

all the little MOMENTS



G BENSON

CHAPTER ONE

THE CAR TURNED DOWN A quiet street and Anna blinked rapidly as she realised it was her parents' already. Her neck ached from sitting so stiffly, and she turned awkwardly in the passenger seat. In spite of herself, a smile tugged at her lips: Hayley lay sprawled over in the back, seat belt digging into her neck. The normally poised and put-together lawyer slept with her mouth hung open, and there was a slight sign of drool.

The last fourteen hours had been a kind of hell, and both of them were exhausted.

Swallowing heavily, Anna looked back to the front and clenched her fingers together in her lap. She kept her eyes off her father, scared to look at the expression on his face as he pulled into the driveway. The car had been eerily silent the entire drive from the airport. There were no words for this situation.

Now, with the engine cut off, the silence somehow became even more oppressive.

Heart racing, Anna let out a long, slow breath. The house looked as it always had, white and two story with a simple front garden. It all looked the same, yet everything had changed. How could it be that just yesterday she'd been on a beach on the Gili Islands, Indonesia, relaxing with a mojito in her hand?

Her father cleared his throat and opened his door, sliding out easily. As usual, Anna followed his lead, while Hayley unbuckled herself and got out on Anna's side, squeezing Anna's fingers in comfort. Anna returned the gesture as they stood next to the car, looking up at the house.

If she could just stand out here and not go in, Anna thought, the reality that awaited her could be avoided. Maybe her brother, Jake, would actually be in there, smiling and asking what had taken her so long. He would wink at her and ask if the islands were as romantic as people said. Sally would laugh and punch her husband's arm, rolling her eyes.

Except that wouldn't happen.

She didn't want to go inside. The driver's side door slammed shut, and it made her jump. Warm fingers wrapped around her wrist, and she turned to see Hayley looking at her intently.

"Sandra will want you."

Anna sighed. She didn't know if she was ready to see her mother.

The walk to the house felt like it took forever.

She'd spoken to her mother for less than a minute from the hotel, as Sandra had sobbed the news into the phone. Unable to listen as shock crawled through her belly, Anna had simply handed the phone to Hayley.

The front door pushed open too easily. Framed by the doorway, Sandra looked small and at the sight of her red eyes and pinched face, Anna had to swallow past a lump in her throat. Sandra fell upon Anna, grabbing her like a lifeline, sobs hot against Anna's cheek, her fingertips digging into her skin. Anna wrapped her arms around her mother and ran her hand along her greying hair. Words failed, and the only sound was that of Sandra's grief. Anna felt a powerful urge to look around for Hayley, to find the person who always knew what to say, but her mother clung so hard there would be bruises. All there was to do was to sway gently and bite back the burning in her throat.

"Na!"

Anna flinched at the contrast between the grief-stricken woman in her arms and the delighted shout of her nephew. Throughout the entire panicked trip off the island and the flight to Melbourne, she hadn't let herself think of the kids.

Her mother took a shuddering breath, and Anna felt her tense as she straightened and wiped her eyes quickly.

Jake's fifteen-month-old son Toby was making his way, step by step, down the stairs, ratty blue blanket clasped in one hand while his other hand clung to the rail. He was grinning around his pacifier. As she watched the little boy, the spitting image of his father, stumble his way down, her smile was the closest to a genuine one she'd managed since receiving the news. Still, her heart ached, and her stomach twisted so badly, she thought she'd be sick.

Regardless, she took two long strides towards the bottom of the stairs and threw her arms wide; Toby all but fell into them, his little arms wrapping around her neck and his legs around her middle. He giggled as she cuddled him tightly. Squeezing her eyes shut, Anna hugged him to her. Warm and solid in her arms, he gave another giggle. Out of the corner of her eye, Anna saw her father grimace and disappear down the hall to his study. The door closed with a solid thump.

Toby pulled back from her neck, blanket clasped to his chest with one hand while the other pulled out his pacifier with a pop. Serious big blue eyes looked

at her, smile gone. “Na,” he said, with a nod. He patted her face, pacifier poking her cheek, then broke into another smile. “Stay!”

Even as her stomach twisted again and nausea rose in her throat, Anna nodded and returned the smile. “Of course I’m staying, Tobes. I’ve missed you.”

She squeezed him to her again and he wiggled in her grasp, already wanting to get down and run around on his chubby legs. The moment his feet touched the ground, he was tugging her towards the living room. Anna looked up at her mother, pretending not to see the fresh tears on her cheeks. “Where’s Ella?”

“Upstairs.” Sandra’s voice was like a guitar string tuned too tight. “She’s gone very quiet.”

A promise to return satisfied Toby, who ran to a pile of blocks, either to demolish or create. Halfway up the stairs, Anna stopped and turned to Hayley. “You okay here?”

Hayley smiled slightly and nodded. “Sandra and I will have some tea.”

Anna nodded absently and continued up the stairs, thoughts already on her niece.

Ella was an incredibly chatty child—an incredibly chatty child who loved her aunt. She’d been a surprise that had come into her brother’s life when he and his fiancé were twenty-five—the surprise that had turned Anna’s jokester, loud brother into a ball of sap who looked at his tiny daughter like he’d destroy mountains for her. The change in him had been immediate as he held the tiny, squealing bundle. When he’d returned to Iraq after three months’ leave, he’d done so with a new love of his life in his heart.

Sudden, overwhelming anger made her screw up her fists. Her brother had survived a war that had claimed thousands, only to be killed years later, along with the wife he’d left active duty for, by one drunk asshole in a car.

Sometimes, the world was a shitty place.

Almost dizzy, she paused outside the room her parents kept for the kids. Taking a deep breath, she knocked and pushed the door open. “Ella?”

There was only silence.

She glanced around the room: a single bed all made up in pink in the corner, portacot along the wall, toys everywhere. A hiccup reached her ears, and her sight zeroed in on the neon orange Converse shoes sticking out from under the bed. Anna almost smiled: she had bought Ella those shoes for her sixth birthday five weeks ago. Jake had laughed and rolled his eyes when he caught sight of them. That was the last time Anna had seen him.

He’d said the shoes were ridiculous, that Ella would grow out of them too fast. Anna had punched his arm to shut him up, and Ella put them on straight

away. The night Anna left, Jake sent a photo message of Ella in bed, fast asleep with her shoes still on.

She had no idea how that was only five weeks ago. A lump formed in her throat and she swallowed it down with difficulty. She slid under the bed on her back, wriggling until she lay shoulder to shoulder with Ella.

Her niece was still, staring unblinkingly at the springs over their heads, so Anna didn't attempt to touch her. Ella's auburn hair was a mess around her head, and her eyes were intent on not looking at Anna. Somehow, the sprinkle of freckles over her nose had gotten even sweeter since Anna had last seen her.

"Hey, Ella Bella," Anna said softly.

Ella continued to stare straight up.

Anna wasn't brilliant at this. Becoming an anaesthetist, rather than a doctor or a nurse, had been a choice she'd made because she wasn't great at conversation or small talk. When they lost a patient, she didn't have to give terrible news to parents and loved ones, didn't need to know what to say, how to act. Kids had always been even more of an enigma to her. She could smile at a child in physical pain on her table and make them smile back enough to settle down before she put them to sleep. She could play games with kids, entertain them. She loved to sit with her niece and nephew and read them stories for a few hours, to make them giggle and watch their eyes widen at the things she told them. There had been the weekend she would never forget, when she had stupidly offered to take the kids so Jake and Sally could have two nights alone. But then she'd handed them back and returned to her life. There had been no permanence in that situation—she could handle a few nights because then she got to give them back.

But this? She didn't know how to do *this*, how to comfort a six-year-old who had just lost her parents.

She lifted a hand, grateful that the bed left a little room, and pushed a lock of hair behind Ella's ear. And that was all it took; her little face crumbled and tears spilled as she turned into Anna's arms. The girl's frame was thin, and Anna wrapped her arms around her shaking, sobbing, almost gasping niece as best she could in the restricted space.

"Our class rabbit died last year. He never came back."

Anna's throat tightened, and she squeezed Ella closer.

"Does that mean Mummy and Daddy aren't coming back too?" Ella's voice hiccupped over every word.

Anna didn't know what to say. So, she went with the truth. "No, they're not, honey."

* * *

The joint funeral was beautiful and hideous all at once.

Throughout, Ella clung to her grandparents and to Anna in turn, green eyes wide, barely speaking a word.

In the middle of the service, Anna and Hayley had to take Toby outside to play on the grass. The tiny boy didn't understand and didn't want to sit still.

Sally's parents barely spoke a word to anybody, saying hello to the kids before retreating quickly. They had never bonded with their grandchildren, and Anna tried her best to be polite while harbouring a feeling of resentment towards them. The stories Sally had shared didn't foster familial bonds. In spite of herself, Anna had kept looking for them at the wake, thinking that surely they would make an appearance.

That night, Hayley came up behind her in the kitchen, running a hand down her arm and making Anna jump and spin around.

"What was up with Sally's parents?"

Leaning back against the sink, Anna shrugged and crossed her arms. "They're born-again Christians."

Hayley's eyes widened. "Oh."

"Yeah."

She pulled Hayley in for a kiss, relieved she was there as a shield between herself and the crying relatives. Most of her life, Anna had thought herself happier single, but when she'd met Hayley three-and-a-half years ago, the two women who didn't settle down for anyone had settled down for each other. She smiled, remembering how there had been heartbroken women everywhere in Brisbane when she'd taken Hayley off the market.

"Why are you smiling?"

Anna shook her head, pulling Hayley in for another kiss. "No reason."

* * *

It wasn't easy to be the partner of someone who was grieving. Hayley ghosted around Anna, offering comfort where she could, which was hard with someone who refused to take it. Anna was aware that it must be maddening, but she didn't want to talk. All she wanted was to squash down the feeling that was threatening to swallow her whole. Whenever she pulled Hayley to her and crushed their lips together, Hayley looked almost relieved. Sex was easier than words, and after five days in her parents' house, they learnt to be quiet.

She was at a loss when people asked how she was doing, when Hayley looked at her in the middle of the night and said, "Babe, you have to be feeling *something* you want to talk about." Silence was the only answer, as Anna would roll onto

her side and pull Hayley's arm across her middle. Sleep eluded her even as she pretended to succumb to it.

What could she talk about? Her only sibling had been killed. She didn't have words for losing the man who was half brother, half best friend. It was a bond that had never faded as they'd gotten older.

When he'd been shipped overseas, she had gone as crazy as Sally worrying about him. The two of them had drunk more wine together than was probably appropriate for sisters-in-law.

She wasn't ready to not have her best friend.

How would she talk about the look in her mother's eye? Or about the scotch she could smell on her father's breath, even as he avoided looking at her? Or about how Ella was still quiet, pushing her food around her plate and barely eating? About how poor Toby had started to pick up that something was very wrong, becoming more and more clingy and agitated. He was often calling for Ma and Da, looking confused when it was his grandmother hovering over him, before breaking into the grin he was so good at.

How did she talk about how dreading the lawyer's visit the next day to go over the will? About how she didn't want to watch her mother break down and her father stare stoically as their son and daughter-in-law's last will and testament was read. Something about doing that was so very, very final. And soon—surely it was too soon?

And how did she talk about how it felt like a part of her had died too?

* * *

In between sips of tea, the balding lawyer spoke monotonously, seated across the living room on a chair brought from the kitchen. While Anna was trying to concentrate on the complicated legalese the man spewed forth, it felt like listening to something underwater. She leant heavily against Hayley while giving the occasional nod, trusting her hot-shot lawyer girlfriend to pay attention for her. Distracted, Anna focussed on Sandra's hands, running methodically through Toby's soft brown hair as he slept on the sofa between her parents. The tea in Andrew's lap was probably cold, untouched as he sat ramrod straight. He hadn't blinked once that Anna had noticed.

With a twinge of guilt, a part of her longed for this to be over, to go home with her girlfriend and bury herself in work and ignore what had happened. Another part of her just wanted to crawl into bed and never emerge again.

She missed Jake.

The lawyer cleared his throat and Anna blinked, forcing herself to look back at him. “So, really, the will is summed up fairly easily. Anna Foster is to be left the house in Melbourne and both cars—er, the remaining car. All assets, both financial and material, are to be transferred into her name.”

Silence descended upon the room, and the words finally registered in Anna’s mind. “I’m sorry. What?”

Hayley’s hand, which had been rubbing gently up and down her back, stilled.

The lawyer kept going, “Custody of Ella and Toby Foster is to go to one Anna Foster, as unanimously agreed by the biological parents.”

Anna’s mouth fell open. She blinked again.

The lawyer, the stupid boring man, looked up from his papers and seemed surprised to see the look on her face. “Jake said he spoke of this with you?”

“Uh...” There was a conversation Anna vaguely recalled.

“If I die, you’ll take the kids, right?”

She spun on her bar stool, raising an eyebrow at him, “We’re here toasting the birth of your first kid, and you’re already talking plural?”

“Oh, I’ll have more. Have you seen that kid? I make good kids. It’s imperative I produce more, little sister.”

Anna snorted. “Oh, yeah, you owe it to mankind.”

“Glad you agree. Now, that’s a yes then? I won’t have my kids going to Sally’s parents, they’re terrifying. Hell, even Sally doesn’t want to go near her parents.”

“Mum and Dad can raise them. Besides, you’re not dying.”

“Mum and Dad!? I love them, but they’re old, and kids don’t need old. And Dad’s...you know Dad—he’s not warm, Anna. It was just me and you growing up. So that leaves you.”

Anna threw back a shot and slid one over the bar to Jake. “Right, yeah, I’d be great with the kids.”

Anna stared at the lawyer, mouth still open. *Jake Foster, that was not a conversation about me raising your children in your absence.* She suddenly felt irrationally pissed that he wasn’t there for her to throttle.

A glance at her parents told her they weren’t surprised. Then she looked at Hayley, who was staring at the lawyer with horrified, wide eyes.

Anna’s world just kept falling apart.

CHAPTER TWO

TWO HOURS ON FROM MEETING with the lawyer and Anna was still shell-shocked. The silence in the car as she drove Hayley to the airport was pressing in on her ears. Both of them stared numbly at the road, Anna's mind churning over everything, ignoring the fact that her girlfriend had retreated completely inside herself. Focussing on the anger bubbling in her stomach was easier.

It probably wasn't healthy to be so mad at her dead brother, but she was—which was almost a relief, because it stopped everything else from overwhelming her.

Being angry stopped the feeling that her chest was restricted and she couldn't breathe, the feeling that everything was spinning while she stood still, the feeling that overtook her when she watched her father close his study door and heard the clink of a bottle on glass or when she caught her mother staring vaguely at a plate, hands covered in drying dish water.

A red light turned green and it took her too long to notice. A loud horn blasted behind her as she tried to forget the memory of Ella staring wordlessly at her untouched food. Anna accelerated, trying to concentrate, but she couldn't stop thinking of the kids. When she and Hayley had left the house, Anna had had to choke down a lump at the sight of Toby sitting in his sister's lap with a book. Ella's arms had encircled the small toddler, and he'd been gripping his blanket to himself as he leant back against her chest, looking up at her and then back at the book with captivated eyes.

That sight hurt. The fact that those two kids didn't have their parents hurt. A six-year-old who would forever remember feeling abandoned and a fifteen-month-old who wouldn't remember anything—what would happen to them now? Would Ella forever be taking on a role too big for her?

Anna's eyes flicked to Hayley, who was steadfastly staring out the window, looking ready to bolt. The worried thought that she would gnawed at Anna, but then anger boiled in her stomach again, overshadowing everything else. How could Jake and Sally put her in this position when they knew damn well how

she felt about having kids? The grip she had on the steering wheel turned her knuckles white. Despite what he seemed to think of a random bar conversation, Jake had never spoken about this, had ignored the fact that she didn't want children. Anna's grip on the wheel tightened even more at the implications. This type of commitment was something she had spent her entire life avoiding. Anna had been nervous enough just *thinking* of buying an apartment with her girlfriend. Jake knew that.

Eyes glued to the road, she swallowed heavily, her breathing getting out of control. Jake was dead and she couldn't even yell at him.

Being angry at Jake was easier than being sad about Jake.

Anna hit her indicator harder than she intended and drove into the departures section of the airport. The hideous silence was making her feel like crawling out of her skin.

"We'll figure this out," she said.

Hayley blinked and looked over at her, hand slipping onto Anna's thigh. "We'll figure something out."

"My parents can take them."

Anna found a spot to pull over and killed the engine. They looked at each other, the space wide between them.

"Maybe." Hayley hesitated. "They seemed on board with Jake's will."

"It looks like he may have talked to them about it." Anna suddenly slammed her open palm against the steering wheel. "Damn it, Jake!"

Guilt slammed into her stomach as Anna dropped her head back against the headrest. Tears filled her eyes, and she blinked them away.

Hayley looked at her, grip tightening. "Hey. Like you said, we'll figure it out."

Cheeks burning, Anna didn't open her eyes.

"I'm sorry I have to go when—well—with everything like this. I'm sorry I have to go so soon. I booked your ticket for two days from now—you'll fly back then?"

Anna rolled her head to the side, finally looking at Hayley. "Yeah. I'll talk to my parents. Figure out what all this actually means."

When they slid out of the car, Anna pulled Hayley's bag out of the back, then leant against the passenger door.

Hayley moved forward, kissing her once. "I'll call you when I land?"

Anna nodded.

"Try and survive without the constant sex, hey?" Hayley smiled.

Anna rolled her eyes. "It'll be hard."

Bag in hand, Hayley started to walk off. Metres away, she paused and turned to look back one last time, head tilted slightly. "It's okay to cry, Anna."

Unable to look her in the eye, Anna shrugged, tight lipped, and Hayley turned away again. Anna watched her walk through the doors before sliding back into the car. Heart thudding, she clutched the steering wheel, started the car, and pulled out too fast, trying to remind herself to pay attention as her stomach turned over. Her reality was inescapable. And her brother must have been insane.

Jake had made his decision, but surely she could speak to her parents, tell them it was best they took the kids. They saw them regularly; it made a lot more sense. She was just the fun aunty, and she didn't want this. Kids deserved to be with someone who wanted them.

She slammed her hand into the steering wheel again, saying out loud, "Talk to them, but not to me. Makes real sense." She bit her lip. Now she was talking to herself.

There was a thought that nagged in the back of her mind. She loved her parents, and she and Jake had been incredibly lucky compared to a lot of other children. But Jake had made it a point to her that he didn't want his kids raised by them. What had he said? Their father wasn't warm. Anna gave a snort of laughter. That was the understatement of the year. Andrew could be a distant, foreboding man. What little physical affection he had given when they were small had stopped quickly. He had kept them at arm's length and expected them to be stoic, non-complaining, quiet children. Her father now expected them to be quiet adults.

Anna pulled the car into a spot at a park near her parents' house and rested her head heavily on the steering wheel. A glance at the clock told her she could avoid going back for a little longer, and she shut her eyes tightly as she thought of Jake as a father.

She'd been curious about how a man raised with a closed-off father like theirs would be as a parent, but children had changed her brother, had enlivened him. Parenthood had suited him and Sally both. Bright, loving and warm, Jake had been everything their father was not, loudly encouraging where their father was a harsh disciplinarian. Jake didn't want his kids growing up in that household. That much he'd said.

With a sigh, she finally pulled out of the park an hour later. Sally's parents were off the table without even a question. And as Jake had said, that left Anna. These kids were all that remained of her brother.

And that thought scared the shit out of her.

By the time she pulled into the driveway, the streetlights had switched on, and Anna knew the kids would be in bed. Guilt gnawed at her stomach, but she pushed it down. She had no idea what to do about any of this.

After letting herself in, she padded softly down the hall to the kitchen, where her mother was pouring cups of tea as if she'd been waiting for Anna to appear. Anna leant on the centre bar top and rested on her elbows, accepting the mug with a grateful look.

“He wanted it to be you, Anna.”

She looked up and caught her mother's eye, which was red-rimmed and shadowed by dark smudges. “Mum, why? Why would he want it to be me? I live in another city. I've never wanted kids. Plus, I work God-awful hours.” Anna wrapped her fingers around her mug, tilting her head to look at Sandra, who sat down opposite her at the kitchen island.

“You don't think I said all of that to him?” Her mother raised an eyebrow playfully.

The half joke didn't even insult Anna. “See, even you agree with me. I'm as nurturing as a teaspoon.”

“You and I both know you can be nurturing. And, actually, I agree with Jake and Sally's decision.”

“You don't want the kids?” Surprise caused her to raise her voice, and she glanced upstairs, even though it was late and Ella and Toby were fast asleep.

Sandra's look hardened. “Those children mean the world to me. But your brother explained his decision, and it made sense. Your hours are better now that you're out of your internship and residency. You're more settled since you met Hayley—we won't talk about your drinking and partying before then.”

Anna avoided her mother's eye and sipped her tea. Maybe she had enjoyed herself a touch too much.

“You're responsible, love those kids, and your job can easily be moved to a hospital in Melbourne. Or you could move the kids to Brisbane, but I don't think that would be fair.”

Anna barely managed to push down the urge to throw her tea to the floor and scream hysterically about how unfair all this was. Acting like a child wouldn't solve her problem.

It wouldn't be fair to *the kids*? She was being asked to drop her entire life and move cities to take care of her brother's children—permanently. Her brother and sister-in-law had just died. Since the will had been read, her girlfriend could barely look her in the eye, and now Hayley was on a plane, probably panicking about what had just happened. Her father was comforting himself with a bottle

of scotch as he hid in his study, and her mother's eyes were a permanent glazed red. Fair was a concept Anna was struggling with.

Her mother seemed to sense her internal struggle. "It's what he wanted, Anna." The words sunk in, heavy, as Sandra reached forward and rested a hand on her forearm. "Your father and I are, well, grandparents. We're old. J-Jake had a point."

It hurt to hear her mother stutter over his name. It hurt to know she spoke the truth. Everything hurt and Anna just wanted out. She knew it was selfish. But at least she was honest enough with herself to admit that.

Anna was going to be taking her brother's children.

She would be moving to God-awful Melbourne.

Her girlfriend was going to be pissed.

Two incomes, no kids.

Shit.

* * *

The next two days passed in a blur of trying to keep the kids settled, calling lawyers, and figuring out the next steps. Andrew stayed hidden away, and Sandra did most of the work with the kids, while Anna tried to hide from the reality of her situation.

Yet she couldn't escape the reality of what had happened.

In the shower, the loss of her brother would slam into her full force, only to be quickly drowned out by irrational anger at both him and Sally. What had they been thinking? Pacing the house like she was caged, Anna would finally go for walks, desperate to escape the grief that followed her. With her heart pounding, she would walk blindly and hope the ache in her chest would cease. Never had she thought she could feel like this; she could still barely believe her brother was gone.

The night before she flew out, Anna found herself tiptoeing into the kids' room before she went to bed. The room was dark, and she could hear Toby's soft baby snores coming from his cot. She padded softly over, and even she was thrown by the cuteness of the toddler, sprawled on his back, pacifier discarded to the side. She pulled the blanket up over him and ran her fingers over the silk of his hair. He really was the sweetest thing, this little boy who moved with a vengeance and had a vocabulary of less than ten words. He was never going to know his father and mother. His future had just been inexorably altered, the man he would have grown into changed. Nature versus nurture was about to take point.

“Aunty Na?”

She turned.

Big eyes stared at her from Ella’s pillow.

Walking over, she squatted next to the bed, resting a hand on the blankets. “What’s up, Ella Bella?” she asked in a low voice, anxious not to wake Toby.

“Do you *have* to go in the morning?”

Anna smiled softly. “I do. But I’ll be back very soon.”

“And then we’re all going back home?” Ella scrunched up her little face, still trying to wrap her head around all the changes. “You, me and Toby?”

“Yep. Is that okay with you?”

Ella’s face remained blank. She didn’t respond but rolled over to face the wall, little hand gripping Anna’s.

Anna sat for a few minutes, waiting for Ella’s breathing to even out and her grip to slacken. Then she made her way out the door and pulled it closed quietly. Jake had always laughed and said Ella was a miniature Anna in personality. Apparently he wasn’t far off. She leant against the wall, eyes closed. A long, slow breath left her body.

What was she doing?

* * *

“So, you’re doing it?”

Heart pounding, Anna nodded.

They both sipped their wine, Hayley almost gulping hers before licking her lips, “And, uh—when do you need to go back?”

Anna tried to calm herself down. It had been a long day, flying back home and trying to organize everything as quickly as she could. None of that had been helped by the fact that she had spent an hour on the couch alone waiting for Hayley to come home, going over and over what she had to tell her. “I spoke to my boss at work today; he’s supportive.” She let out a long breath. “I’m thinking within a week, depending.”

Hayley leant forward, putting her wine glass down on the coffee table and turning to look at Anna. “Depending on what?”

“On us.”

Hayley licked her lips, taking her time to answer, as if she was carefully thinking out her response. “Does it have to be so soon?”

“My mum thinks the sooner the kids get settled back into normal—”

“Nothing will be normal for them.”

“No. It won’t.” Sighing, Anna ran a hand over her eyes. “But she thinks the closer we can get them to it, the better.”

Anna clung to her wine. This was unfair. They had both built a life avoiding exactly this situation. But where Anna had no choice in it, Hayley did. “This isn’t something we ever wanted.”

Hayley nodded again.

“You don’t have to—we can just—I can go. And you can stay.”

With a sigh, Hayley reached for her wine again. “I just—you’re right, this isn’t anything I ever wanted. I was just promoted. But—we—what if we try? I can’t promise anything. But what if we try? I’ll still live here, but I’ll come on and off and see how we go. I’ll come in a few weeks or so and we’ll try distance.”

Barely daring to breathe, Anna stared at her. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to.”

Relief bloomed in Anna’s chest and she kissed Haley before pulling back to try to lighten the mood. “I almost had a tantrum at my mother.”

Hayley smirked, bringing a hand up behind Anna’s neck, pulling her close. “I don’t blame you. Can I throw one?”

* * *

The next six days were full of boxing up items, seeing friends before she left, sorting out lease payments, and overseeing last-minute handovers at work. Hayley was only home late in the evenings after long days at her firm. Anna kept busy with organising and packing up her life and then by pushing Hayley to the bedroom the second she walked through the door. She managed to not think at all. Compartmentalising had always been her strong point.

She pushed the thought that Jake was dead to the back of her mind, buried it as deep as she could. But there were times, when she was doing something completely mundane, that her chest would tighten and, for no apparent reason, it felt like she couldn’t breathe. Before she could lose herself to that feeling completely, Anna would bite her lip to distract herself.

They had decided that Hayley was going to join her for a week, after a month or so, and then try and fly out as regularly as she could on weekends. A newspaper was sprawled on the table, red circles around job offers in Melbourne. Anna really had no idea what she was doing. Uprooting her entire life for two children. Uprooting herself for her dead brother, whom she longed to hit as hard as she could.

The anger hadn’t really gone.

Six days in, the night before she flew out, she stood blowing hair out of her eyes, her messy ponytail coming apart as she pulled packing tape over her final box. The whole apartment was in shambles, her own boxes packed up amongst Hayley's things, tape dispensers and stuff scattered everywhere. She sighed heavily. Her love for this apartment bordered on the extreme. She'd made it so pretty—a home with her girlfriend. While they had always been working so much they hadn't spent a lot of time there, it was still home.

A sound from the bedroom made Anna turn. Hayley was half falling over a box on her way into the living room.

“Smooth.”

Hayley shrugged, looking around.

Anna bit her lip.

Wide eyed, Hayley stared at all the boxes. She had her freaked-out face on, looking ready to burst with something she needed to say. The expression had been crossing her face regularly the last few nights.

Anna crossed her arms and shifted her weight to her other foot, waiting until Hayley finally made eye contact with her.

“It's okay, Hayley. Say it.”

Hayley flinched slightly. “I can't do this.”

Anna swallowed. She waited for Hayley to say what she needed to.

“I don't want to delay it. I don't want to come out in four weeks, to leave a week later, and then only see you every few weeks. For us both to be miserable until I finally panic and end it.” She gritted her jaw and took a step forward. “We both know that's what I'll do.”

Anna didn't move. Internally, everything shifted into boxes, compartmentalised so that shutting down was easier. The talent to do so was one Anna had always been grateful for—now more than ever.

“Anna, I'm sorry. I wanted to try. I didn't want to be the bitch that left you after your brother died and you got dumped with this...this huge responsibility, but I just...I can't do this. It's not me. And the firm...I just got promoted.”

“I know.”

This was a woman who hardly ever cried, and Anna could hardly look at her glazed eyes.

“I'm—I'm sorry. Kids—I just...I can't. I love you. But I can't.”

“I get it, Hayley.” The words came out harsher than Anna had intended, and Hayley moved closer. But exhaustion rolled over Anna, and the anger left as quickly as it had come.

Hayley took another step forward. “You can be angry at me.”

Anna almost laughed. “Thanks for the permission, Hayley. But I get it.”

Bitterness was rising in her gut. She wanted to squash the feeling. She did get it. If she had a choice, she’d bail as well. Over three years together, plans to buy an apartment, plans to build a life, and what did it take to destroy that? A drunk driver on his phone.

“I—”

“Hayley. I kind of need you to go. I can’t...I fly out tomorrow night. I need to not see you before then.”

Hayley stopped short, looking surprised, “O...Okay.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t...I don’t want this.”

Anna nodded.

Hayley moved forward as if to hug her.

Automatically, Anna took a step back, arms still crossed and eyes glued to a spot over Hayley’s shoulder—anywhere but directly at her.

Nodding, Hayley stopped. They looked at each other for a second, and then Hayley turned, grabbed her bag and keys, and walked out.

Anna let out a long breath, falling back on the couch. Pulling her half-drunk wine towards her, she avoided looking around the room. Her brother was dead, her sister-in-law as well. Her girlfriend had left her, and she was moving the next day to a rainy city to take care of her niece and nephew, forever.

She took a sip.

There wasn’t enough wine in the house.

CHAPTER THREE

ANNA COULDN'T BRING HERSELF TO open the door.

Her fingers were numb with cold and her eyelids were heavy as she stood staring at the wood. After flying in late, she had come straight from the airport to her brother's house to drop off her suitcases. All she wanted to do was sleep, and now she couldn't even make herself go inside the house.

Instead, she looked around the front porch. It made her choke up. She'd been here only eight weeks ago, talking with Sally on the steps while they waited for Jake to finish his shower so he could drive Anna to the airport. She and Sally had been laughing hysterically about something, and Anna really wished she could remember what it was. Staring at the step and willing herself to remember, she bit her lip but came up blank. All she could recall was that Jake had come out, shaking his head at the two of them with their wine glasses, and had scooped up Sally, throwing her over his shoulder and carrying her inside despite her shrieks of laughing protests.

Anna shook her head and took a deep breath. If she didn't do this now, she would never do it. The spare key was hot in her hand after being gripped so long, and she finally unlocked the door and pushed it open. Warm air washed over her and smelt like *their* home. Almost dizzy, Anna took a second.

Steeling herself, she dragged one oversized suitcase and then the other up the stairs to the guest room. It was a nice room, one she had slept in many times. The walls were white, decorative touches done with anyone's taste in mind.

There was no way she could sleep in her brother's room.

She unpacked her suitcases, dreading the arrival of boxes that wouldn't fit anywhere. It didn't take long to put her things away, and she ended up standing in the middle of the room, slightly breathless and unsure of what to do next.

Actually, she knew what she should do next; she just wanted to avoid it.

Forcing herself, she wandered down the dark hallway and stood outside the master bedroom door. Repeatedly, her hand rose up to push it open, then

dropped back down every time to clench at her side. Was it better for the kids to come back to it packed up and empty, or worse? Should she do something in there, or simply leave it alone for now?

In the end, she turned and left for her parents' house to sleep the night, unable to be in the oppressive quiet any longer.

* * *

Groggy and disorientated, an unrecognizable sound drilled into Anna's sleep. Blinding light pierced her eyes when she finally opened them and she slammed them shut again. She flopped over, forcing her eyes open again, and slowly focused on Ella. A book was open in her lap as she turned the pages absently. Without a word, Anna lifted up her bed sheets, and the little girl climbed in. It almost blew Anna away how hard Ella fell against her, fingers digging into her back and cold nose pressed against her neck.

She had no idea what she was supposed to do, but maybe the kids would help her.

They spent the day at her parents', and only at dinner time did they all go back to the house. This time, Anna didn't let herself hesitate, pushing the door open and entering like it was nothing—despite the clenching in her stomach.

Her parents stayed; Sandra cooked dinner. Ella simply pushed the food all over her plate and kept looking around the dining room, pale cheeked and not speaking a word. Toby chattered, instantly comfortable and happy in the place he knew as home. Soon, Anna had mashed potato in her hair from where he'd flung it.

At one point, Toby stopped, head cocked and a half smile on his face, staring off towards the hallway as if he'd heard a noise. "Ma?"

They all paused and stared at him, even Ella, watching as he realised no one was coming and went intently back to his potato. It left a hollow feeling in Anna's stomach.

When they put the kids to bed, Ella didn't say a word the entire time. Anna tried to stay until her niece fell asleep, but she was fairly sure Ella was faking it when she finally walked out quietly.

Her parents let themselves out, Sandra pausing to wrap her arms around Anna. "Hayley will be out soon; that'll help."

It was only then that Anna told her.

Her mother looked ready to burst into tears, but one look at Anna's face seemed to make her rein it in. In the car already, her father beeped the horn. Sandra wrapped her arms around Anna again and told her to call if she needed anything.

Anna stood in the hallway, wanting to rip the door open and scream at her mother to come back and stay while Anna flew back to her life. Instead, fingers trembling slightly, she grabbed a bottle of wine that was unopened in the fridge and sat on the couch. She tried to ignore the fact that the wine was her and Sally's favourite, one they always shared.

The house was horribly still. And her heart was racing.

Distantly, she wondered if she was having an anxiety attack. Her breathing was a little rapid and the trembling in her fingers had intensified. Licking her lips, Anna tried to tamp it down.

The kids were going to stay home the next day, Friday. It had been decided that Ella would go back to school on Monday. Sandra said she'd spoken to the school counsellor, and the sooner they got Ella back into whatever normalcy they could, the better. The same day, Anna would have a meeting with Ella's teacher and the counsellor to discuss how to keep everything as normal as possible. But what *was* normal?

Kids' toys sat in the corner of the room, a haphazard stack of Disney DVDs piled in front of the television. There was so much colour. Knees drawn up to her chest, Anna took in a deep breath and dropped her head down. Home was what she wanted, not this. She longed to be sharing wine on the couch with Hayley, then to fall into bed and throw herself into sex and skin, not go to bed alone in her dead brother's house with his kids sleeping down the hall.

Something poked into her back, and she pulled the remote control out from between the cushions. Deciding against turning the television on, she dropped it on the sofa. She couldn't blame Hayley, not at all, not really. But that didn't mean she didn't feel some resentment. They'd spent three years together, and she thought Hayley could at least have tried a bit harder.

She'd done it. Her life had turned upside down, and she was trying.

Mentally slapping herself, she stood up, put her wine glass in the sink and the bottle in the fridge. Just as she was walking up the stairs, she heard Toby give a cry. Heart pounding, she hovered and hoped he would fall back to sleep. Another cry. Steeling herself, she continued up and into his room.

"Mama." He gave a nonsensical cry again and then, "Da."

The sound almost broke her heart. She wondered how long until he'd forget, until he no longer cried for the parents who had once shown up without fail.

Carpet soft beneath her toes, Anna padded across the room to bend over his cot. He was sitting up, his blanket pulled to his chest, brown hair mussed and little cheeks red and wet. Damp blue eyes looked at her for a minute, not

recognising his aunt, only to throw his arms up when he did. She bent down and picked him up, and he nestled into her.

Swallowing, Anna sat on the chair in the corner of the room. She leant back awkwardly and held him to her chest, smoothing the hair off his forehead and rubbing his back. Heavy and unsettled breathing echoed in Anna's ears, and he murmured "Da" several times before he calmed down, fingers clasping rhythmically at her shirt, eyes fluttering closed.

The chair rocked silently, and she rubbed his back, remembering her last phone conversation with her brother.

"Toby's still not sleeping through the night. You're a doctor, right? Is that normal? Ella slept like a log."

"Jake, seriously, how many times? I'm an anaesthetist—kids cry, and I put them to sleep."

"Perfect! That's what we want to happen. What drugs do I need?"

She laughed and rolled her eyes, switching the hand she held the phone in. "Funny. I don't know. Is he waking up screaming or just waking up?"

"Just every few nights, waking up. I only have Ella to compare him to."

"I'd say it's just a phase. Does he settle quickly?"

"Yeah, right back down. Only that quickly for me, though. Sally now has an excuse to kick me out of bed when he cries. Kid loves his dad."

It was hard to keep being angry with Jake when memories like that made her feel like falling apart.

Anna pressed her lips against the finally sleeping boy's head. Not for the first time—and it wouldn't be the last—she really did wonder what the hell she was doing.

* * *

Too much TV wasn't good for kids—Anna had read this somewhere. Nevertheless, she spent her Friday morning watching a lot of cartoons. With a job interview that afternoon, surely a little downtime would do them all some good. Her boss at her old hospital had called ahead to recommend her for the job, but Anna still had to go through the formalities.

Plus, it was a good excuse to get out of the house.

Her mother showed up, took one look at the kids—Toby had a Lego bucket on his head that Ella was hitting at with a wooden spoon while staring at the television—and said, "I'll take them to the park."

Anna mouthed “thank you” and grabbed her bag, saying “bye” to the kids and escaping quickly. As she started to leave, she heard Toby make a squawk of protest, but the sound was interrupted by her mother’s soothing whispers.

Since Sandra didn’t need her car, with the park just down the road, Anna used it. She still didn’t feel like her brother’s car was hers to use.

Navigating slowly through the streets, she was surprised it only took twenty-five minutes to get to the hospital. Anna parked in visitors parking and wandered to the entrance. The building loomed high, the walls grey and intimidating. The place was huge. Luckily, the receptionist at the information desk was more than happy to give her directions to the office she needed. The familiar smell of hospital relaxed Anna slightly.

As she slid into an elevator, a tall, pale woman slipped in just behind her.

“Are you looking for Luke McDermott’s office?”

Anna looked at her, surprised. “Ah, yeah?”

“Sorry, I heard you talking to the receptionist. I was heading there too. I can show you if you like?”

Anna breathed a sigh of relief. “Thanks, that’d be great. The directions weren’t overly specific.”

The woman slipped her hands into her lab coat. “It’s a bit of a maze.”

“I’m Anna Foster.” She held her hand out.

The woman shook it. “Kym Drew.”

“Worked here long?”

“A couple of years now. I’m in Psych.”

Anna winced. “Brave. Well, it’s nice to meet someone I might run into around the place.”

“Applying for a job?” They walked out of the elevator and down a hallway before turning left down another. Already lost, Anna tried to track their route.

“Yeah, actually. Senior anaesthetist. I just moved from Brisbane.”

Kym’s eyes widened slightly. “Oh, wait. He mentioned the woman from Brisbane—you come highly recommended. Job’s pretty much yours, if that helps.”

“It does, actually, thanks.”

“So what brings you to Melbourne? You leave the Sunshine Coast for all this bright weather?” Kym nodded her head to the window they were walking past. All that could be seen were dark clouds rolling across the sky.

“Uh...some family stuff. Had to move.” Anna wasn’t ready to explain the whole ordeal to a stranger.

Her face must have given something away, though, because Kym’s look sobered. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked. I talk a bit more than I should. My

husband passed away a few months ago, and, since then, I seem to overshare, even more than I used to.” She stopped outside a door, fidgeting. “Like now, for example.” She gave a wry grin. “I’m probably not suited to Psych at the moment.”

She took in Kym’s expression, the way her eyes flicked from place to place, how she bounced slightly back on her heels. “No, don’t be sorry. I’m sorry about your husband.” She hesitated. “My uh—my brother passed away, almost three weeks ago now. Things are kind of...messy? I had to move to Melbourne.”

Kym’s eyes caught and held hers. She gave a soft smile. “I’m sorry about your brother. Maybe we could get a coffee sometime?”

She had no idea how she would fit in work with the two kids suddenly in her care, let alone coffee, but...

“I’d love that.” She indicated the door. “You go first.”

“I’ll only be a minute.” Kym was out again about thirty seconds later. “Thanks.”

She smiled. “No worries.”

“I told him you were out here, just head on in.”

“Thanks, Kym. It was nice meeting you.”

“I look forward to that coffee.”

Anna smiled and turned, knocking as she walked into the office, thinking:
That woman had the saddest eyes.

* * *

When Anna woke up on Saturday morning, faint light gave away the very early hour. A look outside the window showed a cloudy sky that was just beginning to lighten. Still warm, she buried herself deeper in her covers.

Thankfully, the kids were still sleeping—which gave her the opportunity to panic. The job at the hospital was hers—a promotion, too, as one of the seniors in her department. She wanted to feel proud, excited even. Instead, it felt tainted. She would much rather still be working in Brisbane, with Jake alive, living his life with his wife and kids. Everyone would be where they wanted to be, not where they were obligated to be. Or dead.

She sighed, kicking the blanket off. Sleeping without Hayley was hard.

Work would begin in a week, giving Anna time to sort out childcare for Toby—apparently the staff got a great rate at the day care in the hospital. She needed to make sure Ella was settled back into school and to sort out after-school care for when she finished.

Everything was still too overwhelming. Even after explaining her situation to her new boss and making arrangements so she could be with the kids as much as possible, Anna was worried about work. Emergencies happened, surgeries ran

long. And, even excluding all of this, how was she going to handle two kids, full stop?

The sheet tightened in her fist as she tried to ignore the tense feeling in her gut. She missed Hayley, missed the adult company. She missed her brother. And Sally. Really, she missed the life she had barely yet given up.

Rolling out of bed, Anna decided to make noise to wake the kids up and stop herself from thinking.

* * *

Cheerios littered the floor, the table, and Toby's hair. Milk was finger-painted all over the high chair tray. Toby sat, hair still bed messy, grinning at Anna as he picked up Cheerios one by one. There was nothing she could do but smile back at him. He'd woken up grumpy, grizzling, and calling for Sally. It had taken a little while, but he'd warmed up.

"Na!" he said through the grin, happily going back to his cereal. Mostly bright and playful, he had especially settled in his own environment. Yet, still, he was constantly calling for his mother and father. The cries at night were the worst.

Ella ate most of her breakfast, for which Anna was grateful, but she tried not to bring attention to it. Not once did she speak, but Anna figured beggars can't be choosers. Her niece was still quiet and introspective most of the time, moody and rarely speaking—except when she was with Toby. In spite of herself, she chatted to Toby, holding his hand and making up stories to tell him.

A Cheerio hit her shoulder, and Anna turned her attention back to Toby.

"Good cereal, Mister?" She took a bite of her toast, smiling softly as he nodded, and tried to ignore the smell she had just noticed coming from him. Nappies were definitely very low on her list of favourite things.

"Can we go to the park again today?"

Surprised to hear Ella speak, Anna whipped her head around. "Of course. It's a great day for the park. Did you have fun with Grandma yesterday?"

Ella shrugged. "It was okay. There were other kids there."

"There'll be more there today, it's Saturday. You can play with them as long as you like."

"Okay."

After finally breaking the silence, going back to it was too depressing. Surging ahead with the newfound conversation, Anna asked, "You looking forward to school on Monday?"

"No."

Blinking at the honesty, she wondered how to tackle this one. Direct seemed the best way. “Why not, honey?”

Ella used the spoon to squash the soggy remnants of her cereal in her bowl before saying, “The other kids will ask me about Mummy and Daddy.”

Anna’s chewing slowed. She swallowed hard. “Well, if they do and you don’t want to talk about it, you just say ‘Can we talk about something else?’ Okay?”

The cereal bowl still held Ella’s attention as she went back to mashing her breakfast.

“You can talk about it, if you want to? With kids or teachers. Or Grandma or me?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

At a loss, Anna nodded. “That’s okay.”

If there was something Anna understood, it was that. But was that okay for a six-year-old? Should she push her to talk? When was it too long for Ella to be pushing food around her plate? When should Ella be expected to act like a kid again and not like a quiet little adult? Would she ever act like that again?

“How about you go clean up, I’ll get Toby ready and we’ll head to the park?”

Ella nodded, perking up slightly at the notion. After putting her plate in the sink, she scooted out of the room.

Anna watched her walk out and then turned to Toby, who had brought his bowl up to his mouth and was drinking what milk was left. Most of it spilt all over him. Anna grimaced.

He put it down with a loud ‘ah!’ noise and grinned at Anna, milk dripping off his chin.

She sat with an eyebrow raised at him, a smile playing on her lips. “Beautiful manners, Tobes.”

“Park!”

Anna stripped the giant bib off Toby, glad it had mostly protected him from the milk. Carrying him on her hip, she went up the stairs. “Yup. We’ll go to the park. That’s a new word for you, by the way. Well done. Grandma teach you that one?”

He just smiled at her and patted her cheek with sticky fingers, legs kicking idly.

Anna entered his room. “All right, we’ll face that monster nappy of yours, then go to the park. Deal?”

He giggled at her.

“Easy for you to laugh. You just make the mess. I have to clean it up.”

Five minutes later, Anna was making her way down the stairs with a much cleaner Toby dressed in tiny green overalls. She put him down in front of a floor

puzzle in the living room, calling in the general direction of the stairs, “I’ll just get the pram and we’ll go, Ella.”

She took a deep breath to calm her nerves. She was handling this. Toby was dressed and clean. They’d eaten. Ella was interested in the park. She was totally handling this.

Walking into the garage off the side of the kitchen, she flicked on the light switch, flooding the space with light. When she saw Jake’s SUV, Anna nearly groaned at the idea of driving a soccer mum’s car.

The car she had driven in Brisbane, now on the market, was a zippy one that had appreciated her lead foot. As Anna sucked it up and pressed the button to unlock the doors, she froze for a moment. The thought occurred to her: If Jake and Sally had been driving the SUV instead of Sally’s smaller work car, could they have survived the crash? Her heart pounded, and Anna squeezed her eyes shut and blocked out the thought. She was getting the pram and they were going to walk to the park.

That was what she was doing that morning.

Small things.

She walked to the back of the car, opening it and pulling out the folded-up pram. Dropping it on the ground at her feet, she eyed it suspiciously. The thing looked more like a mountain-climbing buggy. Since when did prams come with three wheels?

Anna sighed and bent over, pulling at the handlebars and the wheels to try and make it unfold. Sandra had told her it just “popped” open.

Nothing happened.

She shook it, levering it with her feet and tugging again at the handlebars.

Again, nothing.

Anna was a well-sought-after anaesthetist who’d graduated with honours. She could do complex drug calculations in her sleep. Her *mother* could do this. Anna could make the damn pram open.

Squatting, she looked it over and saw a little red lever. She flicked it, which seemed to unlock something as the frame loosened. She pulled at the handlebars again and the whole thing finally popped open, catching Anna in the chin and sending her back on her rear as it did so.

Hand to her jaw, she rubbed, glaring at the pram. Tears of frustration welled up in her eyes.

She really wasn’t handling this.

A giggle came from behind her. Anna turned to see Ella standing in the doorway, hand over her mouth as if to catch the noise and send it back in.

Anna couldn't stop the slow smile that came to her lips. "You laughing at me, madam?"

Ella pulled her hand away from her mouth, a stubborn smile still pulling at her lips. It lit up her whole face, her green eyes bright and a hint of dimples on her cheeks. "You're not very good at this stuff, are you, Aunty Na?"

Anna smiled wryly, wiping her hands on her jeans. "Not really, Ella Bella, but I'll get better."

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