so much easier and on this occasion it certainly did. Anna's dramatic surprise was nothing if she couldn't find her.

Hi Hayley. I'm in Covent Garden. I need to see you. Where are you?

The buildings were tall and relentless. There were so many people in such a small area, it was dizzying. What the hell was she doing here? Was she crazy for doing this? Her phone buzzed.

You're here? I'm by the National Theatre.

Anna checked Google Maps. It wasn't too far.

Be there soon.

Anna sped-walked towards the Thames. She darted between people in an attempt to get to Hayley as quickly as possible. This was her last chance. She'd better not fuck it up.

On Waterloo bridge, Hayley appeared. It was like her future walking towards her. Time slowed down the closer they got to each other. When they locked eyes, still walking, Anna felt a broad grin pull at her cheek muscles. Her heart filled with love and affection. Seeing Hayley again was simply everything. She was wearing a long grey and black tweed coat and black boots with a heel. She must have gone shopping because

Hayley didn't have those clothes with her before. Her hair was down and flowing around her face. This was the Hayley that Anna had not met yet, the woman she had become. All Anna wanted to do was hold her close and never let her go.

They came to a stop in front of each other. Hayley's eyes were bright, but there was a slight wariness in them that made Anna's heart hurt. Anna went in for a hug and squeezed Hayley so tight. Feeling her again was like coming home.

"I can't believe you're here," Hayley said, over her shoulder. It was so good to hear her voice, even with the hint of distance in it.

"You know, neither can I, a bit."

Hayley laughed, gently, pulling out of the hug. "What are you doing here?"

"Would you believe it if I said I drove five hundred miles? It wasn't quite walking but... I'm gonna be..."

Hayley laughed, more fully this time. "Did you just quote The Proclaimers to me?"

"I did, just about. I have no idea where that came from." Anna centred herself. "I set off the second I read your email last night. I stopped for a nap near the border, but I got stuck in traffic all day."

"Oh my god. You must be so tired. You do look a bit tired."

"I'm better for seeing you."

Hayley blushed. It was slight, but it was there.

Anna wanted to kiss her but held back. "How did you know I would take this route to the theatre?"

"I know you, Anna McIntosh, remember? You always seem so surprised by that."

They held each other's eyes for a few seconds. So much passed between them in those moments. "I'm so happy to see you, Hayley. You look really well."

Hayley smiled, shyly. "I'm happy to see you. I still can't believe you're here." She searched Anna's eyes. "Why are

you?”

Anna found Hayley’s hand and interlaced her fingers with hers. “Is there somewhere we can go and talk?”

Hayley’s curiosity shone through her eyes. “Let’s go back to my hotel room. It’s nice and quiet there.”

They fell into step walking back the way Anna had come. Seeing Hayley again after all this time and feeling like her heart was going to burst confirmed she was doing the right thing. It only deepened Anna’s resolve to give up her old dream of settling down in Balbuinidh and to follow Hayley to the ends of the earth.

How could she have been so stupid to risk losing Hayley over her fears of the unknown? At least Anna had rediscovered herself over the past few months. There was that.

Anna shook her thoughts away. She needed to focus. She glanced over at Hayley with the river in the background. “So, you sold the campervan?”

“Yep.”

“Who to?”

“A car dealership in Kent.”

“Oh, wow. Did you get a good deal?”

“I made a profit.”

Anna’s mouth fell open. “That’s amazing.”

Hayley shrugged. “I was just sad to see it go. But it was time.”

“Yeah.”

They passed an artisan coffee shop, a designer clothes shop, and a jewellery shop as they approached Hayley’s hotel. The chunky and gleaming door was held open for them by the doorman. Hayley’s heels clicked on the marble floor of the foyer as they walked across it.

“Treating yourself after months living in a van?” Anna said, as they approached the elevator.

Hayley smiled as she pushed the button. “Yeah. Something like that.”

They were quiet in the elevator. Hayley was biting down on her lower lip, staring ahead at nothing in particular. Anna wanted to wrap her arms around her and never let go, but she held back, still unsure of where Hayley was at. She had to stay calm. This was so important to get right.

The elevator pinged. At the door to her room, Hayley fiddled with the card a few times before it clicked open. Was she nervous, too?

The room was exquisite. The suite was large and airy, with a cute balcony. Hayley slid open the balcony doors and stepped out. Anna joined her. There were views across the central London rooftops, and a slight breeze.

“Sorry, just how rich are you again?”

“This is from the profit from the campervan sale. I thought I might go out with a bang.”

Anna’s heart sank. She didn’t want Hayley to leave tomorrow. “Why are you cutting your trip short?” Anna’s voice cracked with emotion.

Hayley slid a finger along the balcony railing, not meeting Anna’s eyes. “I’ve started to get more into my online business. Being in one place for a while will help me focus on it.”

“You can’t go,” Anna blurted out.

Hayley’s eyes widened.

“Since you’ve been away”—Anna swallowed. She had to get this right—“I’ve done a lot of thinking. I don’t want to waste another second of my life without you at the centre of it. I love you so much and that *is* all that matters. You’re part of me. I’ve always known it, Hayley. All the other stuff is just a bonus. I was just scared, and you know me when I get like that I can’t think clearly. I get disconnected from myself. But this is my head talking as well as my heart now. I’ll make it my life’s work to make you see that I do know what I want and what I want is you.”

Hayley parted her lips, just listening.

“I’m willing to change course from my old dream of a quiet life in Balbuinidh raising a family. I’m open to new things and I have you to thank for that. I’m up for more travel. I’m up for whatever. I’ve already told Kelly, and my parents are fully supportive too. You’ve helped me see that I can take a chance on life again. I can handle things.”

Hayley stared right at her, not even blinking. “What about how different we are? You said you were worried we want very different lives. Don’t our differences annoy you on a fundamental level that you’re not willing to put up with?”

Anna stepped closer and brushed some hair away from Hayley’s face. “I was freaking out. I love you. I’m so sorry I made a big deal about our differences. We are on the same path; I see that now.”

“But you don’t like it when I keep asking you to go out all the time. When I do stupid stuff and rope you into it.”

“I like it more than I realised. As long as you give me some breathing space to decompress, I’ll be fine. The truth is”—Anna exhaled—“you make me feel most like myself. You make me remember who I really am, and that person isn’t anxious and afraid, she’s strong and wants to live life to the fullest. It means a lot to me. I love that you give me that, and I hope that I give you the same thing.”

Hayley’s brow furrowed. “Why are you saying all this now? You gave me the impression you were really sure about the issues between us, that you were convinced it wouldn’t work, and that you had no interest in exploring where this could go.”

Anna turned away and leant on the balcony railing. She clasped her hands in front of her and hung her head, dipping her chin towards her chest. Hayley still didn’t know the true depth of her feelings and that had to be remedied once and for all, no matter how terrifying it was. “I didn’t just have a crush on you at university. Hayley, I was deeply in love with you. Like, embarrassingly so. You were my first love. I always assumed my feelings for you could never be returned so I

never let myself believe that there could be something there or it could go somewhere. Because you were everyone's favourite person, part of me never believed I was even good enough for your friendship. So, pushing away my feelings for you became second nature to me. So no, I never made a move. I pushed down my feelings. I pretended it wasn't a big deal. I did anything I could to still have you in my life because the idea of losing you if you ever found out was too painful. And then you left anyway because you had to go home. We had sex but you never knew that I was deeply in love with you already. That I dreamed about you every night and thought about you every moment of every day. That I yearned to be close to you in every way possible. This is so embarrassing to admit but I want you to know that I'm not messing about here. Hayley, you are the love of my life."

"Oh Anna."

Anna took a breath. "After you left at the end of your time here, I kept having this recurring dream about you. I dreamt that we met up again. You came to my house and we picked up from where we left off. We made a meal together and there were friends around, like how it was. I told you that I loved you and that I never wanted you to leave me and you said that you wouldn't. You would never leave me and I believed you. There was something so cathartic about it. I always thought it was my subconscious giving me what I needed most. I'd wake up and feel so sad it wasn't real because in the dream you felt so fucking real to me. But then I'd feel like a heaviness had been lifted and it didn't hurt so much any more. I moved on, Hayley. I left you in the past... And then you came back."

Hayley was quiet for what seemed like an eternity. "Thank you for telling me that. I'm so sorry."

"That's why I struggled to believe in what we had this time around. I'd built up so many defences to avoid ever having to feel like that again."

Hayley put her hand over Anna's. "We've made a mess of this, haven't we?" Her voice was soft and so gentle.

Anna turned towards Hayley, feeling more naked now than she ever had while they were having sex. “We have and I’m so sorry. I love you, Hayley. I want this. I want to be your girlfriend and travel the world with you. I think it would be amazing. How do you feel? Please say something and put me out of my misery here because I will ramble on all night if need be. I mean, I’ve even brought my passport with me so if you want to jet off somewhere right now, I’m with you. I’m that in. Just tell me how you feel.”

Hayley moved closer. “Baby, you ought to know by now.” She searched Anna’s eyes. “I’m in love with you. I adore you.”

Anna wrapped her arms around Hayley, pressing her body onto hers and hugging her tight. With her heart this close to Hayley’s, there was peace. “I love you so much,” Anna spoke over her shoulder.

Hayley buried her face into Anna’s neck, squeezing her even harder for a few seconds.

Anna massaged Hayley’s back with her thumbs, moving in soft and slow circles.

“This feels so good,” Hayley said. “I can’t believe I have to catch a flight in the morning.”

Anna pulled back out of the hug, triggered. Hayley was leaving her again. She quickly regained her composure and thought about whether she could get a ticket on the same flight, whether Hayley would want that.

Hayley had a contented, dreamy look in her eyes, like things were changing for her in real time. She was so fucking beautiful. Was she hers now? Anna didn’t have the heart to press her for a decision on her flight tomorrow right now. Anna was still processing everything they’d just said to each other, too.

Hayley stroked Anna’s hand. “You must be so tired.”

“I am feeling a bit tired. My eyes are stinging. Would it be okay if I took a shower to freshen up and then have a quick nap?”

“Sure, go ahead. I might have a lie down as well. I have a lot to think about.”

Twenty-One

Anna took her rucksack into the bathroom and closed the door behind her. She let out a long and tense breath, hoping that she was doing enough to win Hayley back. What if Anna coming here and declaring how she had changed wasn't a big enough gesture? What if their being in love wasn't enough? Was Hayley wanting to do long-distance? Because Anna would get on board with that. It was do-able, wasn't it? Or she could move to the US, if that was possible. They'd said so much already and Anna was still trying to process. But Anna didn't want to force the conversation. All Anna knew was that she needed a shower and a quick timeout. Everything felt so precarious and delicate.

She slipped out of her hoodie and pyjamas and turned the shower on. The water pressure was strong and heavy. It felt luxurious on her body when she stepped under it. She closed her eyes and let the water soothe her aching soul. The past few days had taken a toll. But there was also a new sense of calm. Hayley was still in love with her. Anna smiled under the shower, letting some of the water into her mouth.

After her shower she felt somewhat anew. She put on one of the hotel's fluffy white bathrobes after getting dry and using the expensive moisturiser. Stepping back into the room, Hayley was lying down on the bed on her side, resting her face on the back of her hands. Her boots were scattered on the floor and her coat had been thrown haphazardly onto a chair. She watched Anna cross the room towards the bed.

“Nice shower?”

“It was perfect. Just what I needed.”

Hayley patted the bed beside her.

So much was said in that one gesture that Anna stood there and stared at it for a moment. She lay down on her side and faced Hayley, mirroring her position. Looking into her eyes so close again felt like home. Safety. She had been mad to ever

think that pushing Hayley away was the safer option. A thousand lightbulbs went off inside Anna's head as the feeling solidified within her. They were meant for each other. This had to work. She closed her eyes, still hoping Hayley was watching, still hoping this was the start of something beautiful.

Sleep came easily and left too quickly. When she opened her eyes, Hayley was still there, fast asleep. There was something so comforting and peaceful about sleeping next to Hayley. It was like Anna could finally relax. In the dim light of the room there was nothing but their soft breathing and the strong beating heart of their connection. It was only then that Anna noticed the blanket draped across one of the chairs by the window. Their blanket.

Hayley turned onto her back and opened her eyes a few moments later. She smiled when she saw Anna out of the corner of her eye and that one smile melted away the very last drop of doubt that this wasn't the love to end all loves.

"Hey, you." Hayley turned back onto her side, facing Anna close. "Nice nap?"

Anna smiled. "The best."

"You're so cute when you sleep." Hayley caressed Anna's cheek.

"You are, too."

Hayley kept stroking her face. It was so soothing. Anna didn't feel so worked up any more, even though she was still waiting on a decision, or some indication of what came next. Instead, Hayley's fingers were causing a gentle throb between Anna's legs and she struggled to focus on anything else the more she did it.

Hayley paused her stroking. "I spent a lot of time by myself on my trip. I learned how to sit with the discomfort of being by myself and it wasn't so bad. I feel like I really got in touch with myself, for the first time in my whole life."

"That's amazing."

"What would you say to me not getting on that flight tomorrow and coming back up to Balbuinidh with you for a

while?”

Anna felt her eyes widen. “I would say *fuck* yes.”

Hayley smiled and moved closer. “The only reason I was going back home was because I was heartbroken about us. I enjoyed my trip, but it wasn’t the same without you. I’ve missed you so much. But now everything’s changed. You’re here. You drove through the night for me. What you said today. It means so much to me, Anna. You make me feel so loved. I want to be with you, too. I just want to spend my life with you. I feel like you are the freedom I’ve always wanted. You unlock something in me. It’s hard to explain. I really love you. Like we’re soulmates or something.” Hayley rested her hand on Anna’s waist. “I would like us to travel but we don’t have to live like nomads. We’ll work it out. All I want is right here, so it doesn’t matter to me where we go or where we live. But I do still want to work on my business. I can do that from anywhere. I’m sorry if this is too strong too soon but we’ve wasted so much time already and...” Hayley paused. “I just love you so much.”

Anna leaned forwards and kissed Hayley’s lips, finding their special connection the instant they made contact. What comfort in knowing that what they had wasn’t lost. It was right here. Hayley smiled and Anna kissed her broad grin, not caring. They laughed and pulled apart slightly. Anna brushed her nose against Hayley’s.

Hayley touched the collar on Anna’s bathrobe. “This feels so right.”

“It does. I’m so happy we’re doing this.” Anna smiled.

“Me too. I can’t wait to go back to Scotland with you. This is so exciting.”

“I’ll tell Kelly and the distillery I’m not leaving just yet. But once we know where we’re going, I think I’m going to hand in my notice for real. I’m ready to try something new, wherever that may be.”

“I’m not pressurising you into leaving your job. I’m happy to stay in Balbuinidh for a while.”

“Let’s not go into all the details right now,” Anna said. “We can work all that stuff out later. The most important thing is that we’re together. Like I said, I’m up for anything. I’d quite like to work in a bar in another country and get to know it that way. I think it’d be fun and that’s the type of work I could get most easily. I’m flexible. I’ll pay my way.”

Hayley put two fingers over Anna’s lips. “Shhh. No planning right now, remember?”

“You’re right. Sorry.” Anna caught sight of the blanket again and rested her eyes on it.

Hayley followed her gaze to what she was looking at. “What? Did you think I wouldn’t hold onto it?”

Anna raised an eyebrow. “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Hayley took a deep breath in and shook her head on the exhale. “I should never have left it behind when we were younger. I did want you to have something to remember me by, but I can see now that it might have given you the impression that I didn’t care about it, that I didn’t care about you. I was in such a mess. Anyway, it’s our blanket now, right?”

Anna nodded, a smile breaking out across her whole face. “It is ours.”

“Now.” Hayley slipped her hand inside Anna’s bathrobe at the collar, making contact with her bare skin. You said something on the bridge about wooing me?” Hayley smirked.

Anna narrowed her eyes while tingling from Hayley’s hand now resting on her chest inside her bathrobe. “Ma’am, is this still not a done deal yet?”

Hayley bit down on her lower lip. The look on her face was fast turning improper. “It’s close. But I think there are a few items still outstanding.”

“Like what?”

“I think you know.”

Anna raised herself up and straddled her. She tugged on the knot holding her bathrobe together and let it fall from her

shoulders leaving her naked. Hayley's eyes widened as she slipped her hands under the thick white cotton covering Anna's thighs and moved it the rest of the way off Anna's body. Being fully naked while Hayley was fully clothed was such a turn-on.

Anna leaned forward, resting her elbows either side of Hayley's face and kissed her gently on the lips while Hayley caressed her sides. Having a best friend turn into a lover and then hopefully the person she would spend the rest of her life with was mind-blowingly good. The kiss deepened, and she let her full weight rest on Hayley's body. The friction from Hayley's jeans felt so good. This burning desire she had for Hayley threatened to drip all over Hayley's clothes the longer they kissed like this.

"You know, I..." Hayley paused, looking uncharacteristically unsure. "I haven't been able to come since we last slept together."

"Neither have I."

Hayley looked deeply into Anna's eyes. Anna bathed in the intensity of her stare, not wanting to ever look away, as the gravity of the moment caught up with them.

"Baby, I've missed you so much." Hayley gripped Anna's ass, pulling her closer onto her.

Anna melted into Hayley. "I want you so bad, it's fucking ridiculous."

Hayley moaned, softly, narrowing her eyes in a sort of plead, as if desperate for Anna to fuck her.

Anna moved down Hayley's body and knelt between her legs, finding Hayley's eyes as she undid her jeans and pulled them off. A small patch of wetness on Hayley's underwear caused a jolt of electricity to course right through Anna. She leaned forward and kissed the wet patch through the fabric, feeling how hot Hayley was against her mouth. She inhaled Hayley's delicious scent and moved the fabric to one side to give her the immediate access she needed.

Hayley cried out in pleasure as soon as Anna's mouth made contact with her slick wet folds. Momentarily stopping to get rid of Hayley's underwear, she took a long lick all the way up Hayley's slit to the top of her clit. Hayley shuddered underneath her and moaned so freely it took Anna's breath away for a second.

Hayley undid her own shirt, displaying her bra and toned abs. Anna reached up and squeezed one of her breasts as she slowly licked Hayley's most sensitive spot. To think that Hayley was hers now was incredible. She was beyond lucky to have another shot with her first love and even though she nearly blew it, there was no doubt in her mind that this was exactly what she wanted. Needed.

Soft moans and searching hands gripping the bedsheets brought Anna back to the present. Hayley was on the edge. She took Anna's hand away from her breast and held it tight. Anna repositioned herself more comfortably and slid two fingers inside, confidently probing and pleasuring Hayley at will. She lowered her mouth and savoured every second of having Hayley in ecstasy underneath her. Hunger and desire compelled her to fuck Hayley with everything she had. Hayley came loudly, letting out the sexiest most unhinged moans Anna had ever heard and gripping Anna's hand so hard it hurt.

Feeling immensely proud of herself Anna looked up. Tears were falling down Hayley's cheeks and there was a red rash over her chest and neck. Anna went to her. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Hayley wiped the stray tears with the back of her hand and smiled. "It's nothing bad. You're incredible. I just got a bit overwhelmed."

Hayley lay there so open and vulnerable and emotional it made Anna love her even more. She was never going to stop loving this woman. She was no longer crying but Anna wasn't sure how to proceed. "We can slow down?"

"Never." Hayley slid her hand around Anna's neck and pulled her down towards her lips. The kiss was tender and soft. "We're only getting started."

Hayley was finally hers. Anna was so ready for this now. With nothing holding her back any more, it was probably the most intimate kiss they'd ever shared. "Good thing you don't have a flight to catch tomorrow."

Hayley laughed before her eyes turned more serious. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm yours, Anna. Completely and utterly yours. Particularly if you keep fucking me like that."

Those words coming from Hayley were so cathartic. It felt like the girls they were when they were younger – inexperienced, confused, and in love, but painfully departing each other in the airport – were finally being honoured and healed. Everything was clicking into place. "I can't tell you." Anna kissed her neck. "How excited I am about this."

"Maybe you can let me see, instead?"

Anna fell onto the pillow beside Hayley, into the place she never wanted to leave. She turned onto her side and they gazed at each other for a moment. Hayley had that look of desire in her eyes that Anna could happily bathe in forever.

Holding eye contact with her, Hayley reached in between Anna's legs. When her fingers made contact, it was apparent just how excited Anna was. She was so hot and wet, it was almost embarrassing, but Anna didn't give a fuck about that any more. While Hayley's fingers slid all over Anna's desire for her, Hayley leaned over and kissed Anna so hard it pushed her back onto the pillow. Their tongues clashed and Anna felt another hot flood of arousal spill onto Hayley's hand. "Anna, I"—Hayley breathed, in between kisses—"I love you so much."

Anna smiled into Hayley's lips, never having been more certain of anything in her entire life. "I love you, too."

Twenty-Two

Anna was working up a sweat. She swung the axe down hard on the wood. It made a satisfying slice right down the middle and a loud crack. She was making good progress on the stack and would hopefully get through it before Hayley got home. This was as good as going to the gym if she worked fast like this.

“You look super hot doing that.”

Anna turned to see Hayley leaning against the doorframe of the backdoor, arms folded across her chest as if she'd been standing there awhile. “When did you get home?”

“Long enough to make me feel like a creeper, standing here perving on you like this.”

Anna crossed the small back garden and kissed Hayley on the lips once. She put her arms around Hayley's waist and pulled her in close. “You're my girlfriend now.” She kissed Hayley on the lips again. “You're allowed to openly lust after me.”

“Honey, I openly lusted after you plenty when we were just friends. You just didn't see it.”

“That's true. Not until I was giving you a lap dance and you were practically drooling.”

“I was not drooling.”

Anna raised an eyebrow.

“Okay. Maybe I was. But in fairness, you were being so sexy it was actually painful not to make a move.”

Anna took a deep breath and gave Hayley a hug, resting her head on her shoulder. “I'm nearly finished with the wood. We can do some more planning for the trip this afternoon.”

“Sounds good. I'll go make some tea.”

Anna stacked the wood in the log store and cleared up the smaller flakes scattered around the chopping block. She had a

tenant moving in and she wanted to get the place perfect for them. It was going to be strange being away from her house, but she was ready. They were about to embark on a year-long trip starting in South East Asia and ending in the US where Anna would get to meet Hayley's family and friends. Most things were in place: visas, plane tickets, airport transfers, first few days accommodation, a rough itinerary – Anna had conceded on that one – and agreements on key places they both wanted to visit. It had been so much fun planning it together. Today was about getting an idea for buying a campervan in Australia or renting one.

Sitting on the sofa, they huddled around Anna's laptop. "Maybe we should just rent one," Anna said, after an hour of getting nowhere. "I won't have my tools with me to do it up like the last one. They all look like they either need work or are astronomical in price."

"You're right. Let's do that."

"That way we can mix and match. When we are in the cities, we won't need a van. We can go on foot and explore without having to think about where to park. Or we can rent cars as and when we need them to go to places like the Blue Mountains."

"Look at you all willing to be spontaneous."

"I wouldn't get too excited. This is me planning flexibility into the trip."

Hayley laughed. "I've noticed you're more relaxed these days."

"You're right. I am more relaxed." Part of that was to do with being with Hayley. Part of it was to do with Anna addressing the root cause and getting better at managing her thoughts. "Sex and meditation. It works."

"I can't tell you how happy I am to hear that."

"You just did."

Hayley smiled, then leaned over and kissed Anna's cheek. She lingered at the side of her face. "I'm proud of you."

Even this small gesture had Anna trembling at the knees, wanting to take things into the bedroom. Instead, she stood and went into the bedroom on her own. She brought back the collage picture frame she'd made and handed it to Hayley. "This is for you, my love."

Hayley's eyes widened. "What is it?"

"Open it."

The paper was ripped open and removed within seconds.

"Handcrafted by yours truly."

"You made this?"

Anna nodded, feeling suddenly like a show off, which didn't sit well with her. "I was going to print out some photos and put them in, but I thought maybe it could be for our new trip and all the adventures we're going to have together? Be something to look forward to for when we get back."

Hayley stood and wrapped her arms around Anna's neck and shoulders. "Thank you, Anna. I love it. This is so thoughtful. When did you make it?"

"I started making it not long after you left for Europe. It gave me something to focus on. I finished it this week when you were out walking with Myla."

"I had no idea. That's so sweet."

"I also wanted to say thank you for staying with me here in Balbuinidh these past few months. It's helped me get things ready to go away, what with working my notice and getting someone to live here while I'm gone."

"It's been my pleasure. Really." Hayley smirked. "More than happy to oblige you in your needs."

In hindsight, it was wonderful to be at home given how much sex they'd been having. There were few distractions and it meant they could stay in bed all morning or all weekend, sometimes, if they wanted to, and they often did. "We have been busy."

“Oh Anna, when are you ever going to notice that I’m flirting with you?”

Anna laughed. “I know you are. I’m just choosing to ignore it. We will get nothing done today if not.”

“So serious.” Hayley shook her head. “I still have my work cut out with you.”

“I’ve enjoyed our sex-era.”

Hayley laughed. “You make it sound like it’s over.”

“You know what I mean. It’s pretty much all we’ve been doing these past few months. Now we’re going to go and see the world together. There won’t be as much time for... you know.”

“Oh honey, you have no idea how creative I can be with sex in unusual places.”

“I’m actually a little terrified about what you’re going to come up with. There’s an extra element to worry about when there are murderous snakes and spiders around.”

“We’ll never do anything you’re not comfortable with.”

Anna kissed her on the cheek and sat down on the sofa.

Hayley joined her. “So, we’re going to have eras, are we?”

“We’ve already had a lot of eras, but yes, I hope we will.”

“Me too.” Hayley put her hand on Anna’s thigh and absent-mindedly caressed it, sending tingles all the way to Anna’s core. This attraction between them was burning hotter by the day, if that was even possible.

“That feels nice.”

“I love touching you. I can’t get enough!” Hayley pulled Anna backwards onto the sofa, tickling her sides and laughing.

Anna laughed. “Stop!”

“Sorry. It’s just too tempting. You react so quickly. Then again, you react quickly when I touch you in other places, too.” Hayley smirked.

“Pfft. I do not.”

After moving the laptop out of the way, Hayley straddled her, with playful eyes turning hazy with desire. They locked eyes for a few seconds.

“Don’t start. I mean it. We have things to do today.”

Hayley sighed and diligently dismounted Anna’s thighs. She sat next to her on the sofa and crossed one leg over the other. Anna loved that they could mess around one minute and be sensible the next. Hayley picked up the picture frame and studied it. She ran her hand over the smooth and ornate edges. “It really is a beautiful piece of art as well. I didn’t know you did things like this as well as your sturdy furniture.”

Anna had crafted some contours into the frame and cut the smaller frames into different sizes and different angles. “It’s the first time I’ve done something like this. I really enjoyed it.”

“You should make more. I love it.”

“Maybe I will when we get back from the trip.” Anna didn’t know what the future held for them just yet. Would they live here, travel for more than their initial planned year or move to the States? But she had made her peace with not knowing and with uncertainty. It was liberating.

“You know, I think you’re embodying that wolf on your arm these days. It’s so courageous what you’re doing, going away with me, leaving your life here, taking a chance on us. I’m so grateful.”

“I do feel like it suits me better these days.” Anna touched her tattoo.

“I mean, with all that chopping wood, your arms are looking so good. So strong.” Hayley’s jaw tightened. “Fuckable.”

“You really have a one-track mind.”

“I’m sorry.” She shook her head. “I promise not to talk about sex for the next hour.”

Anna laughed. “It’s okay. Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“How are you feeling about going away?”

“I’m excited. I’ve always wanted to go to that part of the world. I’ve never done anything as big as this before.”

“I know.” Hayley held her hand. “I’m so happy we’re taking this step together. I’m so happy we’re going to get to experience this together. I’m just so happy.”

“I love to hear that.”

“It’s because of you.”

“That’s an amazing compliment but I’m getting dizzy up here on this pedestal you’re putting me on. What if you get bored of me when we’re not running around the world?”

Hayley shook her head and smiled. “See that’s the thing. You’re always so down to earth. I love you, Anna. And I always will. Exciting trips or not. Sex every day or not.”

Anna laughed. “We’ll see.” She put her lips onto Hayley’s and lingered there. “I love you, too. And since we’re doing thank-yous – thank you for helping me see how fun life can be if you’re open to it. I was so closed off to new things in life before you came back. All my fun was organised at least three months in advance. I was so routinised I’d forgotten how to live.”

“You weren’t that bad, my love.” Hayley’s voice was kind.

“I was practically announcing my retirement and I wasn’t even in a relationship.”

“You want what you want. That hasn’t gone away. We’re just taking the time right now to do all the things we won’t be able to do for a while once we have kids.”

Anna exhaled, softly. That Hayley was openly talking about their future was so exciting. Hayley wanted the same things as her and she was actively envisioning a future together. Anna couldn’t have been happier, either. “I actually love the sound of that.”

Hayley tucked a strand of Anna’s hair behind her ear. Anna was still getting used to it being longer. Hayley rested her forehead on Anna’s. “Me too.”

Anna wrapped her arms around Hayley's waist. They stayed there like that just holding each other and not saying anything. The force of their connection was so strong, all Anna could do was hold on and feel the power of it.

"This feels like home," Hayley whispered.

"It does."

Hayley lifted her head away and looked into her eyes. "Can you believe this gets to be our life now?"

"I don't think it's fully sunk in yet." Anna smiled.

"I hope it never does."

"Me too. Is there anything else you want to do before we go? And I do not mean in the bedroom, though I will be easily swayed in that department and you know it. Since we're so organised we can just chill on Sunday and Monday, if you want."

"Yeah, actually. There is something I'd like to do before we leave."

"What?"

Hayley hesitated. "Could we go back to the loch we visited years ago? I want to put my stone back where it belongs."

"Um, sure. We can do that."

"Awesome."

"Why do you want to put your stone back?"

"Because it's part of nature and should be back there. Because that's where it belongs. Because I took it when what I wanted was you, and now I have you."

"Hayley, are you projecting onto that stone?"

"Of course I am." She grinned.

Anna closed the car door and smiled at Hayley. They were finally back at the loch they'd visited when they were younger. They crossed the small road and made their way towards the shore. It looked remarkably similar except for the trees which

were bare given that it was winter now and they'd visited closer to summer last time.

Hayley stopped by the water. Her hair blew in the wind. "It's just how I remember it."

"Yeah."

"Where did we take the photo from?"

Anna looked around and found what looked like the rock they had sat on. She pointed. "Over there." They made their way over to the rock as the pebbles squelched underfoot.

"I was glad there wasn't another one close by. I just wanted to be close to you." Hayley said.

"Ah, if only I'd known."

They sat down together. It was a tight squeeze.

Hayley laughed. "We must have been a bit smaller back then."

Anna smiled. "Must have been."

"It feels like we've stepped back in time. Or into the photograph. It's perfect."

"I know. I'm so glad we came back." Anna faced the water again and the mountains dipping into the loch, it seemed, all around. It was so peaceful here. But the last time they were here together Anna's heart was anything but peaceful. This love she had for Hayley, at its core, was the same then as it was now, but at the time there had been crushingly little hope of it going anywhere. "Did you really not know I was in love with you the last time we were here?"

Hayley leant towards Anna. "I think deep down, I knew there was something between us. I knew that I loved every second we shared together. But I didn't know what it truly meant. I think the first time I realised it was something special, something overwhelming, was when we were cuddling the night before I had to leave. Before things... escalated."

"How?"

“You started caressing my arm. Your heart began beating so fast. It was like a drum in my ear. I think mine was much the same.”

“You remember that?”

“It’s my most bittersweet memory of us.” Hayley rested her hand on Anna’s thigh. “We were soulmates running out of time. But we found each other again.”

“We did.”

“I do love it here.”

“We should go travelling around Scotland together or something. Make a list of all the places.”

Hayley laughed. “Now who has the good memory?”

Hayley got back to her feet again and stood up straight, squaring her shoulders and taking a deep breath. She held Anna’s eyes, as if deep in thought.

“Are you okay? Why so serious?”

Hayley bit down on her bottom lip. “Yeah. Fine.” She put her hands in her pockets and got out her lovely stone she had miraculously kept all these years, twiddling it in her fingers. “Time to put this back where it belongs.”

Anna followed Hayley to the water. It lapped at the shore a bit rougher than she remembered. It was funny how the water was the opposite to her internal state both times she’d been here. Last time, the water had been calm as a storm raged within her. This time, it was rough and choppy while she had never felt more at peace.

Hayley turned the stone around in her fingers, looking down at it with soft eyes. “Would you like to hold it one last time?”

“Sure.”

Hayley handed it to her. It was so smooth. It was almost a shame Hayley was putting it back, but she understood why Hayley was doing it. It did belong here, and it did represent their troubled history being over. Although, Anna had stones

in the house from places she'd visited as a child and secretly hoped Hayley wouldn't force her to put them back, too. She handed it back to Hayley.

"Here goes," Hayley said. She looked nervous for some reason, bless her. She knelt down and placed the adored stone on the beach in amongst the others and put her hand over it. "Thank you," she said to it. "For reminding me of the truth for all those years and for making sure I came back to where I belong. Have fun back here with your buddies. I hope you'll be very happy back where you belong, too."

Seeing Hayley talk to her stone was unexpected, but it was so sweet. She fell a little bit more in love with her while watching her do it. This love between them was growing and deepening by the day, it felt. Anna still couldn't believe how ridiculously lucky she was.

Hayley let go of her beloved stone and put her hand back in her pocket. She looked so conflicted about it. Anna's heart went out to her. Instead of standing up, however, she twisted around on one knee and looked up at Anna with the most sincere and hopeful expression Anna had ever seen on her. The hand came back out of the pocket and a small box was revealed in the palm of her hand. Hayley opened it.

Anna froze.

Hayley was down on one knee holding a ring up at her. Was this what she thought it was? It couldn't be. Her heart started pounding. Her mouth felt dry.

"Anna." Hayley looked so serious. "I know this is quick but hear me out."

A dumbfounded shake of the head was all Anna could produce.

"What we have is so special. We've known each other for so long so in many ways this isn't that reckless. Anna, you are my person. You set my heart on fire and you ground me. I want to grow old with you. I want to experience all that life has to offer with you by my side. I've never been surer of anything else. Anna, I love you so much." Hayley swallowed

hard. The skin between her eyes furrowed. “Will you marry me?”

Everything slowed down as Anna absorbed the impact of Hayley’s words and stared into her hopeful eyes. Anna was shocked. Them getting married was always her ultimate dream but she hadn’t been thinking about it or even expecting it anytime soon.

Hayley went pale.

Anna grinned. “Yes!”

Hayley sprung up as if she’d won a million pounds. “Oh my god!”

“Yes, yes, yes – a million times yes.”

“Ahhhh!”

“I love you, too. I would love to marry you.”

“Oh, Anna!”

Hayley kissed Anna’s lips like she needed them for dear life. They pressed their bodies close and wrapped their arms around each other. Hayley placed the ring on Anna’s finger as the water lapped at the shore. It was perfect.

“Can’t believe you’re proposing so soon but I am one hundred percent in. My younger self is doing cartwheels right now.”

Hayley pulled back, a worried expression creeping onto her face. “Do you think we’re rushing into this? I was going to wait until we were in Australia.”

“No. Being with you feels inevitable to me.” Anna smiled.

A delighted grin replaced the look of worry on Hayley. “Who are we to fight the inevitable?”

Anna stared at the gleaming rock on her finger. “It’s huge.”

“It’s a sapphire. Sapphic. Like us.”

“It’s perfect.”

Hayley’s fingers brushed Anna’s as she held her hand. A rush of warmth spread through Anna’s entire heart.

“How does it feel?” Hayley said.

Anna spread her fingers. “Perfect. It fits perfectly as well.”

“I’m so glad.”

Anna leant into Hayley for an unrushed hug, which Hayley reciprocated. Everything in Anna’s life had led to this moment – the good times, the bad times and everything in between. It was inevitable. She nuzzled into Hayley’s shoulder, savouring the feel of her body against hers and the nature all around them, and inhaled the feeling of everything that was peaceful and true. “This feels so right.”

Hayley held her close and caressed the back of her head. “I never want to let go.”

“Neither do I.”

After some time, they came out of the embrace and started walking back to the car.

“Oh wait,” Hayley said.

“What?”

“We should get a photo.”

“God, yes. I can’t believe we nearly forgot.”

They stood close and got the loch in the background. Hayley took a ton of pictures with her arm outstretched and them standing close. Anna kissed the side of Hayley’s face and then they gave up on the photo session. The kisses turned into a deep and passionate kiss that sent Hayley’s hands into Anna’s hair and Anna’s hands to caress Hayley’s back.

“Are you really going to be my wife?” Hayley asked, pulling apart to look into Anna’s eyes.

“There’s nothing I want more.”

“I can’t wait to introduce you to everyone back home.”

Anna took Hayley’s hand. “I would love to meet your family and friends. I can’t wait to go to America and explore your life there. Oh my god I’m so excited about it. About everything!”

Hayley smiled so wide her whole face lit up. “It’s going to be great.”

“It’s a crime I haven’t been already. I hope they like me.”

“They’ll love you! You’re an amazing woman, Anna. Such a beautiful and kind and sweet person. I love you so much! Nothing would make me prouder than bringing you home after our adventure. But that’s all in good time. Getting to this moment with you means the world to me. I hope you know that.” Hayley tucked a wayward strand of hair behind Anna’s ear and looked into Anna’s eyes.

“I do.”

“Hey now. Let’s wait for the wedding first before saying that.”

Anna laughed. A life with Hayley was going to be full of joy and laughter and fun. But most importantly, it was going to be full of love. Which was exactly what she wanted.

Epilogue

Anna tapped her thumbs against her safety harness. She could hardly hear herself think let alone try not to have a nervous breakdown. Her heart thundered. Her stomach felt like it was in her chest. The ridiculous full body suits, helmet and glasses weren't helping. Across from her and Hayley on the small plane, the guides in the business of throwing people out of flying aeroplanes in the name of a so-called exciting sport hovered by the door which threatened to open at some point. Anna pressed her back into her seat in an attempt to get as far away from them as possible.

Hayley sat beside her the epitome of cool, calm, and collected. "How are you feeling, my love?"

She shot her a furious glare. "When I said that I would not be doing a bungee jump that did not mean I would be happy to do a skydive."

"What about what you said last night?"

"It must have been the wine talking."

"That's us reached ten thousand feet. If you'd like to approach the launch pad."

The guy in charge of this god forsaken torture chamber in the air spoke as if they were swapping stories around a campfire. It was infuriating.

Hayley took her hand. "You will be fine."

Anna gritted her teeth. She followed Hayley towards the door of the plane and the guides casually standing beside it, her legs feeling like jelly and her heart in her throat. This could well be the worst, and last, experience of her life. She always knew Hayley would be the end of her.

"If you'd like to pair up with your tandem and get clipped in, we'll circle here until we're ready to go," the guide said in his thick Australian accent.

Instinctively, Anna stepped back and turned to Hayley. “Fuck my fucking life I swear to god this isn’t even funny. How the fuck did I agree to this? I am never going to let you rope me into doing anything like this ever again. I can’t do this. I can’t.”

“Just breathe, my love.”

The two tandem guides waited patiently as Anna freaked out in front of them. She was too scared to care what they thought of her. The main guide had an annoyingly calm demeanour about him. They all looked as if they had seen this type of last-minute freak-out many times before and weren’t fazed by it. They even seemed a bit like they expected it. “Take your time, love, we can fly round in circles until you’re ready to go.”

Anna flared her nostrils as panic took over. Pure fear gripped her body. How could no one else be freaking out right now?

Hayley took Anna’s hand and walked her back to her safe space in the corner. “Squeeze?”

“No, thanks. Let’s just fly back down. Why jump out of this plane, really? What are we going to achieve by it, in reality, for the love of god what are we doing?”

“Anna. You said you like it when I push you outside of your comfort zone. You said you wanted to do this skydive. That it would be the single biggest achievement of your life bar running the Loch Ness Marathon in under four hours.”

“I must have been in an overly good mood when I said that.”

“You can be so pessimistic sometimes. But I know you. I know that you want to jump out of this plane. I know that you are going to love it and that we will remember this moment for the rest of our lives. We will tell our grandchildren that you got scared before we leapt, and they will laugh and enjoy the story even more. All you’ve got to do is let go of control. I know this is hard for you but trust me, it’s going to open your mind to the possibilities of what you can achieve when you

just take a leap of faith and do the thing that scares you the most.”

“Will it.”

“You took that leap for me, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And that worked out well.”

“Yes but that didn’t involve a life or death situation like this.”

“Didn’t it?”

Hayley had a point. They both knew that their hearts would never have been the same had they not got together. In one of their tender moments recently, they had admitted as much. “I’m listening.”

“Pushing yourself to do new things is how we grow. Hell, I had to push myself to slow down and stop taking so much on, and I’m so much happier for it. This stuff works. First step, jump out of this plane, next step, world domination.”

“Okay, okay, okay.”

“Plus it will also be the most fun you’ve ever had in your life. This is living, Anna McIntosh.”

“One way to put it.”

Anna no longer felt like she was going to be sick or faint.

“You know I’m not going without you. I will be by your side, baby. Always. We’re doing this together.”

“Stop giving such a good pep talk. It’s making me feel like I might be able to do it.”

“So are we on?”

Anna took a deep breath. Now that she had calmed down, she remembered how much she had wanted to do this. She wanted to feel the air press against her face and the weightlessness of the fall. To see the ground from a bird’s eye perspective and feel how interconnected everything was. She wanted to do something crazy again, like flying through trees

and canyoning, and see what she was really capable of. Anna let out a sigh of consent. “Fuck it.”

“Yes!” Hayley fist pumped the air. “Let’s fucking do this, come on!”

Hayley took her hand, and they approached the guides beside the door.

“All ready now?” Anna’s tandem guide asked.

Anna managed a nod.

They got attached to their tandem guides and were checked over by the main guide and then by each other’s guides. The guides then went through a well-practised drill that Anna listened to again. She had memorised the safety demonstration at the flight centre and watched countless YouTube videos on it, but one more time was helping her nerves. When the guide slid open the plane door, the roaring engines were immediately overshadowed by the air whooshing past.

She took a breath and looked over at Hayley, the love of her life. All that mattered was the feeling of Hayley’s hand in hers and her gentle and steady gaze. Anna was going to let go of control and see what that felt like.

“We’re good to go at our end. Are you both good?” the main guide said. “Ready to go?”

Both Anna and Hayley nodded at the same time. They glanced at each other, all smiles and anticipation.

“Nice one! Okay, on a count of three.”

Adrenaline thundered around Anna’s body. This was it. Hayley squeezed her hand, making Anna feel infinitely better, as always.

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three!”

And with that, they leapt into the sky together.

~ THE END ~

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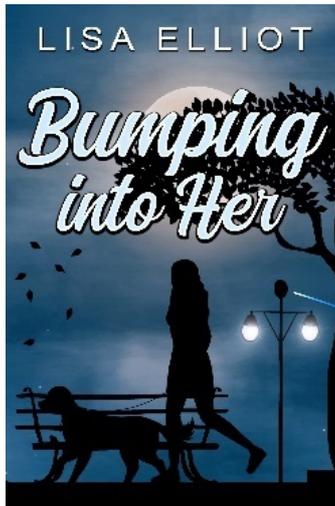
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lisa Elliot is a sapphic romance author based in Scotland. She is passionate about writing stories centred around women loving women and that always have a happy ending. Along with reading sapphic fiction, Lisa enjoys trying to lift heavy things in the gym while listening to dance music or podcasts. She lives for coffee and cake and long walks in the hills. Is task-managed by her dog.

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