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Opening Extract from...

Letting You Go

Written by Anouska Knight

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Alex burst from the break in the trees frantically enough that, had she left the woodland a little way further up the roadside, she might have missed him altogether. Any other time it would've been odd, him just sitting there in his cab, pulled over awkwardly on the track running up towards the house. But not today. It was as if he were waiting for her, his unmistakable battered blue tow truck a beacon of hope where it sat in the dusty layby. Her burning lungs had gasped at this meagre stroke of luck, if luck had any part to play here. His being there had saved vital minutes. Precious time reclaimed by not having to make it all the way back up the lane to the house.

Ted Foster's hands were already braced on the steering wheel, as if by some sixth sense he knew what was coming to find him moments before his daughter slammed herself, wild and startled, against his truck bonnet. Alexandra had looked crazed, *unrecognisable* when she'd sprung in front of his windscreen, the vein in her neck jumping with the emergency pulsing through her lean frame. Her eyes had been too white, as white as Ted's knuckles had been while

he'd sat there, solemnly regarding the truths he couldn't take home.

Ted had made the call as they'd started through the small copse of trees and across the farmland beyond, calmly relaying to the operator the information Alexandra had managed to unscramble as her voice had cracked and her legs momentarily buckled.

Help is coming! The thought screamed through Alex's head. *Dad's coming, Dill, Dad's coming.*

Her pumps were no longer squelching against the dusty earth. Alexandra Foster had been the fastest runner in her year group ever since St Cuthbert's sports days, but she couldn't swim like she could run, and Finn knew it. People didn't run at all in college, she'd found. They ambled. Everywhere. To the cafeteria, the art block – allowing the effortlessly honed muscles of youth to slacken. Alex hadn't run anywhere since leaving high school last year, but dormant muscles had responded to her demands and she was flying. Ted was flying too. His own burst of adrenalin allowing a man of over fifty to keep pace with his seventeen-year-old child as they rushed in panicked determination to where she had left them.

Alex could hear Rodolfo's heavy barks guiding them back to the water's edge, rudely echoing above the peaceful gushing of the river. *The Old Girl,* the locals called it, *Mind the Old Girl and her changing moods.* They'd all had it drummed into them as kids. Dill too. He knew, he *knew*! Alex felt her throat tighten again, her heart twisting as they

burst through the long grasses back into the clearing by the alder trees.

Finn had nearly reached Dillon further downstream when he'd turned and screamed at Alex across the water, screamed at her not to come in any deeper but to *run! Run for help!* So she had, back to the house, instead of floundering on uselessly against her own panic. She thought they'd still be in the water now, but they were back in the clearing, Finn kneeling in the dirt crouched over two wet gangly legs, dripping indifferently where they poked out from under him. Dill looked tiny beneath Finn's teenage frame, as if the water had shrunk him. A mischievous little boy, playing possum.

Ted skidded in beside them on the floor, Finn moving instinctively from where he had been desperately pressing a rhythm into Dill's sodden chest. Alex watched her father, useless again as Rodolfo's barking turned to whimpers and Ted took over the task of thudding urgent hands into his boy's chest.

'You spit it out, son, you hear me? You spit it all up right now!' he commanded.

Finn was standing over them both, his hands locked at the back of his head, motionless as he watched. The water hadn't soothed the nettle stings angrily covering Finn's legs where his long shorts hadn't protected them just half an hour ago. Half an hour, when stingers and the end of the summer were their only cares in the world.

'Son, you start breathing, son. *Right now*!' Ted pleaded.

Alex watched her father punctuating his need with every downward lunge against her brother's skinny body. But Dill wasn't doing what he was told.

Ted breathed into Dill's bluing lips. Still, Dill's legs didn't move from where they peeped beneath his father's body. One of Dill's shoes was gone. Alex's thoughts started to fire off like the cracker-bombs their mum had confiscated from Dill that morning. The world seemed to fall away then, numb beyond the mystery of that one missing red pump. Dill couldn't walk home with only one shoe! Where was it? He had been wearing them both when Alex had followed Finn into the undergrowth, away and out of sight for just a few silly minutes. They needed to find that shoe, right now, right—

Alex heard her father's voice falter. 'Dillon Edward Foster. You cough it up, son… or your mother is going to be awful upset.'

I only left him for a minute… But Alex wasn't as sure now. She'd been distracted.

'Dillon Foster, *BREATHE*!'

Alex watched in silence as her dad tried to breathe life into his child, his huge hands grappling at Dill's expressionless face for better purchase. Alex felt the agitation lurch inside her chest. Her father wasn't being gentle any more, he shouldn't be so rough with him! Didn't he realise? He was going to hurt him.

Something warm spilled down both of Alex's cheeks.

'BREATHE, GOD DAMN IT, *BREATHE!*' Ted shook

Dill as if trying to rouse him from a stubborn sleep. He sank his mouth over his son's again and, *at last*! Alex thought she saw Dill shift beneath their father's solid frame. She held her breath… Yes! She could definitely hear it, a new sound! A breathy, jarring sound! Struggling to make its way clear of where it originated.

Something gave in the pit of her stomach. *Oh, Dill! Thank—*

Ted turned his head from the little boy's face, strain etched in his eyes. Alex watched her father's chest convulsing in short, sudden jerks beneath his shirt. She'd never seen her father cry, not for anything. Alex looked to those two legs again, the shoed and the shoeless. Nothing. Dill's body was limp again with the loss of their father's movements to animate him.

Finn began pushing his hands up through the sides of his wet hair. He turned away to face the alder tree hanging mournfully over the passing waters, a cork archery target hanging forgotten from its trunk. Alex watched as Finn slowly crouched down to the earth again, his broad teenage shoulders closing in on him like a pair of redundant wings.

No… *No!* This was wrong! They'd only left him for a minute.

A broken gravelled voice cut through Alex's fragmented thoughts.

'Where were you?'

It didn't sound like her dad. It didn't look like him either. Ted's features were contorted in a way that made his face

almost foreign; laughter lines suddenly gnarled and hostile. Alex opened her mouth to speak, but there was nothing.

'Where the hell *were* you?' her father demanded, taking in the state of Alex's nettle-stung arms and legs. Alex watched him look accusingly at Finn's lower body, Finn's matching affliction where the stingers had got him too. Finn's shirt was inside out. Ted was piecing it together, Alex could see the furious disbelief growing in her father's eyes and waited uselessly for him to turn that look on her. When he did, it came like a hot iron through her chest, his voice broken and deformed.

'YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO BE WATCHING MY SON!'

CHAPTER 1

Not everything can be damned-well helped! Sometimes, all you can hope for is time and if you're goddamned lucky… distance.

Alex was buttering her way through another loaf of bread with enough vigour that the bulbous handle of the butter knife had indented her fingers. She stopped herself before tearing through another slice of extra value wholemeal and shook the words from her head. There had been other words too, following her down the years like a long shadow. But these were the only words she could do anything with – all she had to offer her family as pitiful recompense for the damage that could never be undone. *Time* and *distance*.

Alex pushed her father from her thoughts and reacquainted herself with the view through the kitchen hatch. The twins were still eating their lunch, too busy devouring their own meals to notice their dad, stealthily enveloping his jacket potato inside one of the flimsy serviettes. Alex bulk bought them from the wholesaler's every other Wednesday along with the rest of the food

bank's sundries. The 2-ply napkins weren't really built for doggy-bagging, enshrouding food like a precious treasure to be hidden in the earth for safekeeping, but the father quietly sitting across the dining room wasn't deterred, already slipping the wrapped jacket potato into the rucksack at his feet. Alex felt something inside her ache for him the way it had ached for Bob Cratchit when her dad had taken her and Jem to see *A Christmas Carol* at the Tower House Theatre. It had been a treat for being such good big sisters to their new baby brother, but Alex hadn't been able to eat her ice-cream at the interval, she'd been so worried for poor Mr Cratchit. Alex remembered how her dad had gently patted her back through every scene, his broad hand ready with fatherly reassurance. Back when he could still look at her.

'Three more soups please, Alex my love,' Dan smiled, blustering into the community centre's kitchen so quickly that his flop of black hair looked windswept. He began promptly dispensing a flurry of fresh cups of tea from the urn while Alex's attention returned to the family out in the dining room. There was something voyeuristic about watching a grown adult hiding food for his children. Something akin to slowing down for a better look at a car accident. But then this was what it was all about, wasn't it? This life she'd chosen. To play her small part, do good – as if a person could even up the tally of all the right and wrong they'd been party to somehow. One of the twin boys glanced up and caught Alex staring. She looked away too suddenly and immediately felt as if she'd short-changed the kid a smile.

Alex hated starers. She remembered the staring as they'd all been sat in St Cuthbert's chapel saying their goodbyes to Dill in front of all of those people. All those eyes. Tragedy and rubber-necking were old friends, her father had said with the arrival of weeping relatives to the church. *Wailing like banshees*, despite having never sent Dill so much as a birthday card when he was alive. Alex tried to recall their faces now, those obscure weeping relatives who'd come to support the four of them with their lingering embraces and heavy knowing looks, but her memory had clung to very little of that day beyond the desolation in her mother's features and the stiffness in her father's back.

'Bugger me, Alex! How many sarnies are you making? What are you going for… edible Jenga?'

Another slice of bread gave under the rigours of clumsy buttering. Alex took stock of the bread mountain and grimaced. 'Sorry. I was just…'

'Away with the fairies?' Dan's eyes narrowed. 'Are you OK today? You look tired. A bit spun-out.'

Alex had told Dan, once. The very brief version. Peppered with a few hazy justifications for not visiting her hometown much any more. Busy lives. Long car journeys. A troublesome allergy to her mum's beloved dogs. 'No, I'm good, thanks. I didn't sleep much last night. Bloody car alarm outside the flats,' she groaned.

'Yeah, I really hate that.' Dan looked justly sceptical, but of course he wouldn't realise what today meant. Few people would, not even the banshees. Would they be thinking

of Dill today? Would they remember to imagine him turning nineteen, handsome and strong, towering over his mother and sisters? It was official. As of today, there had been more birthdays spent lighting a candle for Dill than watching him blow one out. Nine years with; ten years without. His short life seemed to get shorter each year.

'Sure you didn't just have a hedonistic weekend, Foster? Been out larging it with Mr Right, maybe? About time he turned up.'

Alex smiled. Her weekend had consisted largely of a thousand variations of Dill's imagined adult life. Drinking in The Cavern with their dad. Globetrotting with a girlfriend. Teaching his kids to ride their bikes. The fantasies were endless, but they always ended the same way – a warm summer's evening back in Eilidh Falls, a family gathered again, laughter, children with Dill's quirky dimple or other features of his, running around the same gardens they'd all played in as children.

'You wouldn't tell me anyway, would you?'

'Hmm?'

'Mr Right? If he'd turned up and rocked your world?'

Alex took a deep breath and centred herself. 'Sorry. I guess a lady never tells.'

'Blimey, *twins*.' Dan exclaimed pushing his glasses up his nose. 'Can't be easy. How old are they, seven? Eight maybe?'

The children out in the dining area were finishing the last of their bangers and mash almost simultaneously. They were

at that threshold between little boys and young lads; a few adult teeth peeping from lips unapologetically slathered in gravy. The age of mischief, her mum had called it. Dill had taught them all a lot about mischief.

Alex watched those two boys and swallowed against an unexpected snag in her throat. 'They're seven. Dad's first time. He's just squirrelled.'

'Ah,' Dan acknowledged, his head furrowing beneath his flop of hair. 'Well no wonder I couldn't tempt him with the soup. He wasn't gonna slip that into his backpack for later. Spud was it?'

'I probably should've made the situation clearer,' Alex replied. But she hated it. Walking bemused newcomers through the procedure, hitting them with the spiel on support workers and benefits entitlement before they could sit down and enjoy a meal in peace. The twins' father had wandered in to the Trust's lunchtime session more wide-eyed and bewildered than the kids; that familiar mixed heavy look of desperation and gratitude nearly always held together by a debilitating undercurrent of *this is not my life!* Alex got it. This wasn't really her life either, at least not the one she'd once envisaged.

Dan sighed, retrieving a replacement jacket potato from one of the ovens 'Well, he's going to need all his strength while the kids are still off for the summer hols. Is Mum here too?'

Alex regarded the two young boys, wondering when their last opportunity to get into mischief had been. 'I think Mum's left. After Dad was made redundant.'

Dan finished bothering with the potato and shook his head. 'Blimey. Tough break for the kids. But who are we to judge, right?'

It had been part of the training when Alex had first started here after ditching uni. Listen, yes. Encourage, yes. Second-guess the mechanics of a family's downfall? Who was ever really qualified to do that?

'Put the butter straight on it this time, Dan, don't give him the little tubs.' It was a small deterrent to squirrellers, but a deterrent nonetheless.

'You know, it always stuns me when the mum jumps ship,' Dan's said quietly. 'We bang on about equality and all that, but it's still a shocker when it's the dad left picking up the pieces. Know what I mean?'

Alex shrugged, but she knew exactly. Mothers pressed on, held everyone else together while their own hearts broke quietly. Hers had. Blythe would be pressing on right now, right this minute, two hundred miles away.

'You sure you're OK today?' Dan was watching Alex readying the soup bowls with the same look he reserved for the elderly visitors to the food bank he worried needed more help than the trust could offer. 'I thought it might be love but on second thoughts, you seem a bit…'

Alex's smile was automatic. 'Manic Mondays, Dan!' she lied. Dan was a good guy. He'd be quick to offer his sympathies but it always felt like borrowing clothes she liked the look of, knowing they'd never fit right. 'Now hurry up and get those soups out, they're going cold!'

'OK, OK… I'm going, I'm going.' Dan loaded the last teas onto his tray and jostled back out through the kitchen doors. Alex's thoughts meandered straight back to Eilidh Falls. She would call them all later, before they sat down to dinner together. Six o'clock, same time every year, no variations, no surprises. Alex dreaded it. She dreaded the thanks her mother would lavish on her for sending flowers and she dreaded hearing the consolatory lilt in Jem's voice planted there by Alex's perpetual absence. But most of all, Alex dreaded the complete normality of the conversation she would have with her dad. The shooting of the breeze. She had to wonder what they would have done for conversation all these years had it not been for oil changes and tyre pressure.

'Oi.' Dan's face popped through from the other side of the hatch and startled her. 'You don't fool me, Alex. I might be a speccy kitchen hand with a flair for jazzy garnishes,' Dan waved the tray of food and drinks flamboyantly past the servery hatch for Alex's appraisal, 'but I'm tuned in to the ways of women, you know. I know what's eating you.' He looked over his shoulder towards the twins playing air hockey with the condiments on the table. 'You're really worrying about them, aren't you?' Alex's thoughts shifted from one broken family to another. She sent a small request into the universe that a little time and distance might help them too.

'They'll be OK, Alex,' Dan reassured. 'Look at them.' One of the twins began giggling at something his father

had just done with the pepper pot. ‘They might be going through the wringer but they’re still a family. A family can get through anything if they just stick together. Am I right?’

Alex could already feel the return of that automatic smile.

CHAPTER 2

'Crappy *neon*, Alex. Neon! It's a florist's not a bloody tattoo parlour! You should see it all lit up at night. One big, craptastic eyesore.'

'Jem, please stop saying *craptastic*, darling. You sound like a teenage boy.' Alex heard their mother sigh in the background and allowed herself a little one of her own so the other two Foster women couldn't hear it. The call was on loudspeaker. It was Blythe's way of pulling Alex as best she could back into the heart of the family home while she prepared the meal Alex never came back to eat.

Jem exhaled irritably again. 'Carrie always did have a flair for cheapening her environment.'

'Jaime Foster, you catty girl.' Alex heard their mother tease.

'Better a cat than a total bitch, Mum.'

'Oh, Jem.' Their mum didn't like bad language of any sort. Never had, although Blythe would turn a deaf ear if Ted or the girls used an obscenity so long as there was a legitimate reason. Like stubbing a toe, or winning the lottery. Not that anyone had ever won the lottery.

'Alex knows what I mean, mum,' Jem called back to Blythe. 'You know what I mean, right Al?'

Alex was decompressing, gradually leaving the carnage of Dill's birthday the way those crazy scuba divers she sometimes watched on Discovery would gradually leave a doomed shipwreck in the murky depths, steadily and cautiously in case they got 'the bends'. Returning to the surface of Foster family life felt a lot like that sometimes. Something to take steady before the change in pressure did something catastrophic to Alex's system. Thankfully, although Jem's evergreen hang-ups with Carrie Logan – arch-frenemy since their days at Eilidh High – had never made much sense to Alex, they were good enough to change the subject from Blythe and Jem's visit down to the churchyard earlier. (It had been one of those trivial fallings out between teenage girls, Jem had claimed, the kind that burn on ferociously like the light from a dead star, years after the main event.)

Alex could feel the tension leaving her shoulders as Jem vented about Carrie. It felt good. Normal. This must be what it felt like for those mental free-divers, Alex always thought, when they found oxygen again after plumbing the depths on just one devoted lungful of air.

Alex had taken a reassuring breath of her own just before dialling her parents' number. It hadn't been half as uncomfortable as she always prepared herself for. It never was. She shouldn't be so hypersensitive; she had no right. They all deserved so much more from her and what did she do? Drag her heels all day as if phoning her family was the

worst thing in the world. *You will remember this next year, Alex. You will remember that* you *make it worse, not them.* But guilt was a lot like love, doing funny things to the mind.

Jem had railroaded the conversation beautifully as ever. Jem was an excellent railroader, a seasoned expert at smoothing the awkward away with a nice thick layer of normality, as if they were all just enjoying a regular everyday catch-up with each other. Blythe too, as unwaveringly warm as she was thoughtful, had gushed about the flowers Alex had sent home, lest Alex's woefully inadequate annual gesture ever go un-championed. 'Oh, Alex… sunflowers and thistles!' Blithe had delighted, 'Such a simple posy but, just so beautiful, darling. Really, the perfect choice. Ted? Come tell Alex how beautiful those sunflowers are,' her mum had encouraged. 'Your dad commented on them, darling, and you know how oblivious Foster men are. Did you know, your father wanted sunflowers at our wedding? Your grandma Rosalind said they weren't a traditional choice though, so that was that.'

Alex did know that. She also knew how fond her dad was of the colour the thistles gave to the hillside behind the farmhouse, but she wouldn't allow herself to question who it was exactly she always sent the flowers for. Ted hadn't gotten round to mentioning the sunflowers when he'd finally come on the line anyway. He'd had to dash off on a callout, thinning out their already skinny chat about the price Alex was paying for diesel down south.

Alex felt another pang of guilt. As soon as she'd heard the front door closing after her dad at the other end of the line, that tightness in her chest had begun to release. She was resurfacing.

'Boring you, am I?' Jem asked.

'You're boring me a little bit, darling,' Blythe echoed. Alex could tell her mother had her head in the Aga. Blythe was exceptional at keeping her kids and cooking in check at the same time.

'No… Sorry, Jem.' Alex smiled.

'You know what I mean, though, don't you?'

Alex rallied herself. 'About what?'

'The *neon*!' Jem asserted.

'Sure. Neon… for a florist's.' Alex agreed. 'I mean, if Carrie's making *crazy* decisions like that, what else is she getting up to in there, huh?' She was teasing, but Jem missed it, her high-school nemesis was still ram-raiding her thoughts. Alex thought she heard her mother laugh but it was difficult to be sure over the clanking of the table being set.

'*Exactly*,' Jem huffed, 'that cow is not to be trusted.'

'Jem!' Blythe implored. 'Change the record.'

Dill's birthday had become sacred, more sacred than Christmas even and Christmas wasn't a day for *crap* or *bitch* or *cow* either.

'You can't tell me off, Mum. I'm twenty-four.' Jem let out a sudden yelp. 'And you can't whack me with a wooden spoon, Mum!'

'Want to bet, young lady?'

Alex smiled into the phone. It was impossible not to feel steadied by her mother. Throughout everything, Blythe had held the balance.

'I'm sure there are more riveting topics you and Alex can talk about besides Carrie Logan, Jem, surely? Can't you gossip about men, or diets or something… like normal sisters?'

It had occurred to Alex years ago that she and Jem were not *normal sisters*, not if swapping juicy titbits about boyfriends and diets was the standard. Alex still wasn't wholly sure whether she should feel more or less sad about that. It wasn't love or affection she and Jem were missing, but years. Those intense teenage years where experiences and emotions were heightened and giddy and sisters confided and shared. Alex had left for uni and overnight it was as if something seismic had shifted leaving Alex on one side of a gaping chasm and Jem on the other. Not just their age gap. Alex could feel something else there stuck between them, something more than five big teenage years. Whatever it was, Alex had never poked at it, in case it turned out she was responsible for that too.

The phone had fallen silent. Something furtive seemed to be going on at the other end. 'OK, OK,' Jem whispered. She feigned an over-excited tone. 'So guess who we saw? At the church?'

Alex ran through the usual suspects. Blythe had already told her how Susannah and Helen had each left flowers for

Dill this morning, but other than Blythe's old choir-buddies and the Reverend no-one else sprang to mind. 'I give up. Who did you see?'

Jem laughed then. An odd, pre-cursory chortle. 'Guess.' But Alex didn't have time to guess, Jem couldn't hold it in. 'Only *Finn*.'

Alex felt her thoughts slow down, sinking to the bottom of her brain like globules of wax in a lava lamp – heavy, vivid, helpless colour.

Finn. She'd been pressing that name to the back of her mind all day and Jem had just let it loose. Thoughts of Dill nearly always came piggy-backed by thoughts of Finn. Bound together by time and circumstance.

Jem was riding out the pause. All of a sudden, she could wait all day. Alex made a grab for something coherent. 'Finn? But…' she managed.

'I know, right?'

'Finn's back in the Falls? But… I thought…'

'I *know*. The rover's returned and, by the looks of things, he's all done with the intrepid explorer bit.'

Alex could feel a warm uncomfortable sensation brewing over the back of her neck. Jem would test her this way, now and again. She'd poke Alex like a bruise just to gauge if she was still tender, and all Alex could do was do her best not to flinch. It was like being ambushed. Stupid really, that she would be ambushed by this of all news. Eilidh Falls was his home, after all, of course he wasn't going to stay away *forever*.

Alex held the phone, waiting to hear the next nuggets of Jem's reconnaissance back home to filter down the line. Surprise began to twist into resignation. Finn had gone back to settle down, with a wife probably. And a family. *Children.* Beautiful children, sharing his glorious scruffy hair and playful eyes. He could've met a thousand women as he'd backpacked and odd-jobbed his way around the planet, exotic and captivating like the places he'd daubed on his bedroom wall. His 'Great Adventure List!' *Their* list.

Alex waited for news of the impossibly beautiful wife and their impossibly beautiful offspring to sock her one through the earpiece. Blythe had gone quiet in the background. She'd have been pleased for sure to bump into him, Alex knew it. Her mum's fondness for Finn had never waned. Blythe had never blamed Finn.

'Mum turned into a bashful teenager when she saw him, didn't you, Ma? She thinks he's even more handsome with a bit of colour on him.'

'I was not bashful, Jem. I just think it's a shame that boy hasn't been snapped up. He should be bouncing a small child around on those lovely broad shoulders of his by now. "Too busy for love"? How can anyone ever be *too busy for love*?'

No wife. No impossibly beautiful children. Something briefly floated inside Alex before she could stop it, like a hot air balloon momentarily lifting a few inches from the earth before bobbing back down again with a thud. Finn was single then. Fab. Just as it was fab whenever George Clooney

came back onto the market. Fab and uplifting and irrelevant all at once.

'I wonder,' Blythe lilted, 'perhaps he's *gay* now. He has been broadening his horizons for the last two years. I'll bet he's tried all sorts of new things. Food and… well, *whatnot*.'

Alex startled. Gay? *Gay?* Finn was not gay! No way. You couldn't be *that* close to a person and not know something like that, Alex decided with ultimate certainty.

At the other end of the phone Jem was being uncharacteristically quiet, waiting for Alex to bite. Alex shrugged as if her sister could see it. 'Susannah must be happy. To have him back safe and sound,' she bumbled.

Finn had spent the last two years somewhere the ogher side of the planet. Had he been walking it all out of his system the way he used to, only instead of rambling around the countryside he'd gone rambling around the globe? Two years as far away as he could …

'I guess. He was painting the railings on St Cuthbert's wall, you know. Finn's the new maintenance guy about town. He's got the contract for the church. He's re-opened Torben's hardware shop too. On the high street.' Jem's voice dropped to a whisper. 'And in case you were wondering, throwing tools around hasn't done him any harm either, Al. He's like… *buff* now. No more noodle arms,' Jem chirped.

Alex's lava lamp brain was heating up. Torben's? Right across the street from the garage? Alex imagined her father's mood each time he looked out across the high street.

They would be virtually face to face, every single day. Alex swallowed. Her dad would have an ulcer by New Year.

'He asked after you, Al.'

Blythe had moved back into motion in the background but the clinking of tableware had become more delicate while the conversation played out between her daughters.

Alex's thoughts were swirling faster and faster now. 'Erm… That's nice.' *That's nice?* And the rest. Alex expected Jem to laugh again but Jem was waiting it out instead. Well what did Jem expect her to say? *Did he, Jem? DID HE? What did he ask after me, exactly? Did he ask if I'm sorry I cut him loose like a ground rope? Whether I'm sorry for what I said? Did he ask if it still hurts when I think about him?*

There was a light thrumming in Alex's ears and she forgot briefly about what Jem was or was not saying at the other end of the line for a moment, suddenly taken aback by just how many of those statements she could answer with a resounding *yes.*

'He asked if you might be around for the Viking Festival. He couldn't believe the hype now either but he said it would be good to see it all in full swing. He also said it would be good to see you.'

Something cold danced down Alex's spine. It was always mind-boggling that Finn had ever wanted to set eyes on any of them ever again. Alex closed her eyes and pictured her dad in his Christmas pudding jumper standing over Finn in their front yard, wild and enraged as Finn's blood had min-

gled with the whipped cream on his best shirt. The resistance in Finn's expression, the horror in Susannah's as she and Blythe had shielded Finn where he sat awkwardly amongst the shattered crystal on the path.

Alex's heart was gently pattering, just at the recollection. They shouldn't be having this conversation. Her dad could walk back into the house at any moment and hear them all, chatting away, saying *that name* in his kitchen.

'Yes, darling, why don't you come on up here for the Viking Festival? It's only the weekend, you wouldn't need to miss any work.' Alex took a few extra breaths. They were both in on it, Mum and Jem. Finn was home, get Alex back there too and hey, presto! Lightning might strike. Didn't they ever learn? 'It really would be lovely to see you, Alexandra.' There was a tinge of pleading in her mother's voice. It hurt just to hear it.

'I don't think I can make it, Mum. We're so short-staffed, weekends are for catch-up,' she lied, 'next year, for definite.' To her mind it was a simple equation. Stay away from the Falls and nothing ugly like that would ever happen again.

Alex heard the front door of her parents' home rattle open in the background. 'Forgot my damned phone,' Ted groaned, his heavy boots trouncing across the hallway into the kitchen. All three Foster women fell silent.

'You girls *still* gassing?' Alex heard her father ask. 'Who's the big subject now then?'

The thrumming in Alex's ears had suddenly elevated to a thud inside her skull. She wanted to reach down the phone

line and gather up all the particles of the name they'd all just been so carelessly bandying around between them.

Jem and Blythe both offered an answer to Ted's question at the same time.

'Flowers.'

'Vikings.'

Alex just held her breath.

CHAPTER 3

Free-diving. Now there was a paradox if Alex had ever heard one. How could depriving yourself of vital breathing apparatus ever be pedalled as liberation? There was nothing free about it, Alex decided, cautiously navigating a path through the cool water of the swimming pool, repeating with each tentative stroke the mantra her mother had taught her.

In through the nose, out through the mouth… nice and steady, you're doing it. This was at least rung number three on her 'fear ladder'. You had to build a fear ladder to climb, metaphorically, if you wanted to face your fears; she'd seen it on *Dr Phil*. Lolloping in the Jacuzzis or having a blast in the hydro-spa over by the shallow end would've been respectable first steps, Alex really should've started with those on that first, ill-fated, visit to the gym pool. Only she hadn't realised at the time that a person could actually faint underwater. Lucky for Alex an eager teenage lifeguard with the very strong pincer grasp had fished her out and attempted unnecessarily to administer mouth-to-mouth.

'Oh bless her, she still has her tag in,' one staff member

had astutely observed of Alex's brand-new-for-the-occasion swimming cozzie.

'Nice suit though, it's one of the second-skin range we sell in the in the gym shop,' Alex had heard another reply.

'Which colour is that?'

'Looks like the Torpedo.'

'She doesn't swim like a Torpedo. She should've bought the Pebble.'

Alex cringed. Just the memory of her foray into the deep end was enough to jellify her legs again. She felt her rhythm beginning to slip and locked eyes on the pool edge ahead of her.

In through the nose, Al… Better. Much better.

She'd get there. Back to that point she was at once upon a time, before she started letting the anxiety win. When she could still enjoy a nice, invigorating dip.

Her breathing was steady. There was definitely something in her mum's advice. It was far easier controlling her breathing with a rambling inner monologue. Blythe's mantra wasn't as jazzy as the *Ain't no thing!* version Alex had heard on Oprah's self-help special, but it was still coming in handy in the wake of Alex's new found bravery with the wet stuff.

Alex heard a splash too close on her right and tried not to falter again. Her concentration was rubbish tonight. Jem and her mum had taken something from her without realising it earlier this evening. The tension was supposed to ease after calling home, that's how Dill's birthday always

worked. Only now she felt weighted down by something new, something she hadn't anticipated. It had been niggling at her since she'd put down the phone to them. Finn setting up shop, right across the street from Foster's Auto's.

Why can't you ever just take the easier route, Finn? It was a thought that had whispered through her head so many times before. And as ever, it came shadowed by another. *Why did you always expect him to, Alex?*

Yes. Why did she? She was selling him short, again and again and again, slipping straight back into the same old habit as if it were a favourite sweater. Had she forgotten? All sweaters had been returned. Lines had been drawn, ties cut, mix-tapes given back.

Another splash to the right and Alex's coordination left her.

Don't panic… don't panic… but somebody else's leg brushed against hers under the water then and it was all over. It was too late, she was already rearing up like a woman demented. One of the senior swimmers was blinking curiously at Alex through her goggles.

Brilliant, Alex! That had nearly been two widths in a row. *You wimp. You big fat bloody wimp.*

Alex made it to the edge of the pool and heard a giggle as she clambered out beside the Monday night couple. They came every week and spent most of the session huddled cosily in the Jacuzzi, although the guy had ventured into the main pool a few times. He'd done his Daniel Craig in Speedos impression past Alex last week. She'd stopped and

pretended to fix the locker key strapped to her wrist while he'd thrashed past and Alex had discreetly hyperventilated.

Alex squelched her way beneath the poolside clock and through to the changing rooms. Nearly eight-thirty. Good. Enough was enough for one day. Just a couple more hours and Dill's birthday could be put to rest for another year and she wouldn't have to think about awkward exchanges with her dad for a while.

Alex opened her locker and made a grab for her shampoo and towel. She nudged her jeans accidentally and her phone slipped from her pocket. She whipped her hand out, somehow catching it before it hit the floor.

'Whoops. Butter-fingers. Nearly lost it that time.' Alex looked along the lockers to one of the old chaps who came swimming every week too. White-haired and friendly-faced, Alex always felt a bit guilty for curtailing their conversations, but the old lad didn't seem to realise the perils of wearing white swimming trunks and Alex always found herself glancing down like a wide-eyed child to check if they were any less see-through.

'Oh, yes,' she agreed. 'Nearly, that time.'

Alex's eyes dipped without warning. It was like being told not to look at the sun as a kid. *Don't look, don't look!*

'You should try dropping a cigar in your lap, young lady. I was driving my golf cart last weekend, burned straight through my trousers it did. Just look at the blister it's left me with,' he said, pointing to his hairy upper thighs.

Alex glanced sheepishly towards him. 'Oh yes, would

you look at that.' Penis. That's all Alex had just seen. Old man penis. Actually it was worse than looking at the sun. Far, far worse. She wanted to take her eyeballs out and wash them in the pool.

Alex's phone bleeped. She seized her chance at a diversion. 'Sorry, I really have to take this,' she fibbed. 'Would you excuse me?' Alex flashed him a smile and slipped into one of the changing stalls. Jem's name blinked demandingly on the caller display, puncturing the stillness of the cubicle. *Thank you, sis.* She couldn't chance another look at those trunks, she wouldn't sleep tonight.

Alex unlocked her phone. She just needed to kill enough time for the old lad to finish in his locker. *Twenty-three missed calls, Jem?* Tickly tracks of water were streaking down Alex's back and shoulders where her wet hair clung. She rubbed them away and frowned at the urgency on her phone. That was a lot of calls from Jem. Carrie Logan must have death-stared her or something.

Alex hit the button on her phone and listened to the most recent of Jem's voicemails. Jem's words reached up over Alex's collarbone, conquering the silence of the cubicle, pressing in on her with the same cold claustrophobia as the swimming pool.

Mum's sick… suspected stroke… need to come home.

Squeeze. Squeeze. Squeeze.

Alex held her breath as if she were still in the pool and hit redial. She waited – Mum's sick… Mum's sick… with each impatient second.

'Alex?'

'Jem! What happened? Is she OK?'

Everything around Alex had faded into oblivion. Jem was talking in whispers. 'I'm not supposed to have my phone on. We don't really know yet for sure. Malcolm Sinclair found her. At St Cuthbert's. In the churchyard. Alex, I… I can't…'

'Slow down, Jem! Where is she now? Where's Dad?'

'Kerring General. We're here now.'

Jem wasn't a crier, even when she was a kid. When Robbie Rushton stuck a drumstick through her spokes and Jem had flown straight over her handlebars she hadn't cried, she'd pinned Robbie to the ground instead and given him a dead arm. A whole week had gone by before anyone had realised Jem had fractured that wrist, the same one she'd used to punch Robbie with. But Jem's voice was wavering now. This alone made Alex want to cry immediately. She clamped a hand over her mouth in case.

'They're all over her, Alex. They said time was the most critical thing but Malcolm got her here really quickly. We're so lucky he was in the churchyard, Al.'

Suspected stroke. The words swirled in Alex's ears like trapped water. Blythe didn't like a fuss. To be bundled into Malcolm Sinclair's police car and rushed anywhere would have been beyond mortifying for her. 'She's going to be OK, isn't she, Jem?'

There was a flurry of activity in Jem's background, Alex strained to make any of it out.

'You know Mum… tough as Dad's old boots.' But Jem had hesitated.

Alex looked at the scant belongings she had with her. The urge was there – keys, coat, get home to Mum – and then the inevitable thought.

Dad.

Alex forced herself not to think about what she would say if she went back up there. She could already hear the first whispers in her head… *This was always going to happen, Alex, eventually. You knew that.* Because every one of Dill's birthdays without him had been one too many, and there was only so much quiet heartbreak the human body could take, even her mum's.

No. She couldn't go up there. It would be better for everyone if she didn't. One less thing for them all.

'Alex, are you still there?'

Alex took in a deep breath, just to remind her lungs that they still could. 'I'm here.'

Jem sniffed. 'Alex?'

'Yeah?'

'You need to come home.'