

rewriting the ending



hp tune



Sign up for our newsletter to hear
about new and upcoming releases.

www.ylva-publishing.com

Rewriting the Ending

by hp tune



CHAPTER 1

It had been an absolute battle to get to the expansive entrance of the Emirates Lounge at Los Angeles International Airport. Or, rather, to get to their partner lounge in LAX run by Korean Air. All Juliet wanted now was to slip through the glass doors, pour herself a glass of white wine, and sit down. A chair, a bed, a lounge—she wasn't fussy. She just wanted to be off her tired and sore feet.

Not that it mattered what she wanted as the immaculately dressed young man behind the counter turned her business class ticket over and over in his hands. His face was deadpan as he peered over and ran his eyes up and down her slim body. It was barely perceptible, but his eyebrows rose slightly before his face went politely blank again.

Juliet scowled. She was pretty sure he was judging her faded yoga pants and slightly stretched cap sleeve T-shirt unworthy. Her matted blonde hair was probably not helping her cause either, nor were the Merrells on her feet.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but all business class boarding passes must be stamped for lounge entry unless you have your Skywards membership card with you."

Juliet swallowed heavily. She cast her gaze to the print on the wall of the Los Angeles skyline and sighed.

"Right, ah, *Jeremy* is it?" She squinted at the name badge pinned to the left side of his chest, scowling at how she had to lean forward to make out the small font.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, raising his left hand in front of him as if to protect himself from her using his name again. "However, I cannot allow you access on this boarding card."

"Yes, Jeremy, you have made your policy very clear. *However*; let me just tell you a little bit about how I've come to be standing here in front of your delightful tone. We have to thank for this intimate moment not one but two cancelled connecting flights on a codeshare ticket, followed by an absolute string of expletives being screamed next to my ear by another passenger, grossly intoxicated, by the way. And to cap it all off, one of your employees used me as a protective shield, earning me a significant bruise to my shoulder when I

body-blocked a flying laptop bag thrown at her by another irate passenger. Add to that not having slept in the last thirty-eight hours since my journey began in Arizona, three security checks, and two hours of waiting for the privilege of standing in front of this lounge, not to mention the five hours I will now have to wait for a very long flight to Dubai. By the way, Dubai will still not be my final destination. Believe it or not, that will be Brussels!”

Although to his credit, he gave her a fleeting look of disbelief, Jeremy mostly maintained an air of quiet confidence mixed with a petulant toddler’s resolve.

“I understand that you have had a difficult day,” he said. “However, I am still not able to approve your entry.”

Juliet tipped her head back and raked her fingers through her greasy hair, exhausted and fuming. “You have my original ticket, you have my boarding pass, and I’m sure there is record of my upgrade in the system. I strongly suggest you work your magic, sir, before I make my third consecutive complaint.” She carefully disguised the term *asshole* under her breath as he shuffled a few papers on the desk, his only attempt at appeasement.

“Perhaps I can be of some help.”

Juliet turned around at the sudden interruption. Another passenger stood queued behind her, waiting in a calm, patient stance. “Your name?” the woman asked, her deep brown eyes sparkling as she smiled widely. She tucked her thick, dark hair behind her ear.

“Ah, Juliet. Juliet Taylor.” Her body shrunk into itself as her stuttered response left her mouth slightly ajar.

This earned a nod and a wink from the woman before she pressed herself over the counter. Her ample breasts were exposed by her plunging neckline, and a thick gold chain and pendant had fallen into the hollowed space within her cleavage.

“My card, Jeremy—Skywards Gold. And my boarding pass. Now, Ms Taylor will be joining me as one of my permitted guests while you go about sorting out this unnecessary debacle. It sounds as if Ms Taylor has been through enough today, and I would appreciate you contacting John, my Emirates consultant, who will ensure that she is adequately compensated. I suggest you look me up.”

Coughing and with a slight blush to his cheeks, Jeremy handed the card back to the woman and glanced at his computer screen. His eyes dilated

slightly, and his demeanour immediately altered. “Of course, Mrs Revira, go ahead. I will find you inside and advise you of the outcome. I apologise for the inconvenience.”

Eyes falling and hands reaching down to her hips, the woman smoothed the skirt over her thighs and toyed briefly with the silk belt tied just over the right of her pelvis. “It’s ‘Ms,’ thank you, but ‘Mia’ is fine.”

Handbag over her shoulder, Mia Revira took the handle of her Louis Vuitton cabin bag and nodded at Juliet to follow. Juliet felt slightly stunned as she trailed wordlessly behind, laptop bag across her chest and faded Mont daypack over her shoulders.

“Thank you,” she said as Mia led them to a quiet corner where two excessively large lounge chairs sat with a low white coffee table between them.

“Oh, of course, not a problem; the kid is a waste of space.”

Leaving her wheeled case in the walkway next to her, Mia slumped down on the chair and moved her fingers through her straightened hair. “He once told my, ah...” She hesitated a moment before shaking her head. A smile pressed at her lips. “My sister...He told my sister she wasn’t appropriately dressed—something ridiculous about exposed toes. I mean, she was wearing Jimmy Choos.”

Juliet politely laughed, and a quick search of her few memories of the name *Jimmy Choos* recalled some fancy heels that she would never be caught wearing. Well, certainly she would never be skilled enough to walk in them, anyway. “Well, thank you again. I’m just desperate for a shower and some food and to finally sit in something more comfortable than a plastic airport chair.”

“Yeah, sounds like you’ve had an absolute *shit* of a day,” Mia said.

Juliet could see how her own surprise provoked another smile in Mia, and it made Juliet laugh again, more genuinely this time.

“Leave whatever you don’t need here, and I’ll have a wine waiting for you after your shower,” Mia said. “Red or white?”

“Umm, yeah okay, sure. I would love a white wine. As long as you don’t mind my company.”

“Not at all. On long-haul flights, it’s always nice to have someone sane to make conversation with.”

“I could be a serial killer,” Juliet said. She let just the corner of her mouth turn up.

“Ah, a serial killer who can’t manage a power-hungry but very juvenile desk boy?”

“Fair call, thanks. Get me that white wine, then.”

“Blend?”

“Sorry?”

“Do you want a blend? You know, what kind of white wine is your drink of choice?”

Juliet felt herself blush slightly. “I don’t mind. A sauv blanc, if they have it, but at this stage, I would take whatever was offered.”

“Go shower,” Mia said as she gave the smallest of waves to a staff member who rushed over in the middle of wiping another table with a damp dishcloth.

Juliet dropped her laptop onto the chair opposite her and wandered off, suddenly grateful for the clean clothes, hairbrush and travel-sized perfume she had stuffed down the bottom of her backpack. She couldn’t wait to stand for at least ten minutes under steaming hot water. And if she ever successfully arrived in Belgium, she told herself with a certainty she already knew was pretty delusional that she was never stepping foot on another plane again.



As she walked back from her shower, manoeuvring past tables and the occasional briefcase, Juliet’s first sight of Mia was her discarded heels, neatly paired together on the floor by her chair. Her feet rested on the edge of the coffee table, primly crossed at the ankles, with toenails perfectly manicured and polished. Her elbow sat propped on the side of the chair. She was nibbling at a small piece of bread. Her long dark hair—past her shoulders and halfway down her back—was cut with a fringe that was brushed across her forehead and styled towards her temple. She had the most incredible figure that Juliet had ever seen, beautiful curves and a strong posture, and delicately smooth dark skin. Latino heritage, maybe, given her surname. But then, she could just be married to a Latino, given how Jeremy had called her Mrs Revira. Although it was intriguing that she had corrected him on that. The way she had played with her belt had made it seem like the moment had somehow bothered her.

“Hi,” Mia said when Juliet placed her backpack on the floor, sliding slowly into the soft seat opposite. “You look a little more refreshed.”

Again, Juliet felt her cheeks warm. “I never expect to use my emergency change of clothes, but I just discovered a good reason why I should pack them.”

“I’m not beyond doing a bit of airport shopping just so I can change, I must admit.”

“True,” Juliet said. “Always an option.”

“Well, you look good,” Mia said. As Juliet repositioned her fitted, long-sleeved shirt over the waist of her jeans, she thought she caught Mia glimpsing at her white skin. “And so ready for a wine.”

“Absolutely exactly what I need after today.” She took a long sip and dropped a few macadamia nuts into her mouth as she settled back into the chair. “So I’m sorry I didn’t quite introduce myself properly. I’m Juliet, and I’m completely indebted to you for saving me from young dictator Jeremy.”

Mia grinned and handed her boarding pass to her. “I know, Ms Juliet Danielle Taylor,” she said. “Always a good way to find out someone’s full name: just look at their boarding pass or passport.”

“And it’s only fair to share, then.” The banter came easy to Juliet, and she relaxed as she lifted herself slightly off the chair to grasp Mia’s passport on the table.

“A fellow American,” she said. “And oh, it’s not Mia.” Her eyebrows rose as she read. At Mia’s audible groan, she added, “Mallania... That’s gorgeous. I like it.”

“Yeah, yeah. Unless you’re my father yelling at me, it’s not really used. So I haven’t heard it in a long while.”

“Well, you should use it. It’s unusual, nice.”

“Yeah, right,” Mia said. “On a different note, you’re sorted for the rest of your trip, a little upgrade to first class.”

“Really?”

“The downside is that you’re stuck next to me until Heathrow, but you can always block yourself off. These flights have the dividers in them.”

“You organised this?”

“I called in a favour, no big deal. My family have a pretty hefty account with Emirates. The airline wouldn’t like to upset me.”

“So, for the second time today, I owe you a thank-you.”

Mia shook her head. “Really not a drama at all.”

“I haven’t even left the States, and this has already been a crazy trip. It’s just surreal. I started the trip in cattle class and have ended up in first. Nothing like a silver lining.”

“Oh yeah. I heard you mention the person throwing a laptop bag at you... What the hell?”

“I know!” Juliet shrugged. “Makes a good story, I suppose, presuming I actually get to Belgium to tell it. Anyway, how about you? Where are you off to? Where did you start?”

“Hold that thought. We need a top-up while I’m standing.” She soon returned from the bar with two fresh glasses on a tray, along with two plates of various canapés. “I had one of these smoked salmon pastries before—divine.”

Juliet took one and emitted soft murmurs of satisfaction.

“I haven’t come far today, just drove from Vegas,” Mia said. “I caught up with a friend there for a few days ’cause I’m headed to Scotland for a while. Not really sure when I’ll be back.”

“Really?” Juliet asked, licking her lips and sitting herself up a little straighter. “That’s a long way to go for an indefinite amount of time. What’s over there?”

Mia hesitated, breathing deeply in a clearly deliberate way and using what Juliet guessed was a calm expression perfected over years for use when she was feeling anything but calm. She had learned such techniques herself the hard way.

“Just a family property over there,” Mia said. “So I’m having a bit of a break and checking up on things. I thought I may as well do some relaxing and getting back to nature.”

“It’s meant to be beautiful in Scotland. I haven’t seen a lot, just spent some time in Edinburgh when I was younger. Or rather, I drank my way around Edinburgh, which is the way I spent most of my youth in the UK and Europe.”

“It really is beautiful. I’ve spent a couple of summers there, and it’s just stunning. Can’t say I’ve done the backpacking and drinking gig, though. Not that I’m not partial to the odd bottle or two.” She flashed Juliet a slight grin and a sheepish glance at her glass. “Obviously.”

“There’s a point where you definitely outgrow sharing a room with fifteen other equally irresponsible young people. Though seriously, it’s not so summery in Scotland at the moment...”

“No, I think *freakin’ freezing* is what you’re looking for. Though Brussels won’t be any better!”

“I know, no idea what I’m thinking, actually. I’m not a huge one for the cold.”

“So, what sends you over there?”

Juliet sighed heavily, though she smiled. “My editor. I’ve missed a crapload of deadlines, and if I don’t finish this book, I’m going to have to pay back my advance and lose my contract. We’re calling it a sabbatical, and if he hears that I’m recapturing my backpacking youth, I’m in trouble.”

“A book? You’re an author?”

“Well...” Juliet’s eyes cast briefly to the ceiling. “If that’s what you call writing one book and then failing to produce another...then I guess so.”

Mia laughed. “I can’t see why that would possibly not count, and what better place to focus on your next one than in a European city?”

“You sound like my editor, a little cheer squad. I’m actually heading to Bruges, a bit quieter and cheaper too. My budget isn’t quite first class.”

“And what’s the plan? How long will it take?”

Juliet scoffed, dramatically dropping her head back. “Honestly, I have no idea. I’ve said six months, but I’m not sure...I’m not convinced it will ever get written.”

She heard the hint of sadness edging into her own voice. She stretched out her neck, reaching across the table and letting her hand linger over the remaining appetizers, trying to choose. “Was that good?” she asked quietly, nodding towards the small piece of quiche remaining in Mia’s fingers.

“Yeah, good. It has bacon, though, so only if you’re not a vegetarian...”

“Definitely not. And bacon...Everything is better with bacon.”

“Thank God for that. I might have had to get you kicked out of this lounge if you were one of those vege types.

Juliet yawned, rubbing at the bridge of her nose. She checked her watch, working hard to mentally calculate their time until boarding. “Still three hours.” She screwed up her nose.

“Why don’t you sleep a little? I won’t let you miss the boarding call.”

“Sorry, I’m not great company after all. It’s been a long day—or two days.”

Jumping up, Mia padded barefooted to an adjacent chair, gripping a cushion by the corner. The pendant around her neck bounced against her chest as she bent over the chair, and the silk top that she wore rode slightly up her back, exposing a muscular lumbar. Juliet allowed herself a prolonged, self-indulgent stare. It

had been a long time since she had permitted herself an unfiltered fantasy. And this woman was perfect stimuli for her imagination—robust and with lips that she could devour in seconds. She felt a wry smile on her face when Mia was suddenly standing over her looking perplexed.

“Here,” she said. “Put this under your head; you’re dazing out. Get some shut-eye.” Juliet found it intriguing that someone clearly as wealthy and no doubt educated as Mia could slip into colloquial phrasing that wouldn’t have been out of place in Juliet’s own family home when she was growing up.

“Ah, thanks. Yeah, thanks.” Taking a final sip of her half-finished glass of wine, Juliet pushed it back towards the centre of the coffee table and smiled as she took the grey-coloured cushion from Mia. “Make sure you wake me. And I’ll apologise in advance if I start snoring. Just throw something at me.”

“I promise I’ll be gentler than that.” Mia grinned as she withdrew an iPad out of her handbag. It was the last thing Juliet remembered seeing before she fell into unconsciousness.



By the time Mia checked her e-mails and glanced over, Juliet was sleeping soundly, mouth slightly ajar and face utterly relaxed. Her hands were tucked up under her chin, and her knees were drawn towards her chest. Mia’s hands stilled over the sides of her iPad as she watched Juliet slowly breathing in and out. She could see the edges of a tattoo on the inside of Juliet’s wrist, a slightly faded blue colour, though she couldn’t quite make out what the tattoo was. The same wrist had a handmade bracelet around it, black and red braided thread with some small patterned beads; it was dull and clearly worn. It combined well with the fraying jeans. Clearly, Juliet lived a very different life than Mia. Her clothes had no visible label, and despite a clear lip gloss, her face was makeup free.

Mia, in comparison, had black eyeliner carefully applied, and her mascara brush had grazed her eyelashes twice. A deep blush highlighted her cheekbones, and an illuminating powder had been the final touch to multiple layers of various foundations and powders. Her lips wore a frequently applied bright red lipstick.

Even now, she was still playing her role in upholding the family name and all the expectations that came with that.

There was something very appealing in the way Juliet was casually dressed and the lived-in look she carried. She appeared genuine—authentic. Nothing

about Mia screamed façade, though she suspected that everything about her own presentation yelled false pretences. Maybe one day she could buy an old backpack and disappear, leave the Chanel wardrobe behind and don a pair of yoga pants. Maybe she could meditate in Indonesia or attend a Hindu retreat in the crowds of India. Maybe she could write a novel too, hiding away in an apartment in Bruges.

Juliet had the luxury of making independent decisions—booking economy-class tickets and blending into the hordes, going wherever whenever she wanted. Mia was suddenly insanely jealous of the stranger in front of her snoozing her way through a stopover after fate had pulled her into a first-class lounge. She hadn't planned it, hadn't even expected it, yet Juliet was just going along with no idea of what was next, bar a loose plan to end up in Belgium with her backpack and laptop. How freeing it must be.

Slowly, Mia smiled. She gave a silent laugh as Juliet released the softest of tiny snores. How incredible it was that Juliet trusted a stranger enough to fall asleep in her presence with all of her belongings on the floor and her boarding pass on the table.

Maybe this was the push Mia was looking for, this blonde-haired vision of mystery in front of her. She had a day to figure out how to be someone new, someone less like the person she had been born to become.

And more like this hauntingly stunning woman that had literally fallen across her path.

CHAPTER 2

“Juliet, it’s time to wake up.” Mia placed her handbag where she had been sitting. Juliet didn’t move. Glancing at the monitors, Mia located their flight with a nod to herself. “They’re boarding,” she said. “We need to make our way to the gate.”

Juliet released a soft moan, her eyelids shivering a little but staying stubbornly closed. Relocating Juliet’s bags next to her own, Mia crouched by Juliet’s side. “Hey. Jules, honey, we need to move. It’s time to board.”

“Huh?” Juliet gasped, eyes shooting open when Mia tugged at her forearm.

“Our flight. We have to go.”

“Flight?” Juliet’s eyes darted from Mia to their surroundings. “Oh, yeah, flight.”

“Sorry. You can sleep more on the plane...”

“Agh, I feel like a train wreck.”

“Well, you don’t look like one.” Mia hoisted Juliet’s daypack onto her own back before holding the laptop bag out as Juliet slowly rose to her feet, rubbing her eyes and stretching her back. “Here. They won’t go without us, but I really hate having my name called out over the loudspeaker.”

“Thanks, yeah. Umm, do you know our gate?”

“Yes, all organised. Just follow me. Grab that water if you want it. I’ve got an extra bottle.”

Juliet just nodded, again rubbing her eyes and clearly trying to orientate herself. “Hey, I can take my bag.” Her words were slurred with sleep as she blindly followed Mia towards the exit and towards the first travelator.

Mia shrugged. “I’ve got everything. You just concentrate on staying on your feet.”

“I don’t really know you, but you seem to be enjoying this far too much.” Juliet stood in barely an upright slouch on the travelator as she inspected Mia with narrowed, suspicious eyes.

“Me? I’m just helping you out, remember? Without me, you would have snoozed those hours away in a very uncomfortable sterilised chair or, worse, on a patch of revolting carpet.”

“Have I mentioned that I owe you one, Mallania? Because I do.”

Mia scowled. “Just because you saw my passport does not mean you get to throw my full name around, you know.”

“Oh, crap.” With a loud gasp, Juliet patted her pockets repeatedly. “My boarding pass...”

“Relax, I got it. It was on the table the whole time. I have it in my document wallet, don’t stress.”

Juliet finally returned Mia’s smile. “I swear I’ve travelled around the world and have never once lost a passport or boarding pass or missed a flight.”

“That’s what happens when you have no sleep for a couple of days. It’s not great for your cognitive abilities.”

There was a long moment of silence.

“Next gate,” said Mia. Juliet fell in step next to her. Their height was dramatically different as they stood side by side, she noticed, though if Mia were to slip off her heels, they would only differ by an inch or so. “But don’t worry. You’ll have plenty of time to sleep over the next eighteen hours.”

“Which reminds me,” Juliet said, her expression looking perplexed. “I know why I’m flying this ridiculous route to Europe, but what about you? I was just saving money, and then they completely screwed up.”

Mia shrugged. “It was booked for me, sort of. I didn’t really mind. I was originally going to spend a few nights in Dubai, to go...umm, yeah, to go and ah...what is it? Ah, do some shopping.” Her cheeks flushed red. She wondered for a paranoid moment if Juliet knew she was lying, knowingly allowing her to indulge in the appearance of truth-telling.

“Sorry, I’m getting tired too,” Mia tried to allay her discomfort with a kernel of truth. “I ended up changing my flight instead. I quite like flying.”

“Really? I hate it.”

“That’s because you’re always cramped at the back of the plane.”

Juliet laughed and rolled her shoulders. “Maybe. I mean, I do fly. It’s not like I don’t, but I don’t really like it. The whole take-off and landing, the idea that we’re all stuck in this little tiny cylinder in the middle of the sky.”

“You want to take something? I’ve got a relaxant in my purse.” Mia kept her tone casual, as if everyone in the world carried a supply of Diazepam. She didn’t want Juliet thinking she was some kind of drug addict. Then she wondered why she cared what Juliet thought.

But Juliet merely laughed and shook her head. “No, no, I’m good, thank you. You shouldn’t take that crap, you know. It’s not good for you.”

Mia glanced sideways. No one in her circle would ever have cared enough to make such a comment. Not to mention, Diazepam was the just a drop in the ocean, along with the boutique party pills and lines of cocaine that were occasionally brought out after the wine flow slowed. “Yeah, worse things, though, I suppose.”

“Of course. There always is.” Juliet fell behind Mia as they headed directly past the economy queue and onto the aircraft. Juliet’s eyes went visibly wide as Mia stopped and deposited the backpack onto Juliet’s expansive seat and her own case was placed in the overhead compartment.

“You need anything out of that?” Mia asked.

“Umm, I might just get out the book I’m reading...” Her fingers scurried beneath the zipper as an attendant waited.

“Anything good?” Mia plopped herself down in her seat across the aisle.

“An oldie but a goodie—*Wuthering Heights*. I thought it might get me feeling nostalgic and in the writing mood.”

“Is it working?”

Juliet laughed loudly, and it elicited a chuckle from Mia. Juliet had the most incredulous, infectious laugh. “Not even remotely.”

“I’m sure once you arrive, you’ll be writing nonstop.”

“Hmmm,” Juliet said, smirking as she sat down and opened various compartments, exploring the seat and the controls. “I appreciate your confidence.”

“Something tells me that you could do anything you set your mind to.”

“Really? You think? You’ve made a quick assessment of me, Mia.”

Mia nodded. “I do, and I’ll have you know that I’m seldom wrong.”

“We’ll see.” Juliet cocked her head. “We’ll see.”



To Juliet, long-haul flights felt like an unending, special kind of torture. She had been on enough flights to know they were always filled with people experiencing some kind of emotion. Some were devastated by their reasons for needing to board the plane—funerals, a bad breakup, a forced work transfer.

Others were ecstatic, brimming with nervous excitement at a long-planned trip or a return home to see family or attend a wedding. A smaller number seemed quieter, reflective, lost. God knew she had probably been all of those things at some point.

Juliet wasn't sure what she was on this trip, though. Possibly she was none of these things. Mia, too, seemed to be something hard to pinpoint, a traveller that couldn't be stereotyped into clichéd groups. She was obviously on her way somewhere, for a reason that Juliet wondered if Mia even knew herself.

The only thing she knew was that it had taken forever to get there.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. As you may have noticed, we have begun our descent into Dubai, where the local time is seven p.m. and the temperature is a balmy thirty degrees Celsius...”

Juliet sighed heavily and kicked at her bag as the usual flight announcement commenced. She squeezed her bag into a small cupboard at her feet. Her seatbelt was firm at her hips, and her fingers twisted the blanket that was still extended over her legs. She cast a sideways glance at Mia, surprised to find her watching her movements intently.

They had both slept the first eight hours of the flight, though Mia was watching a movie by the time Juliet fully awakened. For the remainder of the flight, they had alternated between chatting and watching television, reading magazines and newspapers, and sharing comments on everything from current affairs and politics to the latest celebrity gossip. It was smooth and surprisingly easy, simple.

“Best part of the flight, right? The landing?” Mia joked.

Juliet emitted a half-hearted sort of chuckle.

“Come on, relax,” Mia said. “We’ll be on the ground in a half hour, and after a small amount of duty-free shopping, we’ll be sipping champagne in the best lounge.”

“*You’ll* be duty-free shopping.”

“True.”

“In one of the worst airports in the world.”

“Oh, that’s harsh. Surely there’s worse. I mean, you were saying you’ve been to some of those small and smelly airports in India.”

Juliet screwed up her nose. “Yeah, but even they’re not as busy. Dubai is like Grand Central Station. I don’t really do crowds.”

“You don’t do crowds, and you hate take-offs and landings. I’m learning so much about you, Juliet.”

“Hey, you shouldn’t pick on me when I’m stressing out. At least save it until I can give as good as I get.”

Holding her hands up in front of her, Mia made a show of conceding defeat. “Okay,” she whispered. “I’ll wait until we’re firmly on the ground, at which time I will endlessly tease.” Suddenly, she paused and frowned. “Sorry,” she said, “I just presumed then. Completely.”

Juliet glanced to her side and raised her eyebrows. She had no idea what Mia was presuming.

“That we would stay, you know, together during the stopover.” Mia licked her lips and cocked her head. Juliet wondered if she was nervous. “I know I’m probably not your usual type.”

Juliet shook her head before the plane jerked, and she gave a small, barely audible cry. Recovering her composure, her eyes returned to meet Mia’s, but found them fixed on the flight path screen in front of her. The infallible confidence that Mia had been emanating since their meeting had disappeared. Mia’s silence and zoned-out stare confused her.

“We have over seven hours in this godforsaken airport we’re about to land in and then yet another flight that’s eight odd hours long. So the answer is, ‘No, I’ll save my own company for the months I have ahead of me.’”

Mia nodded and offered a small smile, but her shoulders remained hunched as she folded in on herself.

“But back up a little,” Juliet said. “What’s this crap about my *usual type*?”

“I just thought that you probably only socialise with arty types...”

“Mmm,” Juliet said. “Like, other authors, artists, musicians, that kind of thing?”

“Umm, yeah?”

“And free spirits, save-the-forest types...”

“Exactly.”

“You’re right. I usually just sit around campfires and pass around bongos.”

Mia’s glance jerked up suddenly, eyes wide and mouth slightly ajar. “You’re joking, obviously.”

Juliet grinned back at her. “Yes, yes, I am. I don’t have a type, Mia. I like meeting people from all different backgrounds, and I don’t judge a book by

its cover. As a supposedly decent writer, the concept of superficially judging people just annoys me. Although something tells me that you probably haven't spent your life talking to people like me."

"I'm not that interested in being who I've always been," Mia said softly, scooping her hair away from her neck. She secured it in a bun by a gold clip as the plane again shuddered through a change in atmospheric pressure.

Juliet's hands gripped the armrests. The seatbelt sign flicked on, and the attendants rushed past them to finalise their pre-landing tasks.

"You good?" Mia asked.

"I hate flying."

"I can see that. Should I ask why you continue to fly when you clearly don't enjoy it?"

Juliet rolled her eyes and didn't bother responding. She was completely dumfounded that people would allow fear to stop them from doing anything.

"Ten minutes," Mia said, "fifteen tops, we'll be on the ground."

"This is why I never travel with anyone. People feel compelled to try and make me feel better."

"Does it work?"

"Never."

"You poor thing." Mia reached across to offer a friendly squeeze of her shoulder, while Juliet managed only a tortured expression in return. "All right, distraction. Does distraction work?"

"Nope."

"What if I told you that while you were sleeping, I saw those two over there, in 2A and 2D, sneak into the bathroom together?" Her forced, low whisper made Juliet perk up.

"What?" She raised her eyes, though her hands maintained their death grip. "Who?"

"Over there, 2A." With a nod towards a window, she cast her eyes to the right, adding, "and 2D."

"Oh my God, really?"

"Yes."

"She, ah, she has to be twice his age?"

"Our flight attendant Jamie thinks at least twice."

"That's...that's pretty horrific, actually. I used that restroom afterwards." Juliet shuddered. "I mean, those bathrooms are small."

“Maybe she’s more flexible than she looks.”

“Mia!”

“What? It’s possible—sit on the toilet or do it against the wall.”

“Are you about to tell me that you’ve done it?”

Mia coughed, and a glimmer of a scowl crossed her face. “No, definitely not. She is at least twice his age, and my guess is that he’s more our age than that teenager sitting back there.”

“Okay, that’s enough distracting. My eyes are burning with just the thought of it, so no more talking.” As if on cue, the wheels of the plane dropped, and the engines slowed with another jerk and uneven dip of the aircraft. “Oh God, just land already. I need my feet on solid ground for a few hours.”

“Almost. Just think of *Abuela* over there and her toyboy if you’re feeling uncomfortable.”

Juliet laughed and nodded. “Yeah, thanks for that.” They shared a glance and laughed slightly louder before Mia turned her gaze to the view out the window. Juliet continued to softly giggle as she closed her eyes, knuckles white.

They approached unsteadily towards the runway.



“You know,” Juliet said as she tried to keep up with Mia. They weaved through crowds of rushing people inside Dubai International Airport. “That lip gloss you bought, it pretty much cost...ouch!” She shot a middle-aged man a disgusted look after absorbing an elbow to her stomach. “That lip gloss costs more than my weekly rent in Bruges is going to be.”

“What?” Disbelief seemed to settle in Mia’s eyes.

“Yep.”

“Where the hell are you staying?”

Juliet looked upward. “Details... I don’t really know yet. I’m sure it’s okay. It has a bathroom and heating. What more do I need?”

“Umm, safety? Cleanliness?”

“You haven’t lived, Mia, until you’ve swatted cockroaches in your kitchen and kicked the front door three times to get it to close. Or stepped over roommates having sex on the lounge room floor when you get home from a twelve-hour waitressing shift with finals the next day.”

Reaching the desired elevator, they waited, Mia looking lost in thought. “You really lived like that?” she asked.

“Mmm-hmm, absolutely. And that was a good day.”

“Oh, what did the worst ones look like?”

“You really don’t want to know.”

“I do. I so do.”

“I might put you off the Moët that you’re craving...”

Mia laughed, pushing the elevator *up* button multiple times, as if expecting it to arrive faster. “You know what I really feel like now?”

“Please say ‘coffee’?” Juliet had been craving quality caffeine for the last six hours of their flight.

“Nope. I want a chocolate bar, some fries and a Coke. A real Coke, none of that diet, aspartame-filled crap. And I want to drink it out of the can—not a straw or a glass or a glass with a straw.” She opened her mouth to continue the diatribe but stopped at Juliet’s amused look. “What?”

“That’s unusual for you?”

“Are you kidding me? Everywhere I go, there’s someone watching, waiting for me to screw up so they can tell their wives and have it spread around the freakin’ trophy wives club. I once bought a chicken from the store, one of those cooked ones, and a friend of my sister saw me go through the checkout. Seriously, by the time I got home, there was a personal trainer, diet consultant, and a brand new treadmill waiting for me.” Mia’s hands gestured wildly, and her lips pressed tightly together.

“Bullshit,” said Juliet. “There is no way that happened.”

“Oh it happened, and that’s only one example. So, while you were using your shoe to kill insects, I had a drawer full of stomach control pantyhose before I even finished high school.”

Juliet softened. There was a real look of pain across Mia’s expression. “Well,” she said as the doors opened and they slipped inside, “*we* are going to go upstairs, which is completely your world, and I’m going to introduce you to my world. Are you game?”

“I have no idea what that means. Do I get to drink a Coke?”

“Do you trust me, Mallania Revira?”

“Ah, you remember that I barely know you, right? We met yesterday at the airport...” she trailed off.

“Do you trust me?”

Mia hesitated, and her eyes met Juliet’s unblinking.

For a moment, Juliet expected a *no*. “Come on, I’m not asking you to base jump off a building with me! I promise it will be completely safe, and it may just change your life.”

“Big call. ‘Change my life,’ hey?”

“Yep, absolutely.”

“All right. I’m game. What are you going to make me do?”

“Make you?” Juliet chuckled as she pushed Mia out of the elevator in a manner that screamed *lifelong friends*. It was one of those small moments of relaxed interaction only possible when friends had crossed certain boundaries not readily crossed with strangers or acquaintances.

“Ah-huh. What are you going to make me do?”

“That all depends. What do you have in that ridiculously inconvenient suitcase?”

“It’s not inconvenient, it’s useful. It’s easy. It’s part of a set.”

“What’s inside of it, Mia?” Juliet took a step back as Mia handed over her card to the lounge attendant and confirmed their onward flights. It took barely a minute before they were inside the first-class lounge and standing to the side of the elaborate food buffet.

“I don’t know what you’re looking for,” Mia said, “but I have some clothes, a few toiletries, some jewellery that I didn’t want to check in, and a few magazines.”

“I don’t suppose you have a pair of jeans in there?”

Giving Juliet a perplexed look, Mia nodded. “Yeah, I’ve got two pairs.”

“Two?”

“One dark blue and one faded blue so that I had, well, options.” Mia blushed again. Mia had yet to exhibit that suave confidence Juliet had first been introduced to in the Emirates lounge.

“Okay, faded blue out and heels off, and take off all of that gold while you’re at it.”

Mia nodded slowly, hand slowly tracing over the thick chain around her neck, a number of bracelets bouncing against her wrist. “Right,” she said, lifting her bag onto a chair and unzipping it. Her belongings were profoundly ordered, folded and placed in a jigsaw arrangement. Mesh zippered bags held various toiletries, power cables, and adapters in each corner of her case.

Juliet reached blindly into her backpack, pulling out and tossing aside a rolled-up hoodie over the back of the chair. A hairbrush fell to the floor. “What’s your foot size—like, an eight?”

“And a half,” Mia said. “Are you dressing me like a...umm...like ah, *you*?”

“Yep. You are going to spend the next, what, twenty hours, being more pleb-like. Consider it a social experiment. Take note of how people treat you. How they don’t treat you. How no one, and I mean no one, looks twice if you shove a double cheeseburger and fries down your throat.”

“Be anonymous?”

“Exactly. You never know. You might like it.”

“Why? Why would you do this?”

Juliet shrugged. “Maybe it’ll help my book.” She offered Mia a light-hearted, wide grin she knew wasn’t believable for a moment.

“So go on,” Juliet continued. “Go get changed, and I’ll be right here.”

Mia turned to go when Juliet added, “Oh, wait.” She gave a slight cheer as she tugged a pair of flip-flops from her bag. “These don’t even remotely match this shirt, but that’s half the fun.” She held out the items to Mia and indicated with her head towards the restrooms. “Oh, and you just use the shampoo and conditioner they have in the shower cubicles. You don’t take your own travel-sized organic hair and body products in.”

“How did you know I have organic products?”

“Just a guess. And hey, I’m all for saving the environment and treating the body well, but hell, that stuff is expensive.”

Mia rolled her eyes and disappeared, leaving Juliet to reorder her backpack and find a fresh shirt to change into. She kept her hoodie out; the blasting air conditioning was making her shiver. By the time Mia returned, Juliet had jotted down almost two pages of notes in her Moleskine—reflections and ideas for her novel. “Oh, now you look awesome!”

Mia rolled on the balls of her feet, looking down at her manicured toes with their deep-red polish. “I feel...ridiculous, but comfy.”

“You look good! Come on, sit down and relax. The next plan is food.”

“There’s no way this shirt fits you. Is it from the ex-boyfriend pile?”

Juliet laughed immediately, shaking her head. “No,” she said. “No. My brother’s, actually. It’s an Army football team shirt.”

“It’s loose and light. I don’t have to suck in my stomach.”

“As if you do anyway. But yes, it’s a few years old and pretty well worn.”

“I’m not so sure on the shoes. They make me short, really short.”

“You’re my height. That’s not short. And look around: who cares? No one is even looking at you, and so what if they do?”

Mia nodded slowly as Juliet cast her eyes around their surrounds. No one was looking at Mia. There were just businessmen reading newspapers and couples sitting at laptops or eating soup. “I guess so,” Mia said.

“Why don’t you put that necklace in your purse too?” Juliet watched Mia’s fingers curl around the pendant until it was clasped inside a closed fist.

“No,” Mia said simply, giving no room for negotiation.

Juliet watched her silently as Mia went about putting her belongings back with meticulous precision into their carefully designated spaces. Finally, Mia stood back up and exposed her smile, and Juliet couldn’t help but think that the casual brown-haired woman standing in front of her could have been a woman she had met at a bar or the supermarket. She was makeup-free, and the natural glow of her skin, even after a long-haul flight, was beautiful. Her physique beneath the loose three-quarter-sleeve jersey looked fit and strong and healthy, belonging to someone with whom she wanted to walk down the street and share a meal. She suddenly didn’t look like she belonged somewhere a world away.

“Next?” Mia said.

“Oh, this is where I get to have a quick shower and you get to go to the buffet and get whatever food and drink you want. Not what is healthy or good for jetlag and not what some bitch from LA would expect you to eat. And so definitely not a carrot or celery stick with a small dollop of hummus. And when I get back, I expect you to have a few delicious options for me as well.”

“Now this sounds like fun.”

“It should be. Meals shouldn’t be a trauma, Mia.”

“Mmm. Anything you want in particular? Drink?”

“I would like a coffee and a beer, please.”

“A beer?”

“Yep, ice cold beer, preferably out of a bottle. But they might kick us out if we get too carried away, so a glass is okay.” Juliet grinned, standing up and taking a few steps before turning back. “Hey, make sure you wait for me. There are some instructions to go with the food. You want to enjoy eating.”

Mia laughed and nodded. “Yes, Juliet.”



By the time Juliet returned, wet hair half caught in the neck of her hoodie, Mia had a range of decadent treats on the table and two tall glasses of beer waiting. She had spent part of the time Juliet was away staring at the food and salivating. The rest of the time, she had been preoccupied with managing the rising anxiety in her gut. Lifelong habits were hard to break.

“Nice choices.” Juliet raised her eyebrows as she examined the items before her. “And that looks suspiciously like a tumbler of soda?”

Mia shrugged. “It may be diet. I was going to lie and say I got that Coke, but the truth is I caved.”

Laughing, Juliet slumped down on the other end of the two-seater sofa and tucked one leg up underneath herself so that her body was tilted towards Mia. “You’re excused. To tell you the truth, I drink diet soda too. Sugar *and* caffeine? I’d never sleep.”

“From what I’ve seen, you could sleep through an earthquake.”

Juliet’s grin fell to a weak smile, and she gave Mia a fleeting, defeated look. “I wish.” A moment later, the expression was gone. “Anyway, the point is that if you want to have a Coke occasionally, then you can.”

“Yeah, yeah, easy for you to say...I mean, you’re all skinny and, you know, hot.”

“I don’t pretend to know everything about well, anything, actually. But if you think the most important thing in life is what size jeans you fit into, then I’ve overestimated you, Mia. I took you as someone with much more substance than that kind of shit, as if it matters at the end of the day. Being a reasonable person? Treating people well and with respect and kindness? That is what you want to go home to. Not some false size zero who can’t form an independent thought.”

“I didn’t mean that it’s the most important thing.” Mia hesitated briefly. “I just meant it as a compliment.”

“It’s the hoodie that does it,” Juliet said seriously, narrowing her eyes and nodding.

“What?” Mia stared at Juliet.

“The hoodie makes me hot. I mean, what’s not to love about the Gap logo that draws attention to my very awesome cleavage?”

Mia laughed, and Juliet gave a soft snicker.

“All right, I’m starving.” Juliet took two fries first and then dropped a brownie square into her mouth. “Mmm. That *is* good.” She licked her fingers slowly in a clearly deliberate performance for Mia. With a swipe of the back of her fingers against Mia’s shoulder, she silently prodded her.

Mia slowly leaned forward, deliberating momentarily, and then picked up a fork.

“Hey, put down the fork,” Juliet said. “We’re using our fingers. It’s all part of the fun. And what did you even *get* a knife for?”

Laughing, Mia dropped the fork onto the table. It clipped the side of a plate and bounced noisily. Juliet curled her fingers around Mia’s forearm.

“Wait. What are you eating, Mia?”

“Ah, cheesecake, Juliet.”

“Are you going to enjoy it?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Juliet sat tall and squared her shoulders. “Then bite it in half, taste it. Finish it. Lick your fingers.” Her tone was passionate.

“You’re nuts.”

“More like genetically flawed,” Juliet said. Her tongue peeked out of her lips as she smiled.

It seemed so simple, eating and not thinking, but everything Mia did, every item she bought, every word that came out of her mouth was considered. She was used to analysing the outcome of every single one of her choices, anticipating the complex domino effect that could result from something seemingly insignificant. Food was just one example.

“Mmm,” Mia purred, eyes fluttering closed. She dipped the end of her thumb and index finger into her mouth and sucked on them with a loud pop. “I so need another one of those.”

She heard Juliet emit a childish giggle, and it made her open her eyes. Mia’s foot had started tapping over and over. Her knee jiggled as Juliet’s knuckles grazed her thigh, and Mia cursed the sudden burning behind her eyes. Juliet would think her crazy if she started to cry for no reason. “Thank you,” she said, a perceptible catch to her voice.

Juliet smiled. “I’m going to try the passionfruit one,” she said and held Mia’s stare for just a moment too long for Mia’s comfort.

Yet, when Juliet averted her eyes, it still felt a little too soon.

CHAPTER 3

“You know what? I just realised that I have no idea what day it is or what day I left home,” Juliet said, sitting next to Mia in a hard plastic chair in Heathrow Airport, with her face in her hands.

Mia felt conflicted. Despite the lengthy flights, she had enjoyed getting to know Juliet and spending time in her company. It had been too long since she had had the opportunity to enjoy someone’s company without expectations. She wasn’t that ready to say goodbye; not that she thought Juliet probably cared. “I so hope this apartment you’ve organised in Brussels has a bed.”

“I’m wrecked. I literally feel like I’ve been run over by a truck.”

“It’s potentially your last flight for six months, so just relax and enjoy the... Oh, wait, maybe don’t enjoy the flight. But enjoy the fact that you are so close now.” Mia smiled.

Her feet were crossed out in front of her with Juliet’s red flip-flops on display. She still wore Juliet’s shirt, and her jeans had stretched slightly over the course of the flight, loose now around the legs and waist. Flicking her toes so that the flip-flops tapped against her heels, she said, “You know, I should own up. It was me that was once refused entry for my inappropriate footwear that time. I’m not sure why I pretended it wasn’t.”

Juliet didn’t comment, just smiled and shrugged.

“Hey, are you sure you don’t want your shirt and shoes back? I feel bad for taking them.”

Juliet shook her head vehemently, eyes bloodshot and tired-looking when she raised her face. “Definitely not. I hope you wear more of them, actually, though it’ll be a little cold for flip-flops right now. So you probably don’t need to worry about not being allowed into airport lounges over winter.”

Mia felt her cheeks warm. “True, but I think I might just do that, wear more comfortable clothes. It’s been kind of amazing. When I bought our coffee before, no revolting old men accidentally touched my ass. Or my breasts.”

“Well, that would be disappointing.” Juliet’s voice dripped with sarcasm.

“If you come and visit me after you’ve finished your book, I’ll hook you up with a new shirt. Apparently the Scottish rugby jersey is pretty good. Or

the team is good? I'm not actually clear on that. But either way, I'll get you something socially appropriate."

Juliet laughed. "Sounds like a good deal to me. So you'll still be there in five years when I eventually get this manuscript done?"

"I have more faith in you than that, Juliet." Mia wished she knew what to say to let Juliet know that she wanted to get acquainted more. Why she couldn't just say that, she didn't know. Was it crazy to expect Juliet to do it, just because she couldn't?

"Yeah, well, you're the only one," Juliet said. She seemed to have missed the serious undertone Mia intended. "You realise that when I actually get to Brussels, I'm going to have to write? I won't be able to procrastinate any longer."

"Please take a couple of days to relax and recover." Mia had already gotten the impression over the past two days that Juliet wasn't anywhere near as kind and gentle with herself as she was with other people.

"I might need a reminder of that."

"Well, consider it done. Are e-mail and text okay, or will I also need to leave long and detailed messages on your cell?"

"Probably e-mail and text will have the effect needed. You know, it feels kind of weird: we've spent just about every minute of the last forty-eight hours together, and now we just go in different directions."

Mia propped her head up on her hand, elbow on the armrest next to her. "I was just thinking that earlier. You'll stay in contact? I'm really excited to hear how the book goes."

"Absolutely." Juliet glanced at the *go to gate* message sitting next to her flight number on the departures information screen nearby. "And I want to be kept up to date with how the change of scenery is treating you."

They shared a look for a few prolonged seconds before Mia finally broke the silence. "Are you okay?" She tried to keep her tone gentle, helplessly watching tears well in Juliet's eyes, blue irises glazing over.

Juliet coughed. "Yeah." She shook her head as if flinging the emotion away. "Just being silly." Her smile looked forced to Mia, although really it appeared more a hybrid grimace than anything remotely close to an expression of happiness. "You, umm, have to change terminals, right?"

"Afraid so. You ready to go through?" Mia reached out for Juliet but was halted when Juliet jolted upright.

"I'd better be."

“Sure,” Mia said, taking her handbag off her lap and dropping it onto the chair as she stood. “So I just want to thank you. I’ve actually had a great couple of days. And I’m really glad that I saved your butt with Jeremy in LAX.”

Juliet scuffed her feet slightly, fingers toying with the hip pockets of her jeans. “Me too. It was really nice to meet you, Mia.” She took a step to the side, eyeing the screen again.

“Hey,” Mia said. “I at least want a hug. I mean, you’ve seen me eat cheesecake and fries, after all.”

It was enough to elicit a weak laugh from Juliet, and she met Mia with a tight embrace. “Thanks for keeping me sane.”

“You’re welcome.” Mia leaned back and pressed a kiss to Juliet’s cheek. “I hope this flight goes okay, and I look forward to your e-mails.”

“You too.” Juliet stepped away and towards the security point before turning back. “Don’t forget: do what makes you feel good, Mia. Okay?”

Mia felt a smile spread across her cheeks. “Okay.”

And with a brief wave, Juliet disappeared, and Mia walked in the opposite direction. She carried with her a few contact details of a stranger, a stranger to whom she felt strangely close to. But that shouldn’t make sense. She was being irrational and childish, everything she had been accused of her whole life. There was no way that a normal person could imagine a relationship was possible with some random woman she had met two days ago in an airport.



The further they drove, the more snow Mia observed out the window from the backseat of the black Bentley that had picked her up from Edinburgh Airport with its wheel rims carefully polished and tyres meticulously shined. The snow-capped hills far off in the distance signalled winter long before the small pockets of white ice usually began appearing at the side of the road and on the grassy fields. She checked her watch and phone. Juliet would hopefully be settling into her apartment by now, and with any luck, she’d manage to stay awake through the afternoon.

When Mia’s driver Martin had picked her up, she had greeted him with a warm smile and a shake of his hand, even a light peck to his cheek. She knew him relatively well, and he had a cheeky, wicked sense of humour, although it only appeared occasionally, when he was sure it was appropriate. Mia had

always appreciated the wink that he would give her when everyone else was oblivious to his humour.

Still, Mia knew after she had left Juliet in Heathrow Airport that not even Martin would call her by her first name or joke with her completely without filter. Anyone at the house would be walking on eggshells, doing whatever they could to keep her happy and content, for with just one bad word from Mia to the employment agency in London, their jobs could be lost or their company's contracts could be cancelled.

But Juliet didn't know about any of that and presumably wouldn't care. Mia had the impression that Juliet didn't need to be liked by Mia or anyone else. Mia was just someone with whom she crossed paths for twenty-four hours, nothing more and nothing less.

The estate in Overscaig, in the Highlands, had been staffed for a month pending her arrival, and so the kitchen would be brimming, the grass would be trimmed, and the horses would be groomed. Three boxes of belongings would be awaiting her arrival, just a range of necessities she had shipped a few weeks ago.

As expected, Martin had a small cooler in the backseat stocked with two small bottles of white wine, freshly squeezed orange juice, and a can of traditional lemonade. Mia avoided the wine and sipped occasionally on the juice, unscrewing the top and drinking out of the bottle, thinking about Juliet.

They had been travelling for almost four hours when the window between the backseat and the front slowly descended; she met Martin's eyes in the rear-view mirror.

"Ms Revira, we are coming up to a service centre, would you like a comfort stop?"

Mia smiled and nodded. "Please," she said softly. "Thanks, Martin."

"You're most welcome. After this, we leave the dual carriage way, and it's mostly single lane from here. We'll be travelling a little slower."

"The view is beautiful, I can hardly complain."

He smiled again. "It is nice to have you again, Ms Revira," he said after a moment. "And, may I say, I was sorry to hear about..." He paused. "Well, I was sorry to hear about *things*."

Mia swallowed. "Thank you," she said. "I appreciate that, but please, I'm here on my own, so what I would really like is for you to call me Mia."

"Of course. It's a beautiful name."

Martin's compliment came out more like a distant, neutral observation, but Mia blushed a little anyway and tucked some loose strands of matted and messy hair behind her ears. "Is Jasmine still there? She used to make the most incredible risotto."

Martin shook his head as he took a short exit off the main road. "No, she met a young man in Glasgow, and he is in his final year at Dundee, about to become a doctor. They married not long ago, I heard, just a few weeks ago."

"A doctor?" Mia asked, eyes widening and mouth opening. "How lucky."

"To marry a doctor? With all those long hours, I'm not sure I would want my daughter marrying a young doctor." Mia observed his head shake in the rear-view mirror, and he waved his hand in the air.

"No, I meant to be studying medicine," Mia said. "Who would want to marry, right, Martin?"

Martin rested his elbow on the centre console and Mia met his eyes in the mirror. "You're a wise girl, Mia. A wise, wise girl."



Having successfully negotiated the train from Brussels to Bruges without uttering a word of mispronounced, grossly incorrect Flemish, Juliet was stuffed—completely, utterly, and deliriously exhausted. And it was highly possible that not one of the four locks on her apartment door actually fastened adequately.

The kitchen she had been promised housed no more than a small fridge and a microwave on a bench. The apartment did have a bed with an oddly sized double mattress that was a few inches too short for the frame. But at least it had clean, crisp, white sheets and two new pillows. And the bathroom, the glorious bathroom, was no larger than a closet, but it had hot running water. Scalding hot. Which was good, because the heater seemed to rumble loudly but barely emanate warmth.

She literally stumbled from the bathroom to the bed, catching her shoulder on the corner of the door and feeling her knee buckle slightly. She'd never had a knee injury, never even had so much as a twinge, but even her knee was begging her to stop moving at this point, with the implied threat that it soon would prevent her from walking at all if she did not comply.

And it was only six in the evening. Pulling out her cell phone, she double-checked the settings and time zones, then examined her watch to make sure

hp tune

everything matched. Blinking heavily and rubbing her eyes, she tried to focus on the screen.

Made it to the apartment, and it even has a bed. Thank fuck. Have you made it too?

She had to read the message four times and go back and correct the typos, but eventually she got it readable and pressed *send*. She made a mental note to get her hands on a local SIM card in the morning, or whenever she regained consciousness.

Only a couple of minutes passed before her phone beeped, though it was loud enough to make her jump. She was sprawled across the bed, freshly showered and dressed in sweats, but she had yet to slide under the warm covers, as she was trying to maintain an illusion of alertness. Who was she kidding? She was already half dozing.

Getting close. So pleased you've made it. Is the apartment up to standard?

Juliet couldn't help but laugh.

Mine or yours?

Quickly, her old Nokia chimed.

Somewhere in between? :-) I hope you sleep well tonight. I know I will.

The apartment is fine and has a bed, which is all I care about right now. Sleep well too, and take care.

Juliet kept her phone in her hand and curled onto her side, reaching across the bed to tug the blankets down. They were thick and heavy, and she could already feel her eyelids sporadically closing against her will as she manoeuvred herself underneath the covers without having to get herself up.

After a few minutes, her phone again received a message, and it jerked her back awake.

You too.



It may have taken five days, but the sun finally came out and the clear blue sky above Overscaig was stunning as Mia settled into the driver's seat of a 2010 Jeep Wrangler. It wouldn't last, and even in the best conditions at that time of year, she would only have six hours or so of light. It was bitingly cold, thanks to a seasonal wind that cut through layers of clothing. She had taken a few days to get her energy back after the lengthy trip, just lazing by the fire and drinking cups of steaming soup until she had begun venturing outside on a few occasions, walking through the snow to the stables that sat almost nine hundred feet from the main house. The horses had relished her attention and had accommodated her on short rides as she tried to rebuild her confidence with the skill. They seemed far taller than she remembered from her last ride, just under two years ago. Or perhaps it was that her sense of invincibility was progressively vanishing with every month and year.

She had a specific destination in mind, a one-hundred-mile return trip that in the midst of summer would only take three hours but with her cautiousness in winter would take her close to four or five. Add in a coffee and lunch, and she would easily be out each minute of sunlight. Despite her need for vigilant awareness of ice patches and other cars on the narrow country roads, the driving was relaxing. She loved the view, the stone fences that ran along the shoulder of the roads, and the sweeping, rock-filled fields.

And she was alone. There was no one checking on her or offering her food and drinks. Although the maid Janet had relaxed since her arrival, Mia still felt smothered. Even her insistence that she travel alone to Durness had elicited an hour of concerned banter and eventually a survival package, which she was fairly sure had enough supplies to keep her alive in the car until the end of winter. She appreciated the concern, but she wasn't made of glass and wasn't about to shatter at any given moment. She was not useless.

So the drive was a pleasant reprieve and essentially drama free, if she didn't count the small, furry, and unidentified animal that may have had a misfortunate run-in with one of the all-terrain tyres. Which she didn't: some things were a little different in the country.

Eventually, she pulled into a small parking space outside a bed and breakfast that doubled as the local café. There was a fairly well-stocked Spar just up the road and a hotel just a few hundred yards in the other direction. In the warmer months, it had the most delicious sight of the ocean—the North Atlantic with a

view towards the Norwegian Sea. Making a quick run between the car and the café entrance, her fingers curled inside the pockets of her knee-length woollen coat and she hurried into the building, looking forward to and the warm comfort of a log fire and gas heating that she knew was inside.

Just one other patron sat quietly in the corner, focussed intently on the laptop that he had in front of him. It took a few moments for staff to respond to the old-fashioned bell hooked on the front door. “Hi,” Mia said, blowing into her hands to warm them.

“Good morning,” the middle-aged woman said, apron tied around her waist. “Can I get you anything?”

“Mmm, please.” Mia scanned the laminated menu on the counter. “Could I have, umm, a skinny latte and the Caesar salad?”

The woman chuckled. “I can do the salad,” she said politely, “but the ingredients aren’t the freshest around here at this time of year. I can recommend the soup, though. It comes with a crusty bread that is to die for. The lasagne and chips are popular with the locals.”

Mia’s face ducked down an inch, and she returned to the menu, feeling the heat rush to her cheeks. “Of course, I didn’t even think. Sorry...” Contemplating, Mia suddenly heard Juliet’s voice in her mind and she smiled. “Actually, the lasagne and chips sounds spectacular. Thank you.”

“Not a problem. Just take a seat, and I’ll have it out in twenty minutes or so. Help yourself to the magazines or newspapers.”

“I heard that you have a bookstore here, is that right?” Mia asked, taking a step back and peering around the corner.

“Ah-huh, just around there. Go ahead and browse, I’ll give you a call when your lunch is ready.”

“Thanks.”

Stepping around the corner, Mia walked past a small line of tables next to the wide windows until floor-to-ceiling shelves appeared. The narrow corridor opened into a large expansive room. Bookshelves lined the walls and were in tightly squeezed rows in the middle. She picked up a small calico bag and worked her way through the sections. Although her goal was to try and find Juliet’s novel, she didn’t particularly expect it to be stocked and so went about selecting a range of reading material, something to keep her busy for a few weeks. Her eclectic tastes meant she chose two autobiographies and a thick

crime book and then another last-minute inclusion by an Australian comedian she had once seen at a women's health fundraiser in Los Angeles. Focussing her attention then, she started scanning the spines for Juliet's book and working her way through different genres. Juliet had been incredibly inept at disclosing to Mia anything about the content, and Mia sensed it was more a book of self-discovery and philosophy than anything fiction.

She was wrong. There, in the middle of the fiction section, under *T* on the bottom shelf, were two copies of a novel by Juliet Taylor. Mia tugged at one of them from the tightly packed shelf, and sat back on her feet where she had knelt down.

Things My Mother Should Have Told Me:

A story of being anyone but who you were raised to be.

Mia was grinning widely when she earned a tap on her shoulder, and she jumped slightly at the contact. "Found anything you like?"

"Yes, actually. I'll take these five...and the bag." She still couldn't believe she had found Juliet's book.

"I've just put out your lunch. Go ahead. We'll fix these up when you're done."

"Thank you. Is it all right with you if I start reading? I'm keen to start this one."

"Absolutely, you go ahead, love. And a fabulous choice. That's up for a few awards this year, one of the best written, bravest literary fictions that I've read in a long time. I hope it does win an award or two. It might get the publicity it deserves. Actually, a media release that we got from the publisher a few months ago said the author had another book in the works and that it was due out this Christmas. Guess it didn't happen."

Mia nodded slowly and gave a half smile. "I know the author, actually. Juliet. Well, met her recently."

"You did?"

"Ah-huh. I did."

"Well, lucky you. If you can ever get me a signed copy, there's a week-long stay here in it for you."

Mia laughed quietly. "I'll have to work on that."



Blank.

It didn't matter how many times Juliet closed her laptop and reopened it. The document was still glaringly blank. Empty. Void of anything profound, thought provoking, or insightfully brave. It was even absent of something crap, grammatically flawed, and sickeningly clichéd.

Juliet let her forehead drop. Her computer emitted a familiar rapid-paced buzzing sound, of a computer key being struck and then held down. When she raised her head, biscuit crumbs were pressed to her right eyebrow, and the screen was no longer a mocking white but had two and a half lines of a lower case *c* across the top of the page.

That was never going to win her a Pulitzer.



Most of the people in Overscaig both dreaded dealing with the Revira family and yet had, at some point, relied on them for a decent chunk of their income. Janet, who had only recently begun working as a maid at the estate in advance of the black sheep daughter Mia returning to the fold, was no different. The Revira family reputation preceded them, and just the mention of one of them returning to stay had sent the small local towns into a flurry. It seemed as if most had a story to tell of conflict at some point with one of the family members, everyone from the local produce suppliers through to the Royal Mail outlet.

Janet herself had experienced some anxiety at the thought of coming to work here, but she'd needed the money, and for all that they were difficult to deal with, the Reviras tended to pay their victims well for their trouble.

However, Mia Revira was turning out to be something quite unexpected. Janet had grown up in this town, and when she had told her father that she would be working for the Reviras, he had repeatedly warned her not to expect too much. She remembered being a young girl and how her father would return home from delivering supplies and lecture them. *It doesn't cost anything to be respectful, but those people still can't afford it*, he'd say. It didn't make any sense to Janet until she was much older.

She couldn't quite recall when Mia and her husband had purchased the adjacent estate, but at some point, the Revira family had had less presence in the area and then had disappeared completely. The gossip that went around for

months when Mia and her husband divorced was that it couldn't have happened to a nicer family.

Yet, although Mia was a grown woman with her mother's infamous ease at telling servants what to do, this current lady of the house had not grown up with Mrs Revira's equally infamous disdain for them. At the moment, Mia reminded Janet of a girl, actually, curled up in the corner of a long sofa, a hand-knitted wool blanket over her lap.

"Can I ask you a question, Janet?" Mia asked quietly. The sofa's wide seat and deep cushions seemed to almost swallow her.

"Of course." Janet hid her surprise, returning a polishing cloth to the bucket she was carrying as she worked her way around the wooden furniture. She even smiled at Mia as she sat down on a recliner across from Mia, having finally started to relax while on the property, thanks to Mia's cues. "Do you need something?"

"No, not at all. I'm good, really good."

A knee-jerk panic overcame her. "Have I, done something? Have I done something incorrectly?"

"No, no. I didn't mean anything like that. Relax," Mia said quickly. "I just wondered... Well, I'm reading this book, and I suppose it's making me think a little. Do you still have parents?"

"Oh." Janet squirmed back on the single recliner and crossed her legs. "I do, yes. My parents live in Ireland now, not far from Galway."

"Do you have a good relationship with them?"

"Yes, I do. I always have, and it would be great to see them more often, but it's a way to go, and it takes time and money."

"Do you think that people either become...someone, I suppose, because of their parents or despite them? That's what this book is talking about at the moment, the idea that although there are so many variables and different aspects, that essentially, who we are is because either we were supported, encouraged, and directed by our parents or because we looked at who they were and resolved to become someone entirely different."

The concept came out a little disjointed and unclear, and Janet guessed that Mia was thinking about the meaning of what she said even as she tried to articulate it. She gave her a nod and another small smile. "That's a reflective book that you're reading," she said. "It makes some sense, I suppose. How can

we not be influenced by the people who raised us—whether that’s a negative or positive thing?”

“I was raised to be a very specific person, to have the opinions that I was told to have, to believe what I was told to, and to live within the rules that were already established for me. And when I couldn’t really do that, it all fell apart.”

Janet’s eyebrows rose. It was the most frank Mia had been with her since she’d arrived. In fact, it might also be the greatest number of words Mia had said to her at one time. She felt herself take a sharp little intake of breath as she decided what to say.

“From what I’ve seen,” she said hesitantly, “the world gets a little bit of a shock when someone acts a certain way for a long time and then suddenly draws a line that they can’t cross. It’s like someone suddenly saying ‘no’ when they’ve spent their life saying ‘yes.’”

“I was meant to be a trophy wife who withstood whatever was thrown my way.”

Janet cocked her head. “And what happened when you didn’t?”

Mia sighed heavily and drew her bottom lip into her mouth. “It all fucked up.”

Though the language surprised Janet, she didn’t show it and just nodded slowly. “The way I see it, for what it’s worth, things will always...” She hesitated almost imperceptibly. “*fuck* up—to everyone everywhere. It’s what you do next that counts.”

“I’m trying,” Mia whispered, a stray tear tracking down the side of her nose until it curved in over her lip.

Janet gave a sad smile, although Mia was oblivious, eyes focussed on the closed book in her lap. She’d heard stories from a still-furious Martin about the things that had happened here to Mia. She had an inclination to tell her, *You got fucked over is what happened*. But Janet needed this job, and it was perhaps safest to pretend for now that she didn’t know.

“Yes, you are,” was all she let herself say. “I can tell.”



Wandering through the centre square of Bruges for the fourth time since she arrived, Juliet kept an open umbrella close over her head. She was wrapped

from head to toe in a number of layers—gloves, scarf and boots all included—and it was doing a fine job keeping away the slight drizzle of rain. Her internal dialogue as she dragged her feet from puddle to puddle was edging on a panicked self-criticism. The idea that she would arrive in Europe and be inundated with great ideas and a fluidity of writing had been spectacularly destroyed. Over the past two weeks, it had exploded into a mass of miniscule pieces. Just remnants of her hopes and dreams now lay discarded around her messy, barely secure apartment.

But she had to somehow keep herself trying. She didn't have a choice. She no longer had a home to return to, no job to reinstate. Failure wasn't an option. Yet, she felt as if she were precariously close to a complete meltdown. She would probably end up in a mental health facility, rambling incoherently about a book she had to write, about the writer she once was.

Juliet shuddered and forced the thought away; it was just a little too close to home.

So she stopped at a corner pub, with its promise of mashed potato and German sausages and a bottled Duvel. The facility was warm and dry, though filled with an odd combination of loud tourists and seemingly quiet locals.

She happily settled into a small booth by a window and peeled off a few outer layers. She shouldn't be eating out; she knew that. She should be skimping on money, making cheap meals at the apartment, and focussing on writing. She should be keeping herself alive with instant coffee and marmalade on bread, the fantasy she'd had when making her plans. The thought that she would arrive and literally not be able to write hadn't really occurred to her other than as a running joke with her editor and with Mia. The idea hadn't been *real*.

At the thought of Mia, Juliet withdrew her phone. She'd texted Mia her new number a few days ago but hadn't heard much from her. Her finger lingered over the keys, yet she put the phone away before she typed anything. Mia needed her space, to have her time out from the world and do whatever it was she planned to do. She didn't need Juliet, the crazy nomad that she had accidentally stumbled across in an airport for two days, texting and complaining at her.

Juliet sighed and shook her head. She needed to get a grip and fast.



Curled up on her side near the edge of the king-size bed, Mia was buried deep beneath sheets and heavy blankets. If she rolled onto her back, she would be precariously balanced on the mattress, risking a two-foot fall to the plush white carpet below. She was enthralled in Juliet's book, tears steadily flowing over the bridge of her nose and falling to the feather pillows she was propped against.

She finally released a shuddering breath when she found herself staring at the blank inside page of the back cover. Slowly, she closed the book and tucked it under her arm, squeezing her eyes shut and crying.

The book had remained loosely held in one arm when she awoke later that night, the lamp still on and illuminating the large room with an eerie glow. Placing the book on her bedside table, she gave it a tired, lingering glance before she switched the lamp off.

She had questions for Juliet.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

REWRITING THE ENDING

BY HP TUNE

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com