When Worlds Collide

by iwasjustpassing

Summary

What do you get when you cross Anne Lister and Detective Sargent Rachel Bailey, Ann Walker and PC Kirsten McAskill, and Eliza Priestley and DCI Gill Murray?

Read and find out!
Oh Bloody Hell!

Anne Lister is patiently waiting for the words she so desperately wants to hear. “Come on, say it,” she whispers. “You know you want to…” Patience has never been her strong suit, but in this situation she knows it will pay off, in more ways than one. “Say it…come on, baby…just say it.”

Detective Sargeant Anne Lister is a senior officer in the Serious Crime Division (SCD) within the Greater Halifax Metropolitan Police Department. She has chalked up more than 12 years of experience with this division, picking through the detritus of human life to keep greater Halifax safe. Before joining SCD, she worked for five years on the Tactical Firearms and Explosives Unit, specializing in deciphering bomb signatures. Her track record is stellar…a staggering number of crimes solved year after year; numerous citation awards for bravery; and a penchant for mentoring young female graduates fresh out of the police academy, and turning them into tough-as-nails officers who go on to become top cops. She doesn’t always play by the rules, and that has come back to bite her more than once. She is good at her job and she knows it…everyone knows it. But it’s not luck…it’s hard work and she definitely puts in the time to be the best.

On this cool October night, Anne is sitting in a chair in the back of a cramped surveillance van with her hands pressed to the sides of headphones covering her ears. Her eyes are closed and she’s focused on every syllable coming through the small speakers. She’s waiting patiently for several suspects inside a nearby home to purchase a large quantity of heroin from an undercover police officer.

Anne and her team have been working this particular case for five long months. They want nothing more than to bust this calamitous cohort and bring the case to closure, without incident. The prime target inside the house is a known drug king pin who has been selling tainted heroin to the wealthy. He’s been adding chemicals to his product to enhance the intensity of the euphoric high and selling it at a value five times the typical street value. He’s making a killing…financially and otherwise. His additives are highly toxic and can kill in small doses. The last person to die after consuming his tainted narcotic was a 15-year old male high school student, making him the 12th victim in the past year. Until now, the king pin has been elusive and has hidden behind his connections to strong and powerful members of the wealthy underworld. The sting taking place tonight has been the result of months of undercover work and careful planning, with Anne directing the entire operation. It’s time to put the plan into action. Please…nobody dies.

And suddenly…there it is. The king pin says just the right words while simultaneously pushing a suitcase full of money toward the undercover officer, thereby completing the transaction. **Offer and acceptance.**

“Mallinson, did you hear that? Have you got it?”

“Yes, ma’am, we’re good to go. Video and audio are perfectly clear,” says John Mallinson, Video Intelligence Specialist. Anne quietly communicates with her team by touching the radio device taped to her throat.

“Alpha team, we are good to go. Remember…there are three white males inside...one is our undercover officer. He’s wearing a grey jacket and has a blue bandana on his head. DO NOT shoot him. All three individuals are in the den, which is the second door on the right from the foyer entrance. A successful outcome for this operation is contingent upon the element of surprise. Go in quiet and low. We know the drill. Nobody gets hurt. On my signal.”

Dressed in black tactical boots, navy cargo pants, a matching navy long-sleeve t-shirt, clear
goggles and a Kevlar vest, her long brown hair pulled into a ponytail, Anne quietly jumps out of
the van and makes her way to the front of the house. Two officers on the team fall in behind her,
three more are positioned at the back door. With weapons drawn, Anne gives the signal for the
team to quietly enter the home from both the front and rear. She opens the front door, the three
officers sneak into the foyer, then make their way down a long hallway toward the den…and all
hell breaks loose. Oh bloody hell…

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When the other officers make their entrance through the back door, they are surprised when they
encounter an unknown fourth suspect positioned as a lookout…and he has a very big gun. With the
element of surprise ruined, they have no other choice but to announce their presence…”POLICE!
DROP YOUR WEAPON!”… and this sends the suspect scrambling.

There is a cacophony of deafening noise…shouting, gunfire, exploding bullets, crumbling drywall,
furniture shattering…all of which alerts the three people in the den that law enforcement has
arrived. Anne can hear the sounds of pistols being cocked, shotgun shells being chambered, and
people diving for cover. What’s worse, she can hear the king pin screaming at the undercover
officer, “I KNEW you were a cop!” The officer’s death is imminent.

Without hesitating, Anne runs toward the den, squats low at the doorway, and with razor sharp
precision, fires her weapon …four shots total…one each into the king pin’s right thigh and right
shoulder, and the same for his accomplice, rendering them both helpless, but alive. She kicks away
their guns, steadies the site of her Glock 17 9mm pistol right between the eyes of the king pin, and
informs both suspects they are under arrest. And she does it with a smug smile plastered on her
face.

The undercover officer, breathing heavily and lying on the floor, looks up at Anne and says, “That
was a reckless undertaking, Lister! I could have been killed!”

“Yes…well…all were given the opportunity to alight and walk. Get up. You look ridiculous. And
by the way…you’re welcome.”

Once the suspects are handcuffed, Anne quickly walks through the rest of the house to ensure the
other officers are safe. The only fatality is the suspect at the back door. All’s well that ends well.

Anne notifies dispatch the scene is clear and requests two ambulances to transport the injured
suspects to the hospital. The drugs and money are cataloged and filed as evidence, and Anne
instructs the arriving Crime Scene Investigation Unit where to dust for prints and collect expended
shells. With a swagger that would make John Wayne jealous, Anne pulls her team off the scene,
announces “Drinks are on me!”, and leads them to a local bar to celebrate yet another hard-won
victory.
Ann Walker is hunkered down in her bed, lights off, watching the flicker of late-night news through sleepy eyes. One story concerning a major drug bust catches her attention and she is suddenly wide awake as Anne Lister’s face flashes across the screen. The tale of the drug bust is dramatically recounted by the reporter, with emphasis on how the lead officer quickly eliminated the threat and ensured $50M of tainted heroin will never reach the streets of Halifax. Ann freezes the frame with Anne’s face on the screen, stares for several minutes, then lightly traces the outline of her body with her index finger.

She is more beautiful...more handsome...than I remember. So strong, so confident...look at how her men follow her commands. God, just look at her...she is stunning.

Ann Walker is a Detective Constable and a Senior Handler in the Halifax MPD’s Dog Unit. She has been assigned to this team since graduating from the Police Academy five years ago. The handlers and their dogs are involved in important police duties, including suspect tracking, search and rescue, bomb detection, and other policing duties. She has an impressive record solving numerous crimes, and her superiors consider her to be a rising star within the Unit.

Ann knows all about Anne Lister...her stellar career, her bravery...her reputation. The last time she saw Anne was at a women’s seminar while Ann was at the Academy. Anne was a guest speaker who spoke with all the female cadets about her career path and what it was like to hold a leadership position in a male-dominated environment. Ann hung on her every word, and in fact planned her career to follow a path similar to Anne’s. Ann suspected almost every woman in attendance that day fell in love with Anne Lister, but for Ann, it happened long before then.

She and Anne Lister are neighbors, living only about 2 miles apart. But proximity and timing have never been kind to Ann, as their twelve-year age difference always put them at different places in their lives. Other than Anne attending her parents’ funeral, there was never a reason for them to interact, socially or otherwise. She had heard the rumors about Anne...her relationships with women and odd behaviors. Her relatives are full of gossip about the Lister clan. But Ann ignores them...she knows quality when she sees it. Whenever she is working an outdoor crime scene with her dogs, Ann often surveys the area for Anne’s presence, hoping she will be able to interact with her...even if only for a few minutes...but thus far, no luck.

Ann’s love life has been a non-event lately. She recently ended her relationship with yet another “fellow”, one that asked for her hand in marriage, and which she politely declined. None of her male companions seem to make the cut...she finds them boring...predictable...dull. There is always one thing or another that just isn’t quite right about any of them. When she lies in bed at night thinking about her life, she knows there is something lurking at the outer edge of her mind’s fabric that holds the answer to her feelings, but she can’t quite grasp the specifics. It’s fuzzy...elusive. But when she slowly drifts off to sleep, one face and one name continually beckon her to that peaceful place...Ann Lister.
“Tib! Another round of shooters,” yells Anne. There’s a loud cheer from her team, and more shots are served and consumed. Anne adores her team. A mix of men and women, they are all highly skilled, professional to the core, and they deeply respect one another. They are family…bound together by a special bond that’s been formed under intense pressure in life or death circumstances. They’ve been through thick and thin, both on and off the job, and Anne trusts them with her life. They all know about Anne’s “oddity”…it’s no secret. Quite frankly, none of them really gives a damn…she’s family…everything else is just noise.

The team is celebrating at ‘Tibs’, a local pub that serves good food, potent drinks and a friendly atmosphere. Isabella “Tib” Norcliffe, the owner, has known Anne since they were teenagers. Their friendship has been through its fair share of ups and downs, but they love each other enough to work through whatever difficulty comes their way. Tib credits Anne for helping her get sober, which is going on 15 years. How she ended up owning a bar is odd enough, but it has made her all the stronger in her fight for sobriety. While Tib would always jump at the chance to be in a relationship with the beautiful and dynamic Anne Lister, she knows where the unspoken boundary line is drawn and will never cross it. They are sisters to the core and introducing intimacy would only cause confusion.

At the end of the evening Anne finds herself sitting alone at the bar catching up with Tib. Only the die-hard patrons remain. Peanut shells litter the floor, the tables are sticky from spilled alcohol, and the music pumps out a soft ballad that fills Anne with a feeling of loneliness.

“Tib, how are you? Everything ok?”

“Yeah, I can’t complain. Business is great, family is great…love life sucks, but what can you do.”

“I hear you.”

“Hey, Anne…I need to tell you something.”

“Sure, Tib…summat up?” Anne observes the disconcerting look on Tib’s face.

Tib leans forward and drops the volume of her voice to a whisper. “There’s something going on around here, but I can’t put my finger on it. Jeremiah Rawson’s been in here a few times…making offers to buy my bar.”

“Your bar...why? Bars don’t fit into his business profile.”

“Exactly…I asked myself the same question. He wants to buy it and make improvements…but he wants me to stay on and run it. He’s bought two other businesses down on Hall Street, and from what I hear, he wants to pump a lot of money into them to make improvements, as well.”

“What kind of businesses?”

“A coffee shop and a dry cleaner.”

“That makes no sense...”

“No, it doesn’t make a lick of sense. Anne…these guys are really putting pressure on me. Jeremiah came by again last night with some other guy…the strong, silent, threatening type. And Jeremiah…he really poured it on thick… a little fear, uncertainty and doubt tossed in as a side
item."

“How did you leave it?”

“He gave me a week. He’s going to come back here, Anne, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Tib, I won’t lie to you, I don’t like this, he’s up to something. I want to put a tap on your phone and some listening devices in your office. Maybe a few cameras. We need him to come back. Do you think you can get him into your office for that discussion?”

“Maybe…but this is making me nervous, Anne. I don’t do this kind of stuff for a living like you do. What if I mess it up? These guys have some pretty intense connections with the lowest of the low…you know that better than anybody. I’m afraid of what might happen.”

“Don’t worry, Tib…I’ve got your back.”

“I’m counting on it, Anne.”
Detective Inspector Eliza Priestley is faced with a dilemma. In her 30 years as a police officer, her mettle has been tested in every way possible, both in the field and behind the desk…but never like this. Eliza has always been a tough, by-the-book cop who’s not afraid to defend and protect the detectives on her team. Her short brown hair, kind eyes and thin, short stature can be deceiving…what lies beneath is the heart of a warrior.

When it comes to Anne Lister, Eliza’s emotions are pulled in many directions. She respects Anne…she is very fond of her. She knows Anne is extremely good at her job…the best even…but it comes at a price. Anne has done many stupid things during her career, some of which should have gotten her sacked. But Eliza has been there time and time again to bail her out because she knows Anne is simply doing whatever it takes to get the job done. But how much glass can one person be allowed to break?

Now Eliza has to decide whether to assign Anne Lister to a highly visible case. If things don’t go well, it will certainly mean the end of their careers. It’s not like her to be indecisive…she makes many decisions every single day under stressful circumstances. Get on with it, Eliza.

Later that afternoon, Eliza beckons Anne to her office and shuts the door behind her.

“Good job on another critical case, Lister. A bit of a cock up in the beginning. I’d like to know what happened there, but you can debrief me later. I’ve got something more important to discuss with you. I’m assigning you to another case. Before I give you the file I need you to understand something. This case involves some very important and powerful people. I want this done by the book…there’s zero room for error.”

She drops a thick file in front of Anne, who promptly opens it and starts to scan photos and documents.

“About 10 years ago there was a horrible explosion at the home of a wealthy Halifax family that resulted in the death of three people…the parents and their twenty-six year-old son. There were also two daughters living in the home, but they were not in the house at the time of the explosion. It was the home of the Walkers from Lightcliffe. Mr. Walker was a Lord Justice on the Court of Appeals for Criminal Division cases. Shortly before the explosion, an appeals case related to the indictment of Stansfield Rawson for money laundering was brought before Justice Walker’s court, and he denied it. The Walker home exploded a week later. The timing of the two events is suspicious. We suspect the explosion was an act of vengeance and intimidation by the Rawson family, but we have never been able to prove it.”

Anne can feel a cold sweat building down her spine. “Yes…I remember this…the Walkers lived fairly close to my home. I wasn't there at the time of the explosion…but I did attend their funeral. Why is this suddenly resurfacing after so many years?”

“As an Appeals judge, Mr. Walker was obviously very well connected…way beyond the boundaries of Halifax. They frequented many of the high society events in London…they knew people far and wide…they were pillars of the community. These very powerful people want this case solved…they want answers. Based on some recent tips from confidential informants, the Rawson’s are at it again. They’ve started to apply pressure throughout the valley to increase their money laundering ventures, which is spilling over into other nefarious activities. We need to shut them down, and we think in doing so, we will solve the Walker case. We follow the evidence, of course, but in this case, the sources on the street are all singing the same tune.”
Anne is listening intently, but a bad feeling is beginning to radiate throughout her body, considering her recent conversation with Tib. Eliza continues.

“Ann Walker, one of the surviving daughters, is part of MPD’s Dog Unit…has been for about 5 years now. She has expressed an interest in moving into SCD and we want you to consult with her on this case. We believe she can provide a great deal of helpful information…any sort of dealings her father may have been involved in…people her family knew that might be connected in some way…even the layout of the house… she’ll be an excellent resource. She will be on part-time loan to your team starting Monday. She’s an excellent officer, solid record. I think you’ll get along well. Her contact information is in the file. Take it home…study it… come back to me with any questions. And Anne…I mean it…do not go rouge on this case. If you do, you’ll be left out in the cold.”

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“You want me to what?!” Ann Walker’s superior officer, Sargeant William Hardcastle, is delivering the news to Ann that senior leaders within the SCD and Dog Unit want her to consult on the cold case involving members of her family. Her stomach sinks and twists, and she has a tingling sensation in her hands.

“I know this is highly unorthodox, Ann…to have you advise on a case that involves your own family. And normally the potential for a conflict of interest would supersede any thought of involving you. But you bring a different perspective. You have police experience…you understand how this side of things works. You have a vested interest in getting this case solved, so you’d be dedicated to the cause. You know what went on inside that house…even if only subliminally or through observation…but in the deep layers of your subconscious, something might be lurking that could help solve this case. We just need to help you bring that to the surface.”

“But why is the case being re-opened? Has new evidence come to light?”

“I don’t have all the details, you’ll need to discuss the reasons with the lead SCD officer…Anne Lister.”

“Wha…Anne Lister?!” She closes her eyes and feels the acid boiling in her stomach; sweat forming on her upper lip.

“Yes. I take it you are aware of her work. And given you’ve expressed an interest in joining SCD, you’d be exposed to that unit working alongside one of their best. It seems everyone wins, don’t they?”

“I…I have to think about it, sir…this is…unusual…it’s not a ‘no’, but I need to sleep on it.”

“Of course. Get back to me by morning with your answer.”

Ann makes her way home on shaky legs and slumps down on her bed. She stares up at the ceiling and a huge smile spreads across her face.
The County Prosecutor

As Anne is leaving work for the day she can’t get her mind off the latest assignment. The case file lands with a thump as she tosses it onto the passenger seat of her car. She pulls out her phone and texts Mariana Lawton, the County Prosecutor for Greater Halifax, and asks to meet her at Tib’s. Anne realizes the price she’ll have to pay for this meeting, but she needs Mariana’s help. Their on-again, off-again relationship goes back decades and it has been the cause of a great deal of pain in Anne’s life. Mariana’s abrupt marriage to Charles Lawton almost 20 years ago…an arrangement that came with the promise of money, status and clout for Mariana…put a bullet in Anne’s heart that is unlikely to ever mend. They continued to sleep with one another over the years, but each time she found herself between Mariana’s legs, Anne felt more and more repulsed and disgusted with herself, knowing she was committing the sins of fornication and adultery. Mariana is toxic relief for Anne, and she finds herself withdrawing from her friend more and more as time goes by.

Happy hour is in full swing at Tib’s. It’s buy-one-get-one-free until 6:00 PM, and some patrons are taking full advantage of the cheap beer. Anne climbs into a booth and orders a scotch for her and a Cosmopolitan for Mariana. Within minutes after her arrival, she looks up to see Mariana coming through the door. She looks beautiful in her navy blue A-line skirt and matching jacket, with a purple silk blouse underneath. Anne groans quietly as she feels herself weakening under the sultry gaze Mariana is sending her way as she approaches the booth.

“It’s good to see you, Mariana, it’s been a while. How are you?” They exchange a brief kiss on the cheek…and then a second one on the lips.

“It has been a while…you’ve been avoiding me…and I miss you.” She slips her left foot out of her 3-inch pumps and begins rubbing the top of her foot down the back of Anne’s shin. “I saw you on the news the other night. Still my hot, little Anne. Seeing you filled me with all kinds of salacious thoughts!” The foot rubbing continues and Anne cannot find the willpower to move her leg. Why is she so hard to resist!

“Mariana…please don’t…you’re a married woman.”

“Never stopped you before!”

“Look…I asked you here for a reason…yes, I wanted to see my friend, but I also need your help…I need some information on an old case.”

“Oh…gee, Anne…you make me feel so desired. <sigh> Go on…what case?”

“Do you remember the explosion at Judge Walker’s house about 10 years ago? What do you know about it?”

“Oh, God, yes, I remember that…just awful. Wow…you picked up a doozy. Seriously? They put you on this? A cold case?”

“Yes, and I can’t say I’m happy about it.”

“Well…as I recall, the Rawson brothers are rumored to be associated with it. If my memory serves me well, Judge Walker rejected an appeal for a money laundering case involving the oldest brother. Are you working this case by yourself?”

“No, some members of my team will be on it…and Ann Walker will be…advising.”
“What? How very odd…”

“Yes, I agree, but it’s out of my hands, so…”

Anne can see Mariana’s face making the journey through several emotions before she finally lands on what looks like jealousy.

“I’m not sure I like the idea of you working with her. I’ve seen her…in court. She’s very attractive.”

“Is she? I wasn’t aware. Not that that matters, this will all be very professional.”

“Right.”

“Mariana, please…I just need information…can you help me or not?”

Mariana sighs. ”Yes…I’ll help you. What do you need?”

“Trial notes…affidavits…photos…anything. I don’t know what I’m looking for yet…I’m hoping something might open my eyes.”

“Let me see what I can do. It might take a week or so. This case goes back a ways and everything is probably in records retention.”

“Whatever you can get would be appreciated…thank you, Mariana.”

Mariana says with a sly smile creeping over face, and with renewed vigor in her foot action, “What’s in it for me, Freddy?”

Anne releases a deep sigh that she’s been holding onto all evening. “My greatest appreciation.”

“You know you can’t resist me, Anne, you never could. And I could never resist you. We’re made for each other…we’ve known that since the first time we slept together at Tib’s house all those years ago. Nobody knows my body better than you. Your fingers have traveled every square inch of it hundreds of times, to my great satisfaction. For heaven’s sake, we’ve pledged ourselves to each other twice. I can’t just forget that…and I don’t think you can either.”

“Mariana, we are where we are…we’ve both made decisions and we have to live with the consequences. You are married to Charles…end of story.” She reaches across the table to hold Mariana’s hand. “You will always be a very important person in my life…I promise you that. Now come on…it’s getting late and you need to get home to Charles.”

Mariana sulks into her drink while Anne flags down the waitress to pay the bill.
Missed Opportunity

Anne flops down into an oversized leather chair in the drawing room at Shibden Hall. She loves how this chair smells and feels…it brings to life her uncle James and how he would listen to her read passages from the bible in Latin when she was a young girl. This room has always had a dark, oaky ambiance…well suited for seduction of young women…and there have been many. But not tonight. With one leg propped over the wide arm of the chair, eating a bowl of cereal, Anne opens the thick Walker file and starts to comb through its contents. There are several tabs in the folder:

- investigation notes
- drawings indicating the location of the bodies found inside the home;
- an account of the Walker family activities for several months prior to their untimely passing;
- a list of suspects and their related interviews
- photographs of the disaster site, potential suspects and the victims
- a small plastic evidence bag containing bomb components

Anne knows the Walker fortune descends from a long line of entrepreneurs who made investments in local wool manufacturing, agriculture and coal mining, but she’s not certain how Judge Walker found his way into the field of law. Nor why Miss Walker decided to join the police force.

Anne picks up the plastic evidence bag that contains the bomb fragments and flips it over in her hand. Like footprints in the sand, bombs leave evidence…wire, blasting caps, residue. Add that evidence can lead to other clues, such as images from surveillance cameras, even interviews with nosy neighbors, and law enforcement can quickly build a suspect profile. In the case of the Walkers, the investigator’s notes do not reference any information as to whether these additional sources of potential evidence were ever considered. Nor were any lab tests conducted to determine if any residue was left behind on the remaining fragments.

Anne sighs in disgust as she looks at the bag and considers all the missed opportunities that may have helped solve this case 10 years ago. Inside the bag are chunks of black plastic, likely from the bomb housing…a one-inch segment of red and green wire…and two badly burned metal connectors. Anne stares at the wire segment and starts to feel a throbbing in her chest. She knows this wire…she’s seen it before. The average consumer cannot purchase this type of wire; it is only available to military personnel. Anne grabs a pad of sticky notes, tears off a single sheet and writes down instructions for the forensics lab to test the remaining fragments for trace evidence.

At the back of the file is Ann Walker’s work history. Anne sits up quickly in her chair as she stares at a photo of Ann in her uniform. A fresh, beautiful face, her eyes so serious and piercing. There is something about the photo that haunts Anne…that attracts her and draws her in…that makes her feel something deep down in her soul. She spends a long time delicately tracing the outline of her face. She feels weak…like she’s holding kryptonite in her hand and she is Superman.

Anne sits back in her chair, closes her eyes and thinks. *How should I handle this?* After a few moments she whispers to herself, “Crack on, then,” and picks up her phone.

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Ann looks down and sees a call coming in from an unknown number. It’s 10:27 PM on a Thursday and she doesn’t often receive calls this late in the evening.

“Hello?”
“DC Walker? Hello, this is DS Anne Lister from the Serious Crime Division. How are you? I hope I’m not calling too late.”

“Oh!...Hello! I...I’m very well, thank you. No..no, this is fine.”

“Good…good.” Anne is smiling into the phone thinking about how she’s caught her off-guard…the pleasant timbre of her voice. “Miss Walker, I’m delighted to hear that you and I will be working together on a case. I assume you’ve been told about this?”

“Yes...Yes, just today, as a matter of fact. But I haven’t decided whether to do this.”

“Oh...I see”, says Anne with a hint of disappointment. “Well...perhaps I could convince you. I think it would be a good idea for us to meet. Would that be alright with you?”

Ann can feel excitement building within. “Really? I mean...yes...of course...that’s an excellent idea. That might help to settle my mind.”

“How about Saturday morning...are you free? Perhaps we could meet at the Pennine Tea & Coffee shop on Hall Street in Halifax. Do you know where that is? Say 10:00 AM?”

“Yes...yes, of course...I love that place...that’s perfect.”

“Well then...I look forward to seeing you there. Cheers!” Anne hangs up the phone, smiles, strokes her bottom lip with her thumb and releases a light “hmm.”

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Ann hangs up the phone, drops down hard on her sofa, and whispers to no one there, “oh my God...I’m working with Anne Lister.”
Hope Hall is a distinguished eighteenth century house in Halifax. The Hall was built for David Stansfeld during the year's 1762-1765, and is one of several imposing mansions erected in or near the town centre around that time. It’s current owner and resident, Christopher Rawson, often conducts business from his home address…dodgy business. His younger brother, Jeremiah, regretfully participates in their illegal activities, knowing the life he has become accustomed to living would be out of reach should he choose a more honest way to earn his keep.

“Christopher, I’ve been able to secure two more businesses down on Hall Street. Both are in need of a host of repairs, and we’ll be able to run our funds through their books quite nicely. We can mark up the invoices from the contractors and clean the money without anyone noticing.”

“Good. What about that bar…Tib’s?”

“The owner, Isabella Norcliffe, is proving to be a bit difficult. She’s been resistant thus far, but there’s another problem, a bigger problem…we need to be careful with her, Christopher…she’s good friends with Anne Lister.”

“Anne Lister?! That Jack?”

“Yes, and if Miss Norcliffe tells her what we’ve demanded-“

“What you’ve demanded.”

“Only because you told me to! We can’t have Anne Lister finding out what we’ve been up to, Christopher…we’ll be put away forever.”

Christopher pauses as he thinks. “Get the owner to agree…do whatever it takes…threaten to pull her loan from our bank, if you have to. That should squeeze her. Don’t let her run circles around you, Jeremiah.”

“Perhaps you should come with me…”

“Don’t you worry about Anne Lister, Jeremiah…leave her to me. Just get the deal closed with Miss Norcliffe.”

Jeremiah leaves Hope Hall with a sense of foreboding so strong he can taste it in his mouth.

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On Friday morning Anne is awakened before dawn by a clap of thunder so loud she is certain her home is under aerial attack. She surrenders to the day and strips back the curtains from the window, water trickling down the frosted panes of glass like veins in the body. She begins to formulate her to-do list for the day, starting with dropping off the evidence bag with the forensics lab. While she does her best not to speculate, she instinctively knows where the evidence is likely to lead.

Once at work, she spends the remaining hours of her day combing through the case file, making notes on assignments she intends to dole out to members of her team, including Ann Walker. Before leaving for the day, she pops into DI Priestley’s office to provide an update.

“Ma’am, just a few things to cover. I’m meeting with Ann Walker tomorrow morning to get re-
acquainted. She’s not yet agreed to support the case and I’m hoping to convince her otherwise. I would hate for her to be ordered to do it by her superiors.”

“I agree, that would not be ideal. Do your best, Anne, I'm sure she'll come around.”

“Also, after a thorough review of the file, it’s evident the investigators never sent the bomb fragments to forensics for analysis. I dropped the evidence bag off this morning and hope to have the results on Monday.”

“That’s just pathetic!”

“Agreed. The last item is particularly disconcerting. The Rawson Brothers are buying up commercial property in Halifax. The properties don’t fit the Rawson profile. One offer for purchase is being made under a veiled threat…for Tib’s pub.”

“Tib’s? Goodness me, that place is crawling with cops!”

“I know. Buying Tib’s would enable them to hide in plain sight. My instincts tell me this fits with the rumors you’ve been hearing about their money laundering activities. I’d like your permission to install cameras and listening devices at Tib’s, and to ask Isabella Norcliffe for her assistance with establishing a paper trail for financial transactions related to the pub.”

DI Priestley considers the requests and goes with her gut. “Approved. But Anne…I want somebody close to Isabella. We can’t leave her twisting in the wind.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

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Anne awakes on Saturday with as much energy as a kid on Christmas morning. She didn’t realize how excited she was about meeting Ann Walker until the day finally arrived. I am actually nervous! Anne arrives at her favorite coffee shop early, inhaling the comforting scent of coffee, cinnamon, and fresh baked pastries. The shop is crowded with patrons…some on laptops with headphones in their ears…parents holding young children who are staring at the pastries in the glass display cabinet with such intensity, you’d expect their eyes to shoot tractor beams and suck the pastry into their tiny hands…and older people bemoaning their latest maladies and offering home remedies to cure all.

Anne notices a sign hanging down from the ceiling over the cash register that states, ‘Now Under New Ownership’. She calls out to Amy Sowden, the former owner, and beckons her over.

“Amy, lovely to see you. What’s with the sign? Are you leaving us?”

“Hello, Anne! No, no, I’m not leaving. Someone approached me about buying the shop. They made a fantastic offer, and asked me to stay on and run things. And get this…they are paying me a higher salary then I was able to pay myself, so I couldn’t find any reason to turn it down. Seems a bit too good to be true, but here we are!”

“That’s terrific, Amy, congratulations. Do you mind my asking who the new owner is?”

“Oh, not at all…it’s Jeremiah Rawson.”

Yeah…too good to be true.

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Anne manages to grab the last booth in the back and sits in the bench seat facing the front door. She has checked her appearance several times in the reflection of the aluminum napkin dispenser, eager to make a good first impression on Miss Walker.

It’s over in a heartbeat, and it’s doubtful anyone in the coffee shop even notices it, but the visual exchange that takes place when Ann Walker enters the shop and locks eyes with Anne Lister is electrifying. Her police photo does not do her justice. Detective Constable Ann Walker is wearing her hair in two partial braids that meet in the back and frame the rest of her long, straight blond hair, accentuating her fine facial features...a delicate nose, ice-blue eyes, soft lips, and a splash of freckles. Her merlot-colored v-neck sweater and form-fitting blue jeans leave a trail of admirers in her wake...both male and female.

Anne, with her heart pounding and mouth suddenly dry, walks toward Ann from the back of the shop with a mile-wide smile stretching across her face.

“DC Walker, it’s a pleasure to see you again!” Anne extends her hand to grasp Ann’s, closing the grip by placing her other hand on top...a friendly, comforting and intimate gesture. She breathes in her delicate perfume...subtle, yet intoxicating.

“DS Lister...likewise, I’m delighted to see you! And please...call me Ann.” Ann’s beautiful eyes are wide with wonder, staring at the flawless woman standing in front of her.

“Ah, then you must do the same. What can I get you? Coffee? Pastry?”

“Oh, no...please...allow me to-"

“No...I insist. I dragged you out here on a Saturday, it’s the least I can do.”

Ann smiles...”Alright then...if you insist...a Latte and a chocolate éclair.”

“Coming right up!” Anne places her order with Amy Sowden, taking this opportunity to wipe the sweat from her hands on her jeans.

Once their morning delights are in hand, Anne takes control of the conversation.

“Ann, did you hear that storm this morning? I thought for certain the brigade was in town!”

“Oh, I know! I awoke with a start before sunrise! I feel certain lightning struck a tree somewhere on either your or my property.”

“You know, I sometimes forget how close we live to one another. I regret not having visited you and your sister more often.” Boy, do I regret it.

“Oh...I think I would have liked that. You know...I’ve always wanted to tour Shibden, there’s so much history there.”

“Well then...we’ll have to see what we can do to make that happen. I know the owner.” They both chuckle and stare into each other’s eyes a little longer than what is considered normal.

“Ann...I want to thank you again for agreeing to meet me here today. As I said on the phone, I wanted the opportunity for us to get to get re-acquainted...before we start collaborating on this...case. I hope you’re okay with that.”

“Of course. I’m delighted to be here. And I want to thank you...for being willing to work with me. I know this probably isn’t an ideal situation for you...me having no experience with your unit and
all…and I’m certain you’d much rather work with someone who is more highly skilled than me…so…”

“Ann, it’s quite the opposite, I assure you. I’m delighted to be working with you…truly. We all bring our individual talents to the table…yours are equally important and valuable. You have a very impressive record, by the way…I’m hoping you can teach me a thing or two.” Anne flashes her trademark killer smile, causing Ann to flush.

“I’m sure you probably don’t remember this…but you and I actually met before…at the Academy. You gave a lecture one day to all the female cadets about your career path…I’ve never forgotten it...It was very inspiring…I even have a photograph of us from that day.”

“Really…?”

“Yes…here.” She pulls out the photograph of Anne standing next to her, with her arm around Ann’s shoulders. Now she remembers…oh yeah…that lovely face.

“Ann, I remember this…taking this photo.”

“Do you!”

“Yes, I remember thinking how animated you were…talking about all the things you wanted to do with your career and how excited you were to be a member of the force…I remember it like it was yesterday. You impressed me a great deal that day…you were very charming and obviously very bright!”

Ann turns a deep shade of red and looks down at her coffee cup, biting her bottom lip. Oh God, she’s biting her bottom lip. Anne leans forward, reaches over and takes Ann’s hand, strokes the back of it with her thumb, and gives her a comforting look.

”Ann, I need to say this…I’m certain this case brings up some very painful memories for you…and I want you to know that at any point…if you need to take a break, or whatever you need to do to take care of yourself…you have my full support. I will help you in any way I can.”

Ann is awestruck by this comment and can feel her heart begin to swell. “Thank you for saying that. I’ll admit…it is strange…but I think this might help in so many ways. It’s been really hard…since it all happened. I feel like everything’s been on hold…my entire life…I feel like I’m living in a bubble. I go to work…I function…I go home…get up the next day, and it’s wash, rinse, repeat. Since the explosion, my sister Elizabeth and I have drifted apart somewhat…granted, she’s moved to Scotland and has three little ones now, and doesn’t really have time for me…but I miss her. We used to have so much fun walking the grounds of Crow Nest…playing games together…riding horses…driving our parents crazy. Then she met her husband, George, at a party at our house…the handsome, dashing military officer…and before I knew it, she was gone.”

Ann realizes she’s drifting. “I’m sorry…”

“No…please, Ann, don’t be. I really like learning more about you.” She’s still rubbing Ann’s hand and Ann is starting to feel lightheaded.

“Tell me…what do you remember about that day? The day of the explosion.”

Ann releases a heavy sigh, hating the topic, but loving the touch. “Not much, really…it was just another day. Dad came home at the usual time…around 6:30…John was home visiting. Elizabeth and I went for a walk after dinner. We were about a mile away when we saw this huge fireball off in the distance…in the direction of our home…and then we heard the explosion shortly thereafter.
It just lit up the sky…this huge orange flame and thick, black smoke. We ran home as fast as we could. Some neighbors had already called the fire department, but there was nothing they could do. There really wasn’t anything left of the house. Elizabeth and I just…fell apart…right there…our family was gone…in a flash…”

“Ann, I want you to close your eyes.”

“What?…”

Anne smiles. “Humor me…just close your eyes.” Ann does as requested, then playfully opens one eye to peek at Anne.

“Ann, do as your told.” They are both chuckling, and Anne continues.

“Fine.”

“Some of these questions will sound strange, but just work with me. What did you have for lunch yesterday?”

“Wha…? Okay, um…a tuna fish sandwich.”

“What’s the color of the beautiful sweater you are wearing?”

Ann feels her cheeks flush. “Umm…kind of a maroon thingie.”

“What day of the week is tomorrow?”

“Sunday.”

“What did you smell when you and Elizabeth got back to the house that night?”

“Smell? I…okay…ummm…burned wood…exhaust…something oily and kind of sweet … almonds…rubber … somebody was cooking outdoors and I smelled the food. That’s about all I remember.”

“Almonds…something oily and sweet…”

“Yeah…I never realized that before…interesting trick, Anne.”

“Hmmm…”

“What, Anne…what are you thinking?”

“I don’t know yet…I’ll have to weigh this with all the other evidence.”

Ann looks as if she’s getting uncomfortable with the topic, so Anne lets go of her hand and redirects.

“Hey…I’ve got an idea. How about we take that tour of Shibden? It’s such a pretty day, it might do us both good to get outside and get some fresh air. Whattya say?”

“That sounds lovely!” Ann feels her entire body flush with warmth and excitement, and she loves how she feels in this woman’s presence. It's a drug, and it's addictive. Or we could stay here and I can stare into your eyes all day.

It takes 35 minutes to reach Shibden Hall…much slower than Anne’s usual pace…but she’s
enjoying the stroll. Anne gives Ann the grand tour the grounds. She shows her all the old coal pits...the bridge modeled after Simplon Pass in Switzerland...the old stables and farmhouses...all of it. They discuss their childhood and the close proximity of their homes...the complexities of the family unit...the difficult cases they’ve worked and why they enjoy law enforcement...they talk for hours, not even realizing how much terrain they are covering. It’s as if they’ve known each other for a thousand years and they’ve found a safe harbor in the other’s presence. Before they know it, they are standing in front of Tib’s pub on Hall Street, two doors down from the coffee shop. They’ve come almost full circle.

“Ann, I can’t believe I’ve kept you this long, it’s almost 6:00! The day just flew…I’m so sorry.”

“Oh, please, don’t be! I can’t remember when I’ve spent so pleasant a day!”

Anne dons a pleading look...“I um...I don’t want the day to be over...I’ve had such a lovely time. Would you like to join me inside for dinner? I know the owner of this pub and I can vouch for the food, it’s quite good. Please...say yes...”

Ann smiles and her eyes glisten. “Yes.”

Anne grabs Ann’s hand and says with a big smile, “Yay...Come with me!”

They walk into Tib’s pub and the women hear a voice shout from behind the bar. “Anne!”

“Tib!”

“Come on in and make yourselves at home. Who’s your friend?”

“Tib, I’d like to introduce you to Ann Walker. Ann, this is Isabella Norcliffe, also known as Tib. She’s a dear friend and a big pain in the ass.”

“Ha! Ann, don’t you dare let her taint your view of me. You can come to dislike me all on your own! What can I get you, love?”

Ann is enjoying the friendly banter between the two women, and she can tell there is a history there...but what kind of history is unknown.

“I’d love a glass of Pinto Grigio, please.”

“Make that two”, says Anne. “And a couple of menus.”

“What? No scotch?”

“Not today, Tib.”

They seat themselves in a U-shaped booth, with Ann sitting against the wall at the bottom of the U. Anne is to her left, her body angled toward Ann and her arm on the back of the bench...a very intimate and territorial design. Dinner lasts for several hours, and as the night wears on, Anne is inching closer and closer to Ann. Ann can feel the subtle shift in proximity, but she doesn’t mind one bit. On the contrary...she wants it. She’s swimming in Anne’s chocolate brown eyes, hanging on her every word, and enjoying the smell of her delicious perfume as it wafts around the booth like forbidden smoke.

Anne is lost in her own new little world, called ‘Ann Walker-ville’, and she finds herself absentmindedly reaching over and touching Ann’s hair...twirling it around her index finger...as she’s talking about some innocuous science topic, like string theory. Ann is hyperaware Anne is
doing this…the rush of chills it sends ricocheting around her body come to a rest between her thighs. Anne keeps looking at my lips…and I like it.

“I’m so sorry, Ann, I’m just talking nonsense. I just…I really like being here…with you…”

“…Me too…” The attraction between the two is simply magnetic. This time its Ann who reaches out for Anne’s hand, feeling its strength and warmth…wanting to interlace her fingers with hers. They look at one another, each of them attempting to breathe.

Anne finally collects herself, and says “I guess it’s getting late…it’s almost 11:00 PM. I should probably let you go.”

“This was a wonderful day…I really enjoyed myself. It was such a great idea…to meet. I really am looking forward to working with you, Anne.”

“Oh good! So you'll do it! I'm so pleased, Ann, really. I think we’ll make a great team.”

Anne walks Ann back to her car at an excruciatingly slow pace, doing everything possible to drag this night out as long as she can.

“Well…all good things must come to an end…unfortunately. Let’s get you home and rested, we have a busy day on Monday. Lots to do. We are going to start at 8:30 AM at the firing range!” says Anne, with a bit too much excitement in her voice.

Ann laughs when she sees the look on Anne’s face. “Oh, good Lord!”

Anne doesn’t know what possesses her to do this, other than raw desire, but she can’t help it. She leans forward and brushes her lips against Ann’s cheek and whispers in her ear, “Good night, Miss Walker...sleep well.”
Ann arrives early at the shooting range on Monday morning. Dressed in her blue cargo pants, a purple long-sleeve henley t-shirt, brown tactical boots and aviator sunglasses, Ann Walker is ready for whatever challenge Anne Lister throws her way.

Anne pulls into the parking lot and sees Ann standing there…looking so incredibly…HOT. She takes a minute to collect her thoughts and hormones, then chuckles to herself and gets out of the car.

“Hi! You’re here early!”

“Yes, I wanted to make certain I arrived on time.”

“Well then…let’s get started.”

Anne is at home on the shooting range. It reminds her of when she was a child and used to scare vagrants off the Shibden property using a small .22 pistol. They approach a long table that has various weapons laid out in order from smallest to largest caliber.

“Are you familiar with the Glock, Ann?”

“Yes, that’s the standard issue weapon for the Dog Unit. I’m certified on that weapon.”

“Ah, excellent, we’ll skip it then. Let’s work with the shotgun.” She picks up the weapon and begins to recite its technical details by heart. “This is the Remington 870 Express Combo, Pump Action, 12-gauge shotgun. It’s big, it’s loud and it’s powerful. This is the standard issue shotgun for our Unit because of its dependability in the field. This weapon is extremely reliable.”

At first Ann appears intimidated by the weapon, but after Anne shows her how to cradle it, set the safety, load the shells, and operate the pump action slide, she feels more comfortable.

“Ok, Ann, have a go.” Ann steps up to the shooting line, puts on ear protection and goggles, then faces the target that’s roughly 40 feet away. “This weapon has a strong kickback, so I’m going to brace my hands against the back of your shoulders so it doesn’t knock you flat on your butt.”

Anne approaches Ann from behind, gently places her hands on her shoulders, gives a light squeeze to let her know she’s ready, then braces her arms for impact. Ann feels her body tingling at her touch.

BOOM!! The recoil on the weapon sends her flying into Anne’s arms.

“WHOA,” exclaims Ann. “I wasn’t ready for that!...obviously!”

Anne holds her there for a second, chuckles at the look on Ann’s face, and says “Let’s try it again. Make certain you lock in your biceps, set your legs and hips, and keep your hands firm, but relaxed. Here…let me help you line up.”

She steps up behind Ann again and places her hands on her waist. Her chin is on Ann’s left shoulder and she whispers in her ear…“You’ve got this…lock your biceps…hands relaxed…squeeze the trigger…nice and slow…that’s it.” Ann is starting to melt as she listens to the sultry sound of Anne’s voice. She swallows hard, licks her lips, takes aim and pulls the trigger. BOOM!
“See? Much better! You nailed it, just an inch to the left of center! Great job!”

Ann is smiling ear-to-ear and feeling quite pleased with herself. *Touch me again.*

“I want to try that again, but let me do it by myself.”

Anne backs away and admires the view from behind. Ann walks over to the table, picks up 6 shells and quickly loads them into the weapon. Gripping the shotgun around the pump mechanism with her left hand, she jerks the gun up and down quickly, loading the next available shell into the firing chamber with one hand.

Anne appears confused and begins to step forward. “Wha…”

Ann steps up to the firing line, holding the gun at waist level. She fires 6 shots in quick succession, blowing the target to smithereens. She cradles the gun in her right arm with the barrel pointing downward, turns around to face Anne, takes off her goggles…and smirks.

The look on Anne’s face is priceless. “Miss Walker…I believe I’ve been had.”

“I believe you have.” Ann smiles wide, taking great pride in being able to fool the dynamic Anne Lister.

“I’ll have to think of a way to even the score,” says Anne, dripping with sexual innuendo. “I’m guessing our work here is done as you appear to be well trained on weaponry.”

“I was #1 in my class, Miss Lister…so yes…I’m well trained.” Anne looks down at her feet with a sheepish look on her face. She stands up and smiles at Ann and slowly walks toward her. She reaches out and places her hand over the hand Ann is using to hold the weapon, and leaves it there for several seconds. “See? I told you you could show me a thing or two. I guess I’ll see you back at the station.” *I believe I’ve underestimated little Miss Walker.*
Once back at the station, Anne and Ann begin the process of setting up an “investigation board” in a conference room. Using a dry-erase board, they tape up photos of suspects and victims; they draw out a timeline, and post other pertinent details, enabling them to see the big picture of the investigation.

Anne faces Ann and takes a hold of her hands. “Ann…are you sure this is okay? Having all this information about your family up on this board?”

“It’s funny…I find myself looking at this objectively, not as an affected member of the family…so yes…it’s okay. You know…my family has a motto: *Iustum perficito nihil timeto*, meaning ‘do what is right and fear nothing’. I need to do this…for them.”

“Okay then…you let me know if that changes.” She exchanges a caring smile with Ann and they resume their work.

The women quickly fall into a symbiotic relationship. While Ann is organizing stacks of witness interviews and police reports into workable categories, Anne notices she would have organized the materials in the exact same manner. Conversely, as Ann is about to ask Anne to pass her a stack of photographs, it’s as if Anne can read her mind and has already retrieved the photos and is passing them her way. Anyone stopping by the room would think they’ve been working together for years. They work quietly and quickly.

What’s not being said or made obvious is that underneath this symbiosis is heat…and lots of it. The casual brushing of a hand against the other’s skin as they work…the touch to a shoulder as they pass behind the other…the sound of their breathing…the casual resting of fingertips against the other’s waist as they guide them out of their way. Anne has found herself delicately dragging her fingers across the back of Ann’s shirt on more than one occasion. All of these things register deep within and generates a longing only they can feel.

Around mid-day, Harriett Parkhill, Senior Forensics Technician, stops by the conference room to drop off the test results from the bomb components.

“Sorry for the delay, ma’am, we’re pretty backed up.”

“Thank you, Harriett, I appreciate all you’ve done to expedite my request. I’ve got two tickets for you to the next Manchester United game! So tell me what you found.”

“Given the age of the components I wasn’t expecting much…but, to my surprise, the results show a residue of C4.”

Ann chimes in, “What is C4?”

“It’s a moldable plastic explosive…it’s typically grey in color and looks like modeling clay.”

Anne looks to Ann and says, “Ann, remember you said you smelled almonds and something sickly sweet? That’s a common residual effect from C4. The almond scent is from the C4 itself, and the sickly sweet smell is from the petroleum base used in the explosives.”

Harriett continues. “There’s something else in the residue… it’s a form of hydrogen used in something called the Advanced Precision Kill Weapon System (APKWS) used by the military. It’s incredibly unique. This form of hydrogen is less expensive than normal hydrogen, and when used
in certain weapons, it helps to avoid collateral damage.”

“So…in other words, it helped to isolate the explosion at the Walker estate to the main house and none of the other outlying properties or nearby neighbors.”

“That’s correct, ma’am. There’s more…your suspicions about the wire are accurate. It has been identified as being the military grade wire used in demolitions. This particular wire is extremely heavy duty and is the only type that can support the large charges the military uses to destroy structures. Taken into context, I would say the profile of the bomber is a white male, current or former military, with extensive experience in chemical weapons and explosives.”

“Well done, Harriett…thank you.”

As Harriett leaves the room, Anne turns to Ann with a sense of urgency in her voice.

“Ann, we need to start running searches for possible suspects. We have electronic access to all military personnel records…can you start that search using the filters Harriett suggested?

“Y…yes…of course.”

“Ann…are you ok?”

“…Yes…I’m just trying to digest everything I’ve heard. My family….my family was murdered. I always knew it deep down…but now it’s real.”

Anne drops down on one knee next to Ann’s chair, takes her hand, and says, “Yes…it is. Can I get you anything? Do you want to take a break?”

“No…no. Show me how to sign-in to the military database. Let’s find this bastard.”
Tib closes her eyes and turns her face toward the early morning sun, soaking up as much Vitamin D, heat and serenity as possible. It’s a pretty fall day in Halifax and she hates having to spend her time indoors doing mundane things, such as payroll. She opens the door to her pub and sets about performing her opening routine – turning on lights and music, setting up the cash register, mopping the floor. Before long, she’s deep into the payroll numbers, and it takes a few seconds for her to realize there is an unwanted visitor knocking on her office door…Jeremiah Rawson.

“Miss Norcliffe…it’s been a week since we last spoke…have you considered my best and final offer for the purchase of your pub? I think you recognize that my price is far above the going rate for this type of establishment.”

“It is, Mr. Rawson…but for the life of me I can’t figure out why…a well-known businessman like yourself…would pay such an exorbitant price for my little pub.”

“Well…you have a strong following…solid revenue performance…great location…it’s worth it. And if you would agree to stay on to keep operations moving forward, I’d be grateful. I’m happy to pay you a handsome salary. I’ve said before, Miss Norcliffe, I am branching out into areas of new business and your pub fits the bill.”

Tib releases a big sigh. “I’m sorry, Mr. Rawson, but I’m going to have to pass. I’m just not in the market to sell at the moment. I like my pub.”

Jeremiah takes a step closer to Tib, closing the gap between them to just a few inches. He says quietly, “Miss Norcliffe…my brother Christopher mentioned to me that the favorable loan you have with Rawson’s Bank may have to be called in if we can’t come to an agreement. I’d hate to see you in a situation like that. According to my financial due diligence, you’d likely have to sell your establishment if that were to happen…and I’m certain the sale price would be an amount much lower than what I am offering you today. Perhaps you should reconsider in light of these new…circumstances.”

Tib stares directly into his eyes, barely blinking. A drop of cold sweat forms at the back of her hairline and slides down her spine, settling at the waist of her jeans.

“I see…perhaps. I need a few days to think about this.”

“Of course. Meanwhile I’ll have my lawyer draw up the paperwork. Have a nice day, Miss Norcliffe.” Jeremiah turns and leaves. Tib runs to the restroom and violently vomits. She slides down the bathroom stall wall, pulls out her phone and texts Anne…’I need to see you…TODAY.’
Ann has been working the keyboard on her laptop for more than four hours. Anne looks over at her with sympathy and admiration. She has no idea how cute she is. Ann appears bleary-eyed and tired, and Anne knows she’s probably hungry. She closes the case file with a thwack and Ann jerks in her seat.

“Ann…you must be starving. We’ve been going at this non-stop for hours. I think it’s time we break for the night. I know we’ve been together all day, and you might be fed up with me by now, but…do you have plans for this evening?”

“N…no…just a frozen dinner and the news. Do you have something in mind?”

Anne looks at her phone and realizes she missed a text from Tib earlier in the day. It’s obvious from the look on her face the text is not good news.

“Anne…Are you alright?...What’s wrong?”

“I need to go see Tib. Will you come with me? I’d like you to. We can get something to eat there.”

“Yes, absolutely. And Anne…I think I’ve got something.” Anne scoots her chair over next to Ann’s to look at her screen. “Show me.”

“It took a while to get the details because some of the records are considered closed, but I found a way around that. There are three people that rise to the top of the pile. One is dead, one is retired and now lives in Australia, and one lives in York. His name is Mark Robinson. He’s 52 years old and he served seven years in the Special Reconnaissance Regiment in the British Army. His official role was Explosives Ordinance Disposal Specialist. He retired from the Army 11 years ago and started his own business offering private security. There’s a photo, too.”

“Oh, Ann…this is absolutely brilliant. Great job! Do me a favor and send the photo to my phone, then let’s get out of here…you’re hungry and Tib wants to see us. Come on…I’ll drive.”
Anne notices Ann seems unusually quiet and pensive on the drive over to Tib’s pub.

“Hey…are you ok? You seem really quiet.” Little does Anne know that a simple, light stroke with the back of her hand on Ann’s thigh brings so much comfort and warmth.

“Just thinking. I just have this feeling…for some reason Mark Robinson’s face seems familiar to me…and I don’t know why.”

“Have you seen him before?”

“I don’t know…I can’t place him.” Ann reaches out and takes Anne’s hand into hers, places their clasped hands in her lap, then stares out the side window. *Where have I seen him?*

Without thinking, Ann brings the back of Anne’s hand to her lips and places a warm, gentle kiss on her skin.

“Oh….I’m sorry…I…it just felt natural.”

“No…that was nice…I liked it,” says Anne, with a warm smile on her face.

It’s in these subtle, intimate moments that their relationship begins to grow into what destiny has already designed.

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Anne and Ann take a seat in a booth at the back, with Tib joining them shortly thereafter. Tib leans in and quietly provides the details of her last discussion with Jeremiah Rawson.

“Anne, I’ve got no choice…I’m going to have to sell to him. He’s got me where he wants me. If he calls the loan, I’m done for.” Tib’s facial expression is lined with worry and fear, and Anne knows she doesn’t need this in her life right now.

“I understand. Look…Tib…I know this is a lot to ask. We need your help to establish a paper trail to prove the Rawson’s are laundering money. If you go through with the sale…we’re hoping you can observe what goes on around here and provide us with copies of any paperwork that might support the case.”

“Anne…do you realize what you’re asking?!” Tib is looking at Anne with an incredulous stare.

“Yes…I do…and I know it’s a lot. I’m prepared to put an undercover agent in here with you. We can make it look like they work in the kitchen, or a bus boy, or something…we can make it work. Mallinson came by and installed the miniature cameras and listening devices, yes?”

“Yes…but-”

“I know, Tib…it’s scary. But I promise you…you’ll be looked after…there’s nothing to fear…I’ve got you.” Anne pulls out her phone and shows her the photo of Mark Robinson. “Tib…do you recognize this man?”

Tib’s jaw falls open. “Oh my God, Anne, that’s him…the strong, silent guy that came in the time before last with Jeremiah Rawson. That’s him! Who is he?”
Every hair on Anne’s body is standing on edge. She looks over at Ann and the expression on her face reveals she’s obviously spooked.

“Trust me, Tib, I want to tell you, but I can’t right now. This proves there’s a connection between him and Jeremiah. Ann and I will have to find additional proof of their business tie. I’ll make arrangements for the undercover officer to come by in the next day or two. And listen…be careful about your communications. The officer will explain how best to deal with that. I don’t want to fill you with paranoia, but always assume you’re being watched; it keeps you safe.”

Tib sighs, nods her head and excuses herself to go tend bar. Anne slides over in the booth next to Ann, angles her body toward her and looks into her eyes. “Are you okay, Ann?”

“…Yeah…I think I’m just tired.”

“Let’s eat something and then I’ll take you home.” Anne stays seated next to Ann all through dinner. She senses the heat emanating from Anne’s body and how wonderful she feels under her protection.

Anne shoots Ann a sideways smile. “Hey…I meant to tell you earlier…you look really pretty in that dress.”

Ann blushes like a high school girl. “Thanks!”

There’s a sudden rush of noise in the pub as a large group of patrons spills through the front door, including members of Anne’s team. Cops…they work hard and they play hard. They see Anne and Ann in the booth, and like a moth to a flame, they make their way over to say hello, assuming their presence is welcome. Anne takes this opportunity to introduce Ann to the rest of the group.

“Everyone…I’d like you to meet Detective Constable Ann Walker. She is on part-time loan to our team to assist with a critical case. I’m certain you’ll all get the opportunity to work with her over the next few months. She’s good people…make her feel welcome.” There’s a huge round of hello’s and handshakes and hugs, and Ann is immediately adopted by the team. It’s as if she’s always been a part of the family, something that’s been missing from her life for years.

Anne leans over and whispers in Ann’s ear, “Are you ok with this? Do you want to leave?”

“No, no…let’s stay a while. I like these people. But thank you for asking,” and she gives Ann’s arm a gentle squeeze.

Before long, the music is loud, the alcohol is flowing, and it’s packed. Anne suddenly feels a power vacuum in the room as she sees Marianna Lawton stroll through the door in her power suit. Mariana sees the two women sitting next to each other in the booth, and her territorial instincts kick in. With her most seductive stare and walk, she makes her way toward the booth, greets everyone with a smile, and focuses her attention on Ann.

“Well…you must be Ann Walker. I believe we’ve met in court at one time or another. Pleasure to make your acquaintance. I’m Mariana Lawton.” Anne is shooting Mariana a look, warning her to behave and be nice.

“Yes, pleasure to meet you, Mariana. I have testified on a few cases you’ve prosecuted.”

“Hmm, yes. Hello, Freddy…nice to see you again. May I sit here?” She points at the space next to Anne.

“Of course.” Anne scoots over, placing her body in direct contact with Ann’s…her shoulder…her
ARM…HER HIP…HER LEG. ANN SHIVERS AT HER TOUCH AND THIS DOES NOT GO UNNOTICED BY MARIANA.

THROUGHOUT THE EVENING, ANNE’S ATTENTION IS FOCUSED MAINLY ON ANN. SHE WHISPERS IN HER EAR ON MULTIPLE OCCASIONS, “ARE YOU OK?…ARE YOU ENJOYING YOURSELF?…CAN I GET YOU ANYTHING?” THE SENSATION OF HER BODY HEAT…THE ATTENTION…IT ALL MAKES ANN FEEL LIKE A MILLION BUCKS. WHICH IS WHY SHE’S TORMENTED WHEN SHE NOTICED MARIANA’S REPEATED ATTEMPTS TO RUN HER HAND UP AND DOWN ANNE’S THIGH UNDERNEATH THE TABLE, WITH ANNE LIGHTLY KNOCKING IT AWAY.

ANN FEELS HER STOMACH START TO CLENCH AND HER THROAT GO RAW AS SHE WATCHES MARIANA PAW AT ANNE. JEALOUSY IS NOT AN EMOTION SHE WANTS TO BECOME FAMILIAR WITH. *OF COURSE SHE AND ANNE ARE A COUPLE…IT MAKES PERFECT SENSE…SHE’S BEAUTIFUL…SMART…CONNECTED…YOU’RE AN IDIOT, WALKER.* ANN EXCUSES HERSELF AND GOES TO THE RESTROOM. IT’S IN THIS PRIVATE SPACE THAT SHE CLOSES HER EYES, TAKES SEVERAL DEEP BREATHS AND REGAINS CONTROL OF HER EMOTIONS.

SHE’S LEANING OVER THE SINK, ARMS BRACED ON EACH SIDE, AND HEARS THE DOOR OPEN. ANNE SILENTLY MOVES IN BEHIND HER AND BEGINS TO RUB HER ARMS AND WHISPERS INTO HER EAR…”ANN…” ANN DOESN’T MOVE, DOESN’T RESPOND. ANNE’S HANDS WANDER DOWN HER SIDES TO ANNE’S WAIST. SHE LIGHTLY GRAZES HER FINGERS ACROSS ANN’S STOMACH ON THE OUTSIDE OF HER SHIRT, SENDING A SPASMS THROUGH HER BODY. SHE PULLS ANN AGAINST HER AND BEGINS LEAVING TRACES OF KISSES ALONG HER SHOULDERS AND NECK, AND ANN IS CONVINCED THIS IS WHAT HEAVEN FEELS LIKE. ANN’S EYES ARE FLUTTERING AND HER PULSE IS POUNDING. SHE REACHES HER RIGHT HAND BEHIND ANNE’S NECK TO COAX HER ON, AND SHE’S SO DIZZY FROM THE AFFECTION SHE FEELS LIKE SHE’S GETTING LOST IN SPACE.

ANN TURNS AROUND AND LOOKS INTO ANNE’S EYES WITH A PLEADING LOOK…”ANN…I REALLY DON’T KNOW WHAT I’M DOING…I DON’T KNOW WHAT THESE FEELINGS ARE THAT I’M HAVING…IT’S JUST CRAZY, IT’S NUTS…I’M NOT SURE I REALLY UNDERSTAND IT. AND I KNOW I DON’T HAVE ANY RIGHT TO ASK THIS…but please…don’t lie to me…what is she to you?”

“MARIANA? OH, ANN, NOTHING, I PROMISE…MARIANA AND I ARE ONLY GOOD FRIENDS…WE HAVE A LONG HISTORY, BOTH PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL…and at times she seems to think we are still living in the past…and I promise you, we’re not…and we never will be.”

ANN REACHES UP WITH HER RIGHT HAND AND PLACES IT ON ANNE’S CHEST, JUST BELOW HER THROAT.

“LOOK…I JUST…I DON’T KNOW…ANN…I JUST REALLY LIKE BEING NEAR YOU…THAT’S WHAT I DO KNOW.”

ANN MOVES A LITTLE CLOSER, AND WHISPERS “AND I LIKE BEING NEAR YOU, TOO.”

“DO YOU?”

“YES…the closer the better.” SHE LEANS DOWN AND BRUSHES HER LIPS AGAINST ANN’S CHEEK. ANN EXHALES A MUZZLED WHISPER…”ANN…” HER EYES ARE CLOSED AND SHE’S LEANING AGAINST THE SINK WITH ANN PRESSING INTO HER, ABSORBING THE TENDERNESS OF HER HANDS ON HER WAIST. EVERYTHING IS JUST SO WARM AND WONDERFUL AND SENSUAL. HER BREATHING IS TURNING RAGGED… AND SHE JUST KNOWS…*I HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE…NOW.*

“ANN, I NEED TO GO…I NEED TO GO HOME…WILL YOU TAKE ME?”

“OF COURSE… ARE YOU ALRIGHT?”

“YES…WE JUST NEED TO GO…NOW…PLEASE.”
I'm Staying

Anne and Ann make their way back to the table and toss out their excuses for leaving so soon, blaming it on Ann feeling bilious. Mariana passes Anne a questioning look and Anne gives her a cold stare. The drive to Ann’s home is quiet, with Anne constantly glancing in her direction with worry. She reaches over, takes Ann’s hand and gives it a gentle squeeze. *She’s becoming the better part of me.*

They arrive at Ann’s home and she turns to Anne with a sultry look and a velvety voice. “Come in? I really wish you would…”

Anne can’t resist. “Yes…if you’re sure…”

“I’m sure. Come with me.” Ann takes Anne’s hand and silently leads her into the kitchen. Ann turns to face her and sighs. “This is really going to complicate things, isn’t it?”

Anne steps up to her, places her hands on Ann’s shoulders and lets them lightly travel down to her forearms.

"Probably…but the heart wants what the heart wants, Ann….Are you s-?"

“Shhhh…yes…I’m sure…it’s all very ok. We’re doing this.”

Anne takes her face in both hands and ever so slowly leans in for their first glorious kiss. The pressure is so light, a tongue lightly dragging across her lips. It’s the kind of kiss every girl dreams about…the kind that makes your body turn inside out and question reality.

Ann takes Anne by the hand and leads her into the bedroom. She turns to her again, gently grasps the lapels of her jacket and slowly peels it off her body, never taking her eyes off her. Ann turns her attention to Anne’s heavily starched oxford shirt, deftly moving her fingers to unleash each button from its companion slit in the shirt. Every act is so intentional…so sensual. Anne can barely breathe. She’s frozen in place, allowing Ann to do whatever she wants.

Ann peels back Anne’s shirt and drags it down to her forearms, then bunches the shirt behind her back, trapping her arms. The devious smile on Ann’s face ignites a fire low in Anne’s belly. Anne presses forward, mouth slightly open, for a kiss, but Ann leans back just far enough out of reach…teasing her. With one hand holding Anne’s shirt, Ann lightly grazes the back of her fingers on her free hand up and down Anne’s chest and stomach, causing Anne’s eyes to slam shut as a massive shiver travels up and down her spine. There’s a muffled whine mixed in.

With her free hand, Ann moves down to Anne’s pants, unsnaps them, and while gazing directly into her eyes, quickly licks her own lips and slowly unzips Anne’s fly. She removes her hand from the shirt, hooks her thumbs into the waist of Anne’s pants and slides them to the floor, taking every opportunity to lightly drag her short nails over Anne’s hips, thighs and calves.

Anne’s not about to let this continue, she wants her fair share. She takes off what remains of her shirt, places her hands on Ann’s shoulders and turns her around. She reaches down and slides her dress up until the hem is within reach, then slowly pulls it up and over her head. She moves on to the straps of her camisole, rubbing her lips and tongue down her neck and shoulders as she pulls the straps down, then pulls the camisole up and over, depositing it in the heap of other clothes strewn across the room. The floor looks like a crime scene. Ann is left standing in her matching black bra and thong. *Oh dear God.* Anne unhooks her bra, and uses her fingertips to slide the straps...
down and off Ann’s arms. Still from behind, Anne hooks her pinkies under the waist of Ann’s thong and lightly tugs upward, putting pressure on her clit and eliciting a gasp and a moan from Ann.

Ann sits down at the foot of the bed and holds out her hand to Anne, silently beckoning her. She gently pulls her down on top of her, settling her legs in between Anne’s. She reaches up for her neck and pulls her into a deep kiss, letting her know this isn’t just a one-night stand or a short-term deal.

Anne begins to lay a trail of sweet kisses up and down Ann’s body, as her hands begin to explore every square inch of Ann’s exposed skin. Both women can feel the sense of urgency building, accentuated by the sound and pace of their breathing. Anne’s tongue is running up and down Ann’s stomach, leaving little bites along the way. She’s licking and sucking her breasts, flicking her tongue back and circling her nipples, driving Ann wild. Her hands are stroking Ann’s inner thighs, leaving a subtle hit-and-run across her clit along her travels. Ann can’t keep up…it’s all happening at once and her mind can’t separate Anne’s hands from her lips from her teeth from her thighs. She’s dizzy with euphoria and can’t imagine this could get any better. But then it does…

Anne reaches down and slowly moves the index and middle fingers of her right hand up and down between Ann’s folds, lightly spreading the wetness that has pooled in the pocket. Ann’s entire body jolts. Anne smiles as she leaves a gentle nibble on Ann’s right hipbone. Her touch is so delicate…her fingers barely brush up against Ann’s most tender and swollen area, but just enough to make Ann moan and beg for more.

Anne looks up at Ann’s face and she knows…Ann is reaching the point of no return. Anne lightly touches her middle finger to Ann’s opening and presses without entering. She pulses her fingertip…press, release, press, release…causing Ann to bear down and press forward into Anne’s hand, willing her to enter. Anne slowly does as silently commanded. She slides her finger in and begins a slow in/out motion, curling her finger against the velvet wall inside her entrance. She adds another finger…allows Ann to adjust…then inserts a third. Ann is writhing and pushing, and grabbing Anne’s hair, and begging her to go faster and harder.

What’s a girl to do?

Anne slips down between Ann’s legs and runs her tongue around her waistline…then bites down on her pubic bone…then moves down to her clit. Ever so lightly, she flicks her tongue over Ann’s clit, causing her to yip…yes, YIP. She continues this torture until Ann grabs her hair and starts to squeeze and pull…hard. Anne smiles, then covers Ann’s clit with her mouth and begins to suck, flick and gently bite. She increases the pace and pressure, rubbing her tongue back and forth, then bearing down and simultaneously sucking with her mouth and flicking with her tongue. Anne can feel the deep red glow building down below…building…and her body heaves upward while the explosion rips through her. It’s all Anne can do to hang on for the sensuous ride.

Anne slowly removes her fingers and gently kisses her way back up Ann’s body. She kisses away the tears at the corners of Ann’s eyes, then finds her lips and revisits the magical kiss from before. Ann can taste herself on Anne’s lips, delicious and embarrassing, but she doesn’t care. She feels so damn good.

The ever-caring Anne checks on her lover with a simple, “Are you okay?”

“Oh…I’m much better than okay. I want to do that again, but I’m just so tired. Is that okay?”

Anne smiles, “Quality, not quantity, dear girl. I know where you live.”

Anne repositions her body to lie beside Ann and pulls her into her arms, nesting them in for the night. “I hope you know I’m spending the night.”
“Mmmm…if you insist.”
Singing

Tib has started to make a habit of arriving early at the pub. Since selling her establishment to the Rawson brothers, she is living in a constant state of paranoia. *Am I being watched? Is Jeremiah going to show up unannounced?* The early hour affords her the opportunity to have the privacy she needs to perform this unsettling business.

She locks the office door, opens the file cabinet and removes a 1-inch thick file. Using her cell phone she photographs each piece of paper in the file, then carefully replaces the contents and returns the file to the cabinet exactly as she found it. She hooks up her phone to her laptop and uploads the files to a secure server owned by the Serious Crime Division. Each time she follows this process she photographs a different file…but only one. To photograph more would be too risky. Once uploaded, she erases the photos from her phone and goes about her normal day. *I am way too old for this.*

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Anne arrives at the station early one morning and finds Mariana’s coat, purse and briefcase tossed carelessly across her desk. She’s just about to relocate her belongings to a nearby chair when she hears DI Priestley call her name and wave her toward her office. Mariana is already inside looking apprehensive.

“Good morning, ma’am…Mariana. What’s going on?”

“Anne, I’ll tell you the same thing I just told Mariana. The drug bust you made several weeks ago…the dealer, Mr. Donald Cameron…he is prepared to give us some valuable information in exchange for a lighter sentence. He’s ready to implicate the Rawson brothers. I’d like you two to negotiate the plea bargain and conduct the interview. I’ve already spoken with the Crown Prosecutor and she’s agreed to a sentence of Life+7 years as the bottom limit. I will observe from the surveillance room. Let's make this happen."

As Anne and Mariana makes their way down the stairs to the interview room, Mariana tugs on Anne's arm to stop her.

"Anne...how serious is this between you and Little Miss Walker?"

"Stop calling her that, Anne. It's very serious. I'm in love with her."

"Wha...?"

"Yes, Mariana. I finally found her and she found me."

"But Anne..."

"But what? You know, Mariana, to make the journey and not fall deeply enough is a life not lived. With Ann, I have fallen deeply enough. I'm going to live my life, and that includes her. You will always be my friend, and I hope you'll become Ann's friend. But you married Charles and that's that. I refuse to have this conversation ever again. Now come on...let's go make this guy sing."

+++++++ 

They enter the interview room where Donald Cameron sits handcuffed to a u-shaped steel rod
anchored to a metal table, an armed guard standing in the corner.

In her no-nonsense style, Anne gets right to the point.

“Such a pleasure to see you again, Mr. Cameron. I understand you have something you want to say to us.”

“Yes…but not without a deal.”

“And what do you have to offer us?”

“I can give you my supplier for the drugs, along with information that ties them to some other nasty deeds.”

“Such as…”

“In addition to narcotic sales and distribution…money laundering…murder…”

Anne looks at Mariana and nods. Mariana pipes in with an offer.

“Mr. Cameron, given the large quantity and value of the drugs that were in your possession when you were arrested, the best deal you’re going to get for your current charge is life plus a $200,000 fine. That’s just the typical term, the judge may rule to make the minimum term longer. If you cooperate, and IF your information helps us make an arrest for the crimes you claim have been committed, I can get the term reduced to life with the possibility of parole in 14 years.”

“No…7 years, or no deal.”

“No…10 years and we call it a day. Best and final offer, Mr. Cameron, I promise you, that’s the limit.” Mr. Cameron glares at Mariana, deciding whether he should press his luck.

"Take the deal, Cameron, and start talking,” says Anne with a glare that could peel the paint off walls.

Cameron sighs, nods, and begins to spill the beans.

“The Rawson brothers…they are the suppliers for all the heroin being distributed between Halifax and Edinburgh, and they’re getting ready to expand north to Inverness. They have a large warehouse in Edinburgh where they receive the shipments coming in from the North Sea. They cut the product in the warehouse, wrap it into one-foot square bales, and distribute the product in smaller quantities using bakery vans. They get regular shipments…comes in like clockwork, I’ve seen it.”

“How often?” asks Anne.

“Every fourth Tuesday of the month. Comes in on a grain tanker. They’re making money hand over fist. On top of that, they are cleaning all this money through various businesses in Halifax and York. They must have 15 different businesses set up by now…coffee shops, dry cleaners, a movie theater…all mom and pop type stuff…they are flying under the radar.”

“How do you know about the money laundering?”

“Jeremiah told me. He once showed me a list of all the businesses they bought to enable them to clean the money. He also told me how they clean it. They change invoices from contractors and suppliers, then pay the money out to these third parties through these businesses. He said they are
starting to approach parties outside the UK to expand their cleaning operation...they have so much money, they can't clean it fast enough. Jeremiah said they need to clean about $10M per month. They are apparently talking to some people in Las Vegas about buying a small casino.”

“You mentioned murder...say more about that.”

“Christopher Rawson has this guy...a big guy...Mark Robinson. He’s in charge of security for the Rawsons. Whenever somebody does something to cock up the operation, Robinson is called in to eliminate the risk. More than one acquaintance has met their demise in an explosion of some sort...exploding cars, burning buildings...he’s bad news. Explosives seem to be his weapon of choice.”

“What kind of explosives?”

“Not entirely sure, but I think plastic explosives...C4 or Semtex.”

“Where does he store these explosives and how does he buy it?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never seen it. Jeremiah told me he's ex-military. He must have connections that help him buy the explosives. But Jeremiah tells me whenever this guy is around the hair on the back of his neck stands up. He’s afraid he might be next on Christopher’s list.”

“Where does this Mark Robinson live, do you know?”

“He has a home in York, but I’ve been told he also rents a flat here in Halifax...over on Hall Street across the street from a pub.”
Coffee and Cream

Early on a mid-November Saturday morning, Anne pops into her favorite coffee shop to pick up a latte for Ann before heading over to her house. *I get such a kick out of surprising her. She giggles like a little schoolgirl!* Since their first meeting at this very spot, Anne can truly confess she has never been more captivated by any woman…ever. They enjoy similar things; they converse on a wide range of topics; they make each other laugh; they never grow tired of the other’s company; and the sex…well…she’s definitely satisfied.

Anne doesn’t even realize she’s smiling until she hears Amy Sowden call her name.

“Anne?” says Amy with a smile and chuckle.

“Oh, hi! Sorry…you caught me in a daydream.”

“Looks like a nice dream! What can I get you?”

“Two large lattes, please, with a dollop of whip cream on top of one.”

“Ah, I see Miss Walker still hasn’t broken that habit yet, eh?”

“Not yet. She craves sugar like I crave…”

“Crave what?”

“Oh…nothing.” Anne flushes as images of Ann in mid-climax swim through her mind.

“Hey, Amy, I see the owners are making some changes to the place.”

“Yes, they are putting in all new flooring, a new pastry cabinet, updating the paint…there are lots of changes planned. Which is funny because most of these things I just did in the past year. I guess they don’t like my design skills. Gotta run love, I need to go refill some cups. See you soon! Tell Ann I said hello!”

“Will do, Amy, cheers.” Anne looks around at the various stages of construction and cringes. As she turns to leave she sees Harriett Parkhill and Thomas Ainsworth huddled in a booth in the back. She walks over to say hello and both seem surprised…almost shocked…to see her.

“Well, hello, Harriett…Thomas. It looks like we’re all getting an early start to the day. Or perhaps some of us are still finishing up Friday night.” A smile and a raise of the eyebrows from Anne causes Harriett to turn a deep shade of red.

“Oh…no…we’re just…friends.”

“Don’t worry, Miss Parkhill, it’s not illegal. Enjoy your Saturday.” As she turns to leave, there’s something odd about that entire scene that doesn’t sit right with Anne.

It’s a quick ride over to Ann’s house from the coffee shop, ensuring her surprise latte stays warm. Before Anne can ring the doorbell, the door flings open, two hands reach out and grab her by the lapels of her jacket, and yank her inside. Ann pushes her up against the foyer wall and presses a bruising, hot kiss on her lips. Anne is simultaneously shocked and laughing into the kiss. Anne is holding a coffee cup in each hand, doing her best not to spill the contents. For once, Anne Lister doesn’t know what to do with her hands.
Ann breaks the kiss, and with a huge smile on her face, says “HI! I’ve missed you… I hate it when I have to work the Dog Unit. I mean…I like it, but I hate not seeing you.”

Anne is still pressed up against the wall, smiling and chuckling. She never felt so good.

“I’ve missed you too. It’s just not the same when you’re not at the station. The days just draaaag on.”

“Come with me.” Ann leads her into the great room and pushes her down on the sofa, then straddles her. With the coffee safely sitting on a nearby table, Ann looks at Anne…deep into her eyes…and touches her face. “I really… REALLY…missed you.” She leans in for a slow, passionate kiss that takes Anne’s breath away.

“Ann” she says in a breathless whisper. Just the mention of her name causes Ann’s eyes to flutter.

Anne’s strong hands are on Ann’s hips, pushing her fingers into her skin, guiding her into a light, pulsing motion. She slides her hands under Ann’s shirt, only to find she is not wearing anything underneath.

“Take this off” she commands. Ann reaches down to grab the hem of her shirt, and pulls it up and over her head. Anne reaches over for Ann’s coffee, carefully removes the lid, and dips her index and middle fingers into the whip cream. She looks at Ann with a devious smile and wipes the warm cream on her nipples, eliciting a gasp followed by a “Mmmmm” from Ann. Anne sucks down hard on one breast, escalating Ann’s gasp to a loud moan. The process is repeated on the opposite breast, with tongue and teeth actively engaged, sweet cream sliding into Anne’s mouth.

Ann’s hands are interlaced behind Anne’s neck, and she’s unknowingly pulling on Anne’s hair, egging her on.

“Go lower,” whispers Ann.

“Hmm?”

“I said…go…lower.”

Anne pulls her in for another deep kiss, then moves down to ravage Ann’s neck with her tongue. Starting at her chest, she drags her fingers down Ann’s center, stopping at the bottom to swirl her fingers in a warm bath of moisture. She wastes no time pushing up and in with two fingers. Ann cries out and pushes down in a hunt for pressure. She is gyrating and pulsing, matching the pace of Anne’s fingers and looking into her eyes. There are kisses, sucking of lips and hot whispers, until Anne feels the tightening of Ann’s inner walls, followed by the ultimate release and a loud hiss through her teeth. She collapses against Anne, gasping for breath, her heart pounding. She softly whispers against her ear, ”I love you, Ann Lister. And I know you love me. It’s not what you say… it’s what you don’t say.” She gives Anne another bruising kiss then licks her lips. "I taste sugar."

I’ll have to bring coffee more often.

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Anne and Ann are still nuzzling on the sofa when Anne’s phone vibrates with a text.

“It’s Tib…she wants us to meet her in the park for lunch.”

“Ok, let me go get cleaned up. I’m such a dirty girl.” They both laugh as Ann jumps off Anne’s lap
and runs up the stairs for a quick shower.

Anne sighs a happy sound and texts Tib: ‘See you at noon.’

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Tib is waiting on a park bench as Anne and Ann approach her, arm-in-arm, smiles plastered on their faces.

“Well, well, well,” says Tib. “Aren’t you two a sight. I’m glad somebody’s getting it.” Ann flushes while Anne and Tib laugh.

“How’s it going, Tib?” asks Ann.

She looks around to see if anyone else is nearby, then launches into a quick summary of what has taken place at the pub for the past few weeks.

“There’s stuff being funneled through the pub from Edinburgh. Bread vans come in during the middle of the night. They off-load small square packages wrapped in plastic and put them in the storage room. Then they load trash bags full of money back into the van. I’m guessing it’s drugs, I don’t know what else it could be.”

“When does this happen, Tib?” asks Anne.

“Usually on a Wednesday or Thursday, between 1:00 AM and 3:00 AM. It’s not every week, usually once or twice a month. The first time I saw it was by accident. I got all the way home and realized I’d forgotten my phone. I went back to the pub through the alley and just happened to see them parked in the loading dock. I stayed hidden in a dark area…they never saw me.”

“That’s pretty damn dangerous, Tib.”

“Oh, and what I’ve done up to now isn’t?!”

“Good point…touché. What about the undercover cop, Thomas Ainsworth?”

“What about him?”

“Has he been any help?”

“Not really. I like having him there, just in case, but otherwise…meh.” Anne’s thinking about having seen Thomas and Harriett in the coffee shop this morning.

“What, Anne?” says Ann. She can tell by the look on her face that the wheels are cranking hard.

“Mmm…nothing. Tib, thank you. This is really great information. I’ll personally check the video feed and make certain we have a recording of those deliveries. I know Mallinson has been running through some of the recordings, I just don’t know how far along he is in the process. Until then…stay safe, ok?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll see you love birds later. Try not to get lost in the sheets.”
The following Monday morning Anne arrives at the station to find a cardboard legal box sitting on her desk. There’s an envelope on top containing a note from Mariana Lawton. ‘Fred, per your request. I hope this helps. See you soon? Call me. xx M- xx’

Anne flips off the top of the box and peers inside to find a jumbled, 12-inch stack of files, paper, photos, CDs and more. It’s a disorganized mess that will take hours, if not days, to sift through. She feels a headache coming on at the mere thought of having to handle each item. She pulls out the contents and starts to organize the items into obvious groups. *Ann would have this organized in about 10 minutes.*

She makes five piles, one each for photographs, CDs, handwritten notes, emails and miscellaneous items. She makes copies of all the CDs, tosses them in her desk drawer for later reference, and carries the originals over to Hariett Parkhill for further analysis.

“Hariett, I’m looking for any information on these CDs that will support our case. I recommend you start by searching each file for references to ‘Robinson’, ‘Edinburgh’, ‘Walker’ or ‘Warehouse’. Once you’ve conducted the initial search, please go back through and see if you can find any spreadsheets that might indicate activity related to money laundering…payments in and out, etc.. Thank you, Hariett. I know I don’t have to tell you how quickly I need this.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Anne walks away from Hariett, still uneasy about seeing her with Thomas Ainsworth in the coffee shop.

She then asks one of the members of her team, Suzanna Washington, to go through the emails and handwritten notes, and look for any documentation that relates to nefarious activity. This leaves the photographs and miscellaneous items for Anne.

Later that evening, Anne is knocking on Ann’s front door, holding the remaining contents in the legal box and Chinese take-out. “Surprise!”

“Anne! I didn’t think I would get to see you today! Get in here! Oooh, you’ve brought Chinese, yum!”

“With you doing Dog Unit work today, …well…I missed you and I wanted to see you.”

“I like that,” whispers Ann with a wide smile. She reaches her hand up to Anne’s neck and tip-toes up for a soft kiss.

With Kung Pao Chicken and Pot Stickers on their plates, they sit on the floor of Ann’s den and begin organizing the documents and photos inside the box. Once again they fall into a quiet rhythm of examining each item and determining its disposition.

Anne picks up a piece of paper from the miscellaneous pile and finds a copy of check in the amount of £50,000, payable to Mark Robinson. The check memo states ‘Security Consulting Fee’. The date of the check is three weeks prior to the Walker explosion. Like the tumblers in a lock, Anne can feel another piece of the case ‘click’ into place.

She looks over at Ann who is staring at a large black and white photograph, her brow furrowed and eyes darting back and forth.

“Anne…?”
“Hmm?”

“Look at this.” Anne scoots over next to her to look at the photo. Judge Walker is the central figure in the picture, with a small group of people gathered around him. It appears the photo is from some type of outdoor event…a barbeque perhaps. There in the background stands a large man conversing with Christopher Rawson and looking toward the Judge’s direction. It’s unmistakable…the man is Mark Robinson.

“God…Ann…”

Ann flips the photo over, looking for any indication of a date…nothing. “I remember this barbeque…it was just a few weeks before the explosion. That has to be why he seems so familiar…I must have seen him there. I know it’s been 10 years, but still…”

Anne swallows hard as she considers what she holds in her hand. “Ann…I just found this.” Ann looks at the copy of the check. She is now visibly shaking and tears are beginning to stream down her face. Anne pulls her close and does her best to comfort her. “Ann, it’s going to be okay.”

“You don’t know that, Anne.” She collapses into Anne’s arms as she feels the outer edges of her world start to disintegrate.
Jeremiah Rawson is once again at Hope Hall wearing a path in the carpet of Christopher Rawon’s study. It has become an all-too-familiar scene.

“Jeremiah,” Christopher says in greeting his brother, dripping with disdain. Christopher has always intimidated Jeremiah, even when they were young children. He’s never felt good enough around his older brother. He has always been bullied into doing Christopher’s dirty work and he has about reached the end of his rope.

“Christopher, we have a problem. I just heard from our confidential source. Cameron has cut a deal with Anne Lister and the Prosecutor’s office. He’s told her everything…the drugs, the money, Mark Robinson’s handiwork…all of it. We’re screwed, Christopher. I told you this was going to happen! We went too far, too fast!”

“Jeremiah, calm down! I told you before…leave Anne Lister to me.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Don’t worry about it. The less you know, the better.”

“Christopher, don’t make this worse than it already is.”

“I will handle it, love, I will handle it.”

As Jeremiah drives away from Hope Hall, he knows his world is about to come to an end. The police are closing in on all sides and it’s just a matter of time before he’s in prison for the rest of his life. With Anne Lister leading the charge, he has no doubt she will be successful in her efforts to bring down their enterprise. I need to do the right thing…I need to get ahead of this.

Back at Hope Hall, Christopher Rawson, seething with anger at his brother's incompetence to do even the simplest tasks, sends a text to Mark Robinson.

‘We need to meet.’

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DI Priestley is staring at the investigation board and sees a pattern forming that makes her hopeful. It feels as if things are coming to a head with the investigation, but there are still some important gaps that need to be closed. Her patience is growing thin and it shows. She corrals the team in the conference room and stands before the investigation board with notes in hand.

“Ok, people, listen up. We’ve made tremendous progress on this investigation, but we still have too many holes. Let’s take this step-by-step.

“First, the link between the Rawsons and Judge Walker is already established. The prior case involving Stansfield Rawson is on the record; that’s the first connection. We believe the Judge’s decision to reject the elder Rawson brother’s appeal was the motive for the Walker murders. In addition, they Rawsons and Walkers knew each other socially and lived within just a few miles of one another. We have the photograph that shows the Rawsons attended the BBQ on the Walker estate just a few weeks prior to the home explosion. I think we can check that box.

“Second, we need to tie the Rawsons to drug distribution. If we can implicate Mark Robinson, as
well, that will be bonus. Donald Cameron, the drug king pin, has already copped a plea and provided us with sufficient information that will enable us to gather hard evidence to support his claims. We can’t rely solely on Cameron’s testimony; he’s a convicted drug dealer…we need hard evidence that will stand up in court. We need to put a sting operation in place for the next time the grain ship comes in, and we need to get a team with sniffer dogs up to the warehouse in Edinburgh and do a search. I’ve already obtained the search warrant. DS Lister, I need you to coordinate both those operations. Please work with DC Walker and her team on the sniffer dogs.”

“Yes, ma’am, got it.” Anne’s gut lurches as she imagines possibly putting Ann in harm’s way.

DI Priestley continues. “Third, we need to link Mark Robinson to the Rawson brothers. We can do this using two items: the photo showing Mark Robinson speaking with Christopher Rawson at the BBQ, and the check stub for £50,000. Check that box.

“Fourth, we need to link Mark Robinson to the C4 and the wiring. This has been the most challenging piece. We have sources working with military channels on this item, but thus far nothing has turned up. Let’s hope the search of the warehouse turns up something. Leave this item with me.

“Fifth and finally, we need to tie the Rawson brothers to money laundering. Anne, have we been able to obtain any substantiating documentation from the photographs provided by Tib?”

“She has managed to upload hundreds of photographs to the secure server. Most are copies of invoices from suppliers. We believe the Rawsons are mixing dirty cash from drug deals with legitimate cash from these businesses they are buying up. It appears these businesses are doing extremely well because of the amount of dirty cash they are adding to the coffers, when in fact these businesses are barely breaking even. Also, they are marking up invoices from contractors, appearing as if they are spending much more than they actually are. This helps reduce their tax rate, too. So for example, they may record payment for top-grade carpet in their movie theater, when in fact they installed the lowest grade possible. I need to follow up with some of these contractors to determine the amount actually invoiced. John, can you help me with that?”

“Yes ma’am, can do,” says John Booth, Level 1 Detective.

“Harriett, have you been able to come up with any evidence on the CDs I gave you a few days ago?” asks Anne.

“Not yet, ma’am, nothing that sticks out, but I’ll keep at it,” says Harriett.

“Okay, team, that’s all for now. Please keep me updated. Anne, I need to see you alone for a few minutes, please.”

The rest of the team filters out of the room to the sounds of shuffling papers, disposable coffee cups being tossed into the waste bin, and background chatter.

DI Priestley closes the door to the room and turns to Anne with a look of concern. “Anne…I need to make you aware of something. I’ve had a letter…two days ago…an anonymous hand-written letter. It was about you. I think you’re in danger.”

‘What? What did it say?’

“The letter wasn’t specific…just a sentence or two telling you to ‘back off or you won’t live to regret it’. I’m telling you this because I want you to take extra precautions around safety. I’ve assigned an undercover officer to watch over your home. He’ll be part of the grounds crew. But
you need to be careful in all other areas...whether in your car, out socially...everywhere.”

“Can I see it? The letter?”

“No…it’s been handed over to the evidence team, they’re looking for prints.”

“It has to be the Rawsons, Eliza, who else could it be? What about Ann Walker? Any mention of her in the note?”

“No, nothing…just you. I don’t think she’s the target. Be careful, Anne. This investigation has obviously touched a nerve.”

It has to be Christopher Rawson that sent the letter. Anne is sitting at her desk in front of her laptop, but staring past its screen as she digests everything DI Priestley said to her. She’s known the Rawson brothers almost all her life and continues to be amazed at how low they will go in the name of greed. A death threat toward her shouldn’t surprise her, but it does.

Absentmindedly, she pulls out the CD copies she had made earlier from the legal box she received from Mariana and starts to look for references to ‘Robinson’, ‘Edinburgh’, ‘Walker’ or ‘Warehouse’. Within minutes she comes across an image file of a lease agreement between Mark Robinson and a storage company in Edinburgh. The agreement is for a multi-year lease of a 40,000 square foot warehouse located at an address that matches the address for the warehouse provided by Donald Cameron. She hits the print button, grabs the document out of her printer, and pushes away from her desk. How is it possible Harriett Parkhill didn’t find this file?

Anne quickly and angrily stomps down the stairs to the forensics lab, ready to read Harriett the riot act. She shoves her way through the door to the lab, but Harriett is nowhere to be found. Another lab technician informs Anne that Harriett went home sick a short while ago. Frustrated beyond belief, Anne runs back up the stairs into DI Priestley’s office and shows her the lease agreement. “I think we need to pick him up and bring him in for questioning.”

“It’s still circumstantial, Anne. Unless and until we find something in the warehouse we have no proof of any wrongdoing on Robinson’s part. We need to get the sting operation in place asap and hope we capture some evidence as a result.”

“I’m on it.”

It’s late in the day and Anne knows she needs time to think and plan for the sting operation in Edinburgh. She wants desperately to see Ann...to talk things through with her...brainstorm...hold her hands. She walks to the parking lot, hits the remote to unlock her car, chucks her briefcase into the back seat, shoves her key into the ignition, turns the key...and nothing. She tries again...nothing. She hears a click-click-click of the starter and that’s it. She lets out a loud groan and slams her hands against the steering wheel. “DAMN IT! Not today!”

She gets out of the car and reaches between the hood and the grill to press the hood release latch, props up the hood and looks at the battery. Battery connections look ok, what could be...oh shit! Taped to the left side of the battery, almost out of sight, is what looks like a grey stick of clay. Sticking out of the clay is a red and green wire that leads to a small remote control device with a red blinking light.

Anne turns to run as fast as she can. It feels like her entire world is moving in slow motion. As she runs, she hears several beeps from her car, with the interval between the beeps decreasing quickly.
She knows the bomb is about to explode, so she dives behind the nearest car for protection, only three cars away from her vehicle. The explosion is jaw dropping. The sound is deafening; the force takes her breath away. Glass is shattering all around her, both from vehicles and the windows of the station. Metal from her car and those nearby is ripped to shreds and flying through the air. Black smoke is billowing out of her vehicle and the intensity of the heat from the flames can be felt from 50 feet away. Cops are everywhere, spilling out of the doorways to the station. Sirens are screaming, people are running toward her, shouting “get up,” but she can’t hear anything. There’s a high-pitched sound ringing in her ears.

John Booth reaches her first, helps her inside and guides her to a chair. Blood is trickling out of her nose and ears, and she has small cuts on her face, arms and hands. And she is shaking… uncontrollably. Out of nowhere, DI Priestley appears and is kneeling in front of her asking her questions, but Anne still can’t hear her.

“What?”

“Anne…what happened?”

“I can’t hear you…my ears…I can't hear. My car wouldn’t start. I opened the hood…and…and...I saw a bomb taped to my battery. It was C4…and that red and green wire. It had a...a...remote control taped to it. Whoever set it off had to be nearby.”

DI Priestley turns away and gives orders to folks on the team, but Anne has no idea what she just said. People scatter like cockroaches to carry out her orders as she turns her attention back to Anne.

“Eliza…call Ann Walker. Tell her to get to Shibden as soon as she can. I need a ride home.”

“First things first, you’re going to the hospital. Then we’ll get you home.”

“What?”
“God, this hurts.” Anne is lying on her bed with an ice bag on her forehead, moaning into the empty space in her bedroom at Shibden Hall. She was taken to the hospital as a precautionary measure, and other than bumps, scrapes, minor cuts and a pounding headache, she is not expected to suffer any long-term damage. She looks and feels like hell, but she’ll live.

DI Priestley called Ann Walker, who was out in the field on a search and rescue, and relayed the news of Ann’s situation. She did not tell her about the bomb, only that there had been an accident and Anne was resting at home. As soon as she is able, Ann jumps into her car and floors it to Shibden Hall. Gravel is flying out from underneath her tires as she skids into the front driveway of Anne’s home. Within seconds, she is out of the car and up the stairs, crashing through the door to Anne’s bedroom.

“What happened?!” Ann is aghast when she sees Anne’s face. She looks as if she’s been put through a blender. Ann slides down onto the bed next to her, and takes hold of her hands.

“Shhhh...my head is killing me.”

“Ok,” whispers Ann. “Let’s try this again…what happened?”

“My car exploded.”

“What?!”

“Shhh…somebody put a bomb in my car.”

“WHAT?!”

“Sweetheart…please…it really hurts.” Anne recounts for Ann the details of the day, then tugs her forward to lie down next to her and holds her in her arms. “It’s going to be ok, Ann, I promise.”

“Anne...are you kidding me? You almost died!” Ann is incredulous as she thinks about how close Anne came to being killed.

“Yeah, but now they know…they failed and they know we’re on to them. They won’t try that again.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because…I trust my instincts. All they’ve done is wake a sleeping giant.”

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Tib is bleary-eyed as she closes up the pub at 1:30 AM the next weekday morning. A large party showed up late in the evening and made an absolute mess of the place. She wipes down the sticky tables, hauls away the trash, and loads the dirty plates and glasses into the dishwasher, then mops the floor. Instead of coming back in a few hours to photograph another file, she decides to do it now. I just want to sleep in.

After locking the front and rear doors to the pub, she goes into the office and begins the process to select the next file and photograph its contents. Just as she’s getting ready to upload the photos to the secure server, the power goes out. She freezes and starts to mentally retrace her steps to ensure
she properly locked up before coming into the office. Surely there’s no one here. She hears footsteps in the hall coming toward the office. Her heart is pounding in her chest and ears, and she’s panting. She looks up and sees the dark shadow of a large figure filling the doorway. Oh, God!

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It’s 5:30 AM the next morning and Anne is slowly waking up to the sound of her phone vibrating on the nightstand. She attempts to sit up and the pain hits her square between the eyes.

“AGH!” Every bone, every muscle, every inch of her skin is crying out in pain. Ann is awakened by the noise and groggily calls out to her lover.

“Anne, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing…just…good morning.” She kisses Ann’s forehead, then picks up the phone and sees a call coming in from Eliza Priestley.

“Ma’am…good morning.”

“Anne, how are you feeling?”

“A bit groggy, ma’am, but I’ll be alright. What has you calling me at this early hour?”

“Anne…we’ve got him. Mark Robinson. My military contacts have just busted a private who’s been siphoning off small quantities of C4 and spools of wiring, and selling it to Robinson under the table. The private has confessed and is willing to testify that he’s been supplying him with the explosives and the wire. We have two Special Weapons teams leaving to go pick up Robinson: one at his home in York, the other at his flat in Halifax. We’ve got him, Anne.”

Here we go.

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Anne and Eliza Priestley are in the video surveillance room listening to the audio transmissions of both Special Weapons teams sent to arrest Mark Robinson. Team 1 is in Halifax, Team 2 is in York. Given Robinson’s expertise with explosives, both teams have to methodically approach the respective properties to ensure the safety of the officers. After conducting detailed reconnaissance on the Halifax flat, Team 1 carefully enters the property and finds it vacant, except for an old mattress on the floor, an Ethernet cable dangling out of an outlet in the wall and a lot of dust. Team 2 in York reports a similar result…no one is there, but the home is fully furnished and clean. The team spends hours ripping the place apart in search of any evidence relevant to the case, but to no avail.

Mr. Robinson is in the wind.
She's Gone

“How is it that Mark Robinson is always two steps ahead of us?” asks Anne. A redundant question that hangs in the air like thick humidity...gross and uncomfortable. She’s sitting sideways in a booth at Tib’s, with her long legs extended outward on the bench seat, staring at her toes but seeing nothing. Ann is with her, a look of concern written all over her face. The cuts and bruises on Anne’s body are healing, but she still looks as if she got into a tangle with a seriously pissed off cat. Ann is becoming familiar with this look on Anne’s face…one of deep contemplation that is impenetrable by the noise and movement around her.

“We should be so far ahead of these guys by now.” She looks up and around the pub, searching. She turns to Ann, “Have you seen Tib tonight? She’s usually out and about with the clientele.”

“No, I haven’t, which is very odd.”

“I don’t see Thomas Ainsworth anywhere either. That guy is not impressing me…for someone who is supposed to be shadowing her, he’s pretty much invisible. I’ll be right back, I’m going to see if she’s in the back office.” She reaches across the table to give Ann’s hand a squeeze. “Don’t give away my seat,” she says with a wink.

Anne strides through the pub, turns to go down a small hallway and enters Tib’s office…it’s in shambles. Paper is strewn everywhere…the file cabinet is laying on its side with drawers half open, their contents spilling out onto the floor…the photographs, mementos and other paraphernalia that used to be so organized and strategically placed on Tib’s desk are now scattered to the four corners of the room, helter-skelter…Tib’s cell phone is on the floor, snapped in half and the glass completely shattered. Every cell in Anne’s body is vibrating as the realization hits her. Tib’s gone.

She runs back out to the main room, holds up her badge and begins barking orders.

“All patrons, leave the premises immediately! This is a police matter! Do not worry about paying your bill, you need to leave now...quickly! GO! MOVE!!” The 30 or so patrons in the pub do exactly as they are told. They grab their jackets, purses and bags, and with hushed voices and concerned looks on their faces, begin to file out the front entrance.

Anne runs over to Ann in the booth, grabs her hand, and says “Ann, I need you to run and get the crime scene tape out of my boot. Seal off the front so nobody else can come in.”

“Anne?! What’s going on??”

“Tib’s gone…they’ve got her.”

"Oh my God…” In a flash, Ann is up and out of the booth, intending to do exactly as requested. Anne pulls out her cell phone, calls Eliza Priestley, and quickly and professionally fills her in on the situation.

“Ma’am, it’s Anne Lister. I’m at Tib’s pub. She’s been taken. The office is in shambles, her cell phone has been destroyed, and our undercover officer, Thomas Ainsworth, is missing…he’s not here. I've evacuated the building, Ann is taping off the front and back entrances, and I am about to contact the Crime Scene Investigation team.”

“Okay, Anne, I’ll be there shortly. I’ll take care of alerting the CSI team.”
Anne hangs up the phone and sinks to her knees, her head hanging down. *Oh, God, Tib, I’m so sorry…I shouldn’t have done this…I shouldn’t have put you in this dangerous situation. Wherever she is, God, let her live. Take me instead.*
Has Christmas Come Early?

It’s 11:00 PM and the police station is absolutely buzzing with activity. Phones are ringing off the hook with concerned Halifax residents calling in possible tips on Tib’s disappearance; confidential informants are being hauled down to the station for interview; and every available police officer is out looking for Tib. The force is searching every back alley, dumpster, convenience store, and dark corner…no stone will be left unturned.

Anne, Ann, Eliza and Mallinson are in the video surveillance room looking over the security footage from Tib’s pub. Anne is leaning over the back of a swivel chair, her fingers digging into the fabric on the back panel as she thinks about what Tib is going through. She cannot allow herself to think the worst…that she might already be dead. Ann looks over at her, knowing full well Anne is wracked with guilt over what’s happened to Tib. She wants nothing more than to go to Anne, wrap her arms around her and tell her she’s not to blame, but now is not the time or place.

“I’ve got a dog team standing by, if needed, ma’am,” Ann says to DI Priestley.

Mallinson plays back the footage in slow motion. The video shows Tib in her office taking photos of documents with her phone…then she stops, looks up, asks “Who’s there?”…and the lights go out.

“The emergency lights in the hallway are on backup power, so hopefully we can get an identity on the abductor,” says Mallinson.

The footage shows a large man standing in the doorway. He is wearing a hoodie, making it impossible to see most of his face. However, they can see his distinctive nose. It’s bulbous and looks as if it has been broken a time or two during his life. When compared with a photo of Mark Robinson, there’s no doubt…it’s his nose.

“Wait! There!” shouts Anne. “Stop the footage there, I see something.” It’s evident from the footage there is a second shadow lurking in the hallway, just outside Tib’s office door. It’s impossible to make an identity, but it proves one thing…Mark Robinson did not act alone.

They advance the footage again…Robinson moves into Tib’s office and a struggle ensues. Good for you, Tib, fight. Robinson sweeps his arms across the desk in an attempt to get to Tib, sending paper flying in all directions. He comes around one side of the desk to advance on her, but Tib grabs the filing cabinet and pulls it down in front of him, preventing him from reaching his prey. She shimmies around the opposite side of the desk, runs toward the hallway, and slams directly into the chest of the second man. The second man holds a Taser against her neck, sending 1,000 volts of electricity through Tib’s body, causing her to collapse and convulse. Robinson picks up Tib’s cell phone, breaks it into two pieces, then drops it to the floor and stomps on it, smashing the glass and likely the components.

Anne is gutted as she watches the footage. She must have been so frightened.

Next they check the video footage from the alley behind the pub. It clearly shows two men dragging Tib into a white delivery van, and what appears to be a cloth bag over her head, her hands bound by zip ties. Her body is limp, still affected by the voltage swimming through her nervous system. The two men jump into the van, start the ignition and slowly drive away.

“DC Walker, I don’t think we’ll need that dog team given they have her in a van,” says DI Priestley. “Mallinson, get with the city dispatcher and see if you can find any other video from
other sources that shows the direction that van is traveling. We’ve got cameras everywhere in the
UK…we should be able to track it down.”

“Yes, ma’am,” says Mallinson, and he’s off and running, hoping he can help save the day.

"The CSI team is still taking prints, and Tib's phone is in the forensics lab. We're hoping we can get some of the final images she took just prior to the abduction," says Anne.

Eliza’s phone pings indicating an incoming text. She studies it for several seconds, and looks up with a look of surprise on her face. “Well, well, well…I have a visitor in my office. Mr. Jeremiah Rawson has asked to speak with me. Perhaps Christmas has come early.”
Anne is chomping at the bit to grill Jeremiah Rawson and rake him over the coals. She’s standing in the bullpen, shifting her weight side to side and biting on the nail of her index finger, clearly frustrated. “Ma’am, I’d like to take the interview with you. I’d really like to have a little chat with Mr. Rawson.”

“No, Anne, I need you focusing on the coordination of the raid we’re going to conduct on the warehouse. Have a detailed plan set up within two hours. I’ll take the interview with Rawson alone.”

Anne would rather spend the next two hours ripping Rawson a new one, which is why she finds it extremely difficult to focus on the task at hand. Meanwhile, DI Pristley has arranged for Mr. Rawson to be taken into an interview room rather than meet in her office. Knowing full well he has come to confess to some type of illegal activity, she contacts the prosecutor’s office to obtain approval to cut a deal. With the approval in hand she makes her way to the interview room, considering along the way the techniques she’ll use during the session.

Eliza looks through the one-way mirror in the door and observes Jeremiah’s behavior. He’s pacing around the small space…there is a sheen of sweat on his forehead and upper lip…he’s rubbing his hands together constantly, obviously demonstrating signs of anxiety. Good. He has a file folder in his hand with what appears to be a thick stack of paper. And that must be my Christmas present.

DI Priestley enters the room with her eyes narrowed and her jaw set.

“Mr. Rawson. Please have a seat. I understand you have something you’d like to say to me.” Eliza pulls out a chair from the small table and sits down, motioning for him to do the same in the chair across from her. She’s going with the straightforward, no nonsense approach.

“Yes, ma’am, I do,” as he plops into his seat.

“I’m listening.”

“Where to start…” Rawson licks his lips and places his shaking hands on the table. “My brother Christopher and I…we’ve been doing some bad things. I’m not proud of it, ma’am, and I never really wanted to do any of it in the first place, but…Christopher has a bit of a hold over me, so I didn’t have much of a choice.”

“Sounds a bit weak, Mr. Rawson, but go on…”

“I know you know what we’ve been up to…money laundering…drug trafficking…arson…outright racketeering. I will turn over all our documentation proving as many of these acts as I can. I have lots of records in this file that will prove our illegal activity, and I can probably get more, if needed. I’ll hand it all over to you…every last bit of paper. I’ll even testify against Christopher and Mark Robinson. But I’d like a deal. I will confess to the money laundering and the drug trafficking, but the other stuff I was never involved in.”

“But you knew about it, Mr. Rawson…you could have come forward then.”

“Some of it I did know about, yes…but I couldn’t come forward…Mark Robinson would have killed me…and Christopher would have ordered the hit…my own brother.”

Eliza continues to stare at him with a look of contempt on her face. This man nauseates me.
“What kind of deal are you looking for, Mr. Rawson?”

“Five years, plus 3 years probation.”

“Hmm, yes, that would be awfully nice, wouldn’t it? The best you’ll get out of me, Mr. Rawson is 10 years in prison and 5 years probation. And a hefty fine…think millions.”

Jeremiah sighs and considers his options. He knows there’s no other way out of this…he has no choice but to take the deal. His wife…his children…they’ll be disgraced. I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to them.

“Ok…you’ve got a deal.”

“What about the bombing of the Walker residence and DS Lister’s car?”

“What? Her car?!”

“Yes, you didn’t know? A few days ago an explosive device was found under the hood of her car. Had she not located the device and taken cover behind another car, she would be dead. What can you tell me about that, Mr. Rawson?”

“I…that…I don’t know anything about that, ma’am, I promise. I went to Christopher a few days ago to tell him DS Lister was gaining ground on her investigation into our bad behavior, and he said to leave it to him. He must have contacted Mark Robinson to take care of the matter. It’s supposition on my part, but I have to believe that’s what he did.”

“What about the kidnapping of Isabella Norcliffe?”

“What?!”

“Don’t tell me…out of the loop on that one, too, eh?”

“Oh dear God…Christopher…”

“Hmm. Two men were caught on surveillance cameras tazing Miss Norcliffe, then loading her into a delivery van and leaving the premises. We believe one of the suspects is Mr. Robinson; the other person is unidentifiable. If it was your brother, Mr. Rawson, where do you think they might have taken her?”

“I don’t know….I’m guessing it might be the warehouse…in Edinburgh. Where we receive and distribute the drugs. Honestly, ma’am, I had no idea she’d been kidnapped. This is just awful…it gets worse every waking minute.”

“Yes…it certainly does. Why do you think they would kidnap Miss Norcliffe?”

“Well…we knew she was photographing files for the police…we actually planted fake paperwork to mislead your detectives…make everything look above board. So perhaps they kidnapped her to punish her for that activity. But I think it could also be something much worse…”

“Worse?! Such as?”

“Yes, worse…to lure DS Lister to the warehouse so they can kill her.”

+++++++ 

Ann arrives at the station the next day, cup of coffee in hand, whipped cream on top. The memory
of Anne, the sofa and the whipped cream brings a smile to her lips and a flush to her cheeks. So much has happened over the past three months between the two women, it’s hard to believe they haven’t been together for decades. And yet it feels like just yesterday…she was 19 years old, running down the footpath that led over to Shibden Hall…chasing Anne down to invite her to lunch at the Walker’s house. Fast forward to current day and she cannot believe Anne Lister is now her significant other.

She checks her appearance in the rearview mirror, wipes away the dried rheum that collected in the corner of her eyes overnight, dry and crusty. God, she wore me out last night! But I loved every minute of it! She applies a light coat of lip gloss, gathers up her purse and phone, and makes her way into the building. Before she can drop off her belongings, Eliza Priestley beckons her into her office and closes the door behind her…then closes the window blinds.

“DC Walker…how are you?”

“Very well, ma’am. Is everything alright?” Am I in trouble?

“Yes, everything’s…well…I wanted to get some time with you, make certain you’re doing ok with the case. Things have taken quite a turn and I just want to make certain everyone is dealing with things in an appropriate way.”

“I’m fine, ma’am, really. I’m learning a great deal from DS Lister. She’s very good at her job and a great teacher…very inspiring.”

“Yes…I’m sure. Look, Ann…I’ll be brief. I need to speak with you about your…friendship…with DS Lister. I know that you two…well, you’ve become…close…and I worry about how this might affect the outcome of this case.”

“Sorry?”

“Don’t get me wrong, Ann, I’m not about to intrude. But I believe you would probably do just about anything for DS Lister…is that accurate?”

“Well…yes ma’am, I would.”

“Would you?...Would you die for her?”

“Wha…?”

+++++++  

Anne hears the sound of an opening door and looks up to see Ann coming out of Eliza Priestley’s office. She appears ashen and there’s a light sheen of sweat on her forehead.

“Ann? Are you alright?”

“Y..yes…I…I’m not feeling well…I’m going to go home for the day and lie down.” She’s already pushing her way through the outer door, doing her best not to look at Anne.

“Ann, wait, I can-.” The door to the outside world clicks shut behind Ann as she runs to her car with tears in her eyes, Anne staring after her with worry carved into the lines on her face.
“Okay, people, listen up! There’s been tremendous movement on this case in the past few days and we are about to go all in. We have a lot to cover, so everyone please take a seat and settle down.”  
DI Priestley is standing in front of her entire team in the conference room, eyes set, a stack of notes in her hand. 

Every single person in the room is buzzing with eagerness to nail these criminals to the wall. They want their Tib back, safe and sound. Any one of them would go to the ends of the earth for her. She is part of their family...their adopted sister. And they don't like it when somebody tries to hurt a member of their family. 

Anne looks around the room with anxiety boiling in her stomach. Ann is not in the room and she should be...she's a critical part of this operation. Anne tried calling her several times the night before; no response. She texted her several times, only to receive a single response, stating ‘I’m not feeling well, just want to sleep. Good night.’ Anne feels cut off… helpless… frustrated... and beyond worried. 

“I’d like to give everyone an overview of the conversation I had with Mr. Rawson yesterday. The salient points are as follows: 

“First, Mr. Rawson believes Tib was taken to the Edinburgh warehouse. It’s an out-of-the-way building, somewhat desolate. The Rawson's crew is obviously comfortable with the facility and its security, and it’s where they store and distribute their narcotics. They have complete visibility of their surroundings from all sides, except from the East. There’s an abandoned building next door that blocks their view in that direction. That will be our point of approach. DS Lister will cover the plan in just a moment. 

“Second, Mr. Rawson believes Tib is still alive. Knowing what he does about his brother, Christopher, and Mark Robinson, he believes they are using her for bait...they want us to come get her and take a few of us out in the process. I’m sure this will come as no surprise, but it's likely the building is wired with explosives. However, yesterday was the day the Rawson’s would have received their regularly scheduled shipment, so the warehouse should be full of product. They haven’t had time to cut it down to smaller volumes yet; that usually takes a few days. So it doesn't make sense to blow it all sky high. This means time is of the essence. We will be making the 4½ hour drive today for Edinburgh, and then launching our operation first thing in the morning. DS Lister, please give the team an update on the operation.” 

“Yes, ma’am.” Just as Anne stands to deliver her plan to the team, Ann walks into the conference room, her eyes cast downward, avoiding Anne’s gaze. Anne gulps, takes a breath and begins speaking. 

“Umm…as DI Priestley mentioned, an Eastern approach to the building is the most feasible to avoid detection. There will be three teams, three people on each team. Team One will take out all surveillance equipment…John Booth, you’ll be leading that team. Team Two will focus on searching for, and dismantling, incendiary devices…I will be leading Team Two. And Team Three will focus on search and rescue of Tib Norcliffe…this will be the Dog Unit led by DC Ann Walker. We are coordinating with the Divisional Commander of Edinburgh’s Investigative Unit, and we have their full cooperation. They have been providing surveillance on the building for several days and have provided us with a mapping of all cameras, alarms and other detection devices they’ve been able to spot up to this point. John, I’ll make certain you and your team have the map so you can plan the order in which to disable all devices. Mr. Rawson provided DI
Priestley with helpful information concerning the alarm panel on the East side of the building, which may enable you to disable all devices in one fell swoop.

“As for incendiary devices, it’s with 99% certainty we’ll be looking for C4. One member of the dog team will accompany us with an animal officer specifically trained to detect C4. I am now fully trained on how to dismantle the unique wiring mechanism that Robinson has been using up to this point.

“It’s unknown how much time we’ll have to perform this operation. Mr. Rawson seems to think we’ll have roughly two hours. However, given a product shipment was supposedly received in the past 24 hours, it’s possible someone may show up sooner to begin cutting the product. We do not have confirmation of a received shipment from the Edinburgh team…their view from the warehouse to the docks was limited. However, they did state that several vans came in and out of the building yesterday.

“Mallinson, you will be with DI Priestley in the surveillance van and she will be calling the shots from there. We will be in full tactical gear tomorrow, M16s, night vision goggles, and vest cameras included. We have 4 vans out back, gassed up and ready to take us to Edinburgh. Bring all your equipment, and bring your A-game. Team leaders, we’ll meet tonight at the hotel one last time. That’s it, ma’am.”

“Thank you, DS Lister. Okay, team, let’s get our equipment together and move out. Let your loved ones know you’ll be away for the evening, and drive safely.”

Anne hangs behind, slowly gathering her paperwork, wanting to catch Ann alone. “DC Walker, can I see you for a second, please?” Ann takes a deep breath and waits for the others to file out of the room. She knows Anne has her cornered and they are going to have to talk.

“Ann, what’s going on? What happened yesterday? You took off out of here without stopping to talk to me, and then you cut me off last night. What’s going on?”

“I…I just…wasn’t feeling well…I didn’t want you to see me like that.”

“Ann, come on…after everything we’ve been through? Me seeing you not feeling well is not a big deal. Are you sure that’s all it was?”

“Yes…yes…it just kind of hit me real fast. But it came and went. When I woke up this morning, I felt fine and I knew what I had to do. I’m sorry, Anne, I didn’t mean to worry you.”

Anne attempts a weak smile, knowing there’s something else going on behind those pretty blue eyes. “It’s okay…I promise. How about we drive up to Edinburgh together in the van with the dogs? Nothing like a little howling to lighten the mood.”

Ann smiles, sighs and says “I’d like that.”

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The 12-person team and the dogs arrive at the Marriott Courtyard in Edinburgh late in the afternoon. The hotel is several miles away from the warehouse district, making it unlikely they will run into Mark Robinson or Christopher Rawson. Everyone is on pins and needles, ready for this mission to be over. The possibility of explosives being on-site has everyone on edge, especially Anne. She spent several days prior to this one with bomb specialists from the Armed Forces, going over the red-and-green wire triggers and the proper procedure to disable devices using this unique wire. She is ready and confident.
She is also sneaky. She made arrangements during check-in to position her room next door to Ann’s room. Even though most people on the team know they are an item, propriety dictates separate rooms, especially the night before an important mission. But that doesn’t stop Anne Lister…five minutes after unpacking she’s knocking on Ann’s door.

“Hi…thought you might like some company and food.” She’s holding a pizza box containing one large pizza covered with Ann’s favorite toppings. And a Kit-Kat bar for dessert.

“Ooooh, do come in!” As soon as Anne sets the pizza on a small table, Ann moves over to Anne and wraps her arms around her waist. “I’m so sorry about last night…I wanted to see you so badly, I just…couldn’t. Will you stay with me tonight?”

Ann kisses the top of her head, caresses her neck, and says “of course I will. But only if you promise to eat.”

“No problem there, Miss Lister…I’m starving!”

With grease seeping through their paper plates, a roll of paper towels being used for napkins, and lots of “yuumms”, they eat their way through the pizza, smiling at each other, laughing and stealing kisses mid-chew. Anne loves these little moments…the kind that make you want to bottle up the scene inside a snow globe and carry it with you wherever you go, ready to recall the moment with just a single shake. *Maybe this is what heaven feels like.*

Ann gets up from her chair and sits on Anne’s lap, wrapping her arms around her neck.

“I need to tell you something…”

*Uh oh…is this it? Is she breaking up with me?*

“I want you to know these past few months have been the best months of my life. You have opened up a whole new world for me. You’ve shown me how much fun and interesting life can be, even in little Halifax. I see how you get up every morning, expecting the best out of life and every one around you…it’s beautiful…inspiring…incredible to watch. I never experienced anything like that until I met you. And all your hugs and kisses…your touch…your love…you’ve been the best thing that’s ever happened to me and I don’t ever want you to forget that.” Ann chokes out the last part of the sentence and begins to cry into Anne’s neck.

“Ann…sweetheart…are you going somewhere? Are you leaving me?”

“No, you silly goose…I just wanted you to know how much I love you…that’s all. Now shut up and hold me.”

Anne tightens her arms around her girl and gently rocks her back and forth. They stay like this for several minutes, but Anne can’t go for very long without tasting Ann’s lips. It starts with a gentle tug on her earlobe, a swipe of her lips down Ann’s cheek, and a cradle of her hand around Ann’s jaw to softly turn her head toward Anne’s mouth. The kisses and tugs start softly, then become deeper and hurried as the passion builds. Without breaking their kiss, Anne loops one arm under Ann’s legs, the other behind her waist, and stands to carry her to the bed. She gently sets her down and hovers over her, tucking a loose strand of Ann’s hair behind her ear.

“Every time I look at you, Ann…I swear…I lose my breath.” Ann’s heart explodes into a million pieces as she pulls Anne down for the most heavenly kiss. Anne can feel tears forming behind her eyelids as she feels the raw emotion in this kiss. It feels like the first time she ever made love with Ann…so new, so lovely, so raw. She never wants it to end. But her lover is craving more than just
a kiss and Anne is never one to disappoint.

Ann tugs on Anne’s t-shirt, pulling it out from the waist of her jeans, up and over her head, then pulling on the back of her neck to bring her down again to continue the heated kiss. Lips and tongues and teeth, nipping, pulling and sucking…it’s all jumbled together and so easy to lose any semblance of time and space. Ann deftly unhooks Anne’s bra, exposing her beautiful breasts to Ann’s welcoming hands, with Anne releasing a moan as Ann takes a nipple into her mouth and sucks hard.

Anne is never one to allow an uneven playing field, and it’s seconds before she is pulling Ann up to a sitting position so she can remove her Oxford University sweatshirt and the sports bra underneath. Ann’s breasts never disappoint…always so perky, so pink, so pretty. Anne’s hands, her tongue and her teeth explore every inch of the soft tissue, causing Ann to arch her back in feigned protest. Ann’s hands keep finding the top of Ann’s head, pushing her downward with a whispered request of “please, Anne…get inside me.” Anne’s not so accommodating in this moment…she wants to drag this out and make Ann absolutely explode.

Anne suddenly stands up and goes over to her kit bag, leaving Ann groaning for more. Within seconds Ann returns and slips something around Ann’s right wrist...a handcuff. The other end is snapped closed around a spindle in the headboard. She repeats the process with Ann’s other wrist, leaving Ann totally at the mercy of Anne Lister…the woman hovering over her with a devilish grin.

“Miss Lister! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“If you can’t behave, Miss Walker, I’m going to have to take matters into my own hands. You cannot assault a police officer the way you’ve been doing. I have to conduct my investigation without interference from you, so without further adieu…may I continue?...Is this okay, Ann?”

“You know…I think I’m going to have to acquiesce to your demands, Miss Lister, just out of interest to see where this goes. Curiosity has got the better of me and I think I’d like to see how this feels. So yes...you may continue.” The smile on Ann's face is beyond adorable...and hot.

Permission having been granted, Anne wastes no time reclaiming the woman she loves. Tender kisses are planted everywhere...behind ears, across cheeks and foreheads, down necks, across collarbones...she drags her tongue and teeth across the vast landscape of Ann Walker’s beautiful body, leaving a trail of purple and red and wet. Ann’s arms are tugging on the cuffs, but she is helpless in her pursuit to join in. She can only arch her body, and move her legs together and apart, in a response to Anne’s touch, or to request Anne to move in a different direction.

Ever mindful of the restraints around Ann’s wrists, Anne constantly looks up to check on her, making certain the cuffs are not cutting or pinching her beautiful skin. Ann is beginning to buck her body, insisting Anne satisfy her lover’s primal need. Anne has transported her to a place where she can’t think...she can only feel Anne's touch…and the so-damn-strong desire to climax into oblivion. She doesn’t realize she’s moaning and sighing and gasping, every time Anne touches her or bites her or trails her fingers down the inside of her thighs.

For Anne, this is the best part of making love...when her lover is so ready to explode and she just drags it the hell out. With a barely perceptible touch, Anne lightly moves the tips of her fingers between Ann’s folds and is bowled over by how wet she is. She moves down to lightly drag her tongue across the same area, then moves up to Ann’s mouth to kiss her, allowing her to taste herself on Anne’s lips. Anne whispers in Ann’s ear…”I love you, Ann Walker…” then she’s gone again to explore the southern hemisphere of Ann’s body.
Ann is dying to touch Anne…the handcuffs are maddening! “Anne, please take these off…now, baby.” Anne does exactly as requested. It’s not often Ann asks for what she wants, so Anne will never deny her…well…almost never. The second the cuffs are off, Ann grabs Anne’s face and yanks her in for a bruising kiss. Anne grabs each of her wrists in one of her hands and massages them, all while dragging her tongue and teeth across Ann’s plump lips. It’s not long before Ann is pushing Anne southward again, her need so strong it’s driving away any shyness she may have felt in the past. She grabs Anne’s right hand and pushes her fingers into her, begging her to touch her.

Ever attentive, Anne slips two fingers in, soon adding a third and begins the slow build of in-out, twisting her wrist and curling her fingers. The moans coming out of Ann’s throat sound guttural…a growl. Her head is being driven further down into the pillows as she arches her back and gyrates downward against Anne’s hand. Anne’s tongue takes a slow and circuitous route from Ann’s thigh to her bikini line to her hip bone…and finally to her clit…driving Ann into overdrive. She firmly grabs the back of Anne’s head and drives her mouth down on her clit, silently demanding she take action. Anne smiles and begins to flick her tongue across the nub of nirvana, then gently bites it with her teeth, and sucks and flicks, all while maintaining the motion of her right hand. Her left hand finds its way to Ann’s right breast, gently massaging and rubbing her nipple between her fingers, adding to the pleasure of this incredible moment.

Anne ignores Ann’s request for “harder…faster”…and instead maintains the steady pace, dragging out the length of time it will take for her to reach ecstasy. Ann can see the climax building in her mind’s eye…it starts out as a low flame deep in her belly, then quickly spreads like a wildfire, and explodes like a massive firework in a dark night sky. Her back is arching more than a foot off the bed, and her head is crushing into the pillow…her hands are wrapped around Anne’s head, holding her in place as she soars through this fantastic ride…gasping for breath, feeling her insides pound and pound and pound again, until she gradually falls back to earth into the arms of Anne Lister.

“Oh my God, what you do to me, Anne…there are no words for it.” Anne is enjoying the slow climb back up Anne’s body, as she wears a path with her lips from her belly to her chest, to her breasts, to her neck and ears, to her cheeks, to her lips…oh, those lips.

“Ann Walker,” Anne whispers.

Ann releases a heavy, happy sigh…”yes, my love?”

“Will you marry me?”

“Wha…What?” She cradles Anne’s face in her hands and gently lifts her face so she can see her eyes.

“Will you marry me? It’s a fairly simple question.”

“Anne…”

“I got a ring.” She gets up off the bed, makes her way back over to her kit bag and brings out a small black box. She opens it and sits down next to Ann on the bed. The ring is beyond beautiful…a wide, white gold band with five diamonds across it, each ¾ of a carat. It’s stunning…it shines like a brilliant beacon of love.

“I got this a few weeks ago… it was just so pretty… so dainty… so exquisite. I just wanted to put it on you the moment I saw it. Ann… I thoroughly intend to live with someone I love. I thoroughly intend to spend my evening out with someone who loves me. Someone who’s there all of the time, to share everything with. And for me… that person is you. Will you accept me? Will you marry me?”
Ann is on the bed, suddenly aware she is still very naked, with her lover proposing marriage.

“Anne…I…”

Anne is sitting next to her, questioning the look on Ann’s face, and it hits her…”Oh…it would appear I’m a bit quick off the mark.” The look of disappointment and devastation on Anne's face could not be more obvious, and Ann's heart breaks thinking a few simple words out of her own mouth could cause such pain.

“No, Anne…I just…we’ve only been seeing each other a few months…perhaps we should give it a few more before making such an important decision…make it through a couple of seasons, to really see what the other is about. I wouldn't want you to see all the different sides of me, and then realize one day you’ve made a bad decision.”

“Oh, Ann, no, that wouldn’t happen. I've known you most of my life…it’s been long enough for me. But I know we’re different, and if waiting is what you need to do, I understand.”

“But not long, Anne...six months…then decide? Please don’t be disappointed, Anne, you know I love you…more than anything in the world. But I do think we need to be prudent about this…give our relationship time to continue to grow and evolve…to be the best it can be. That's all I want for you...for us.”

Anne can’t help but smile at her. Ann is so sweet and kind and caring…and practical, good Lord!

“Of course. Six months it is. But don’t think I won’t be counting down to the exact day. 180 days…hmmm.”

“I’ll make it worth the wait, Anne, I promise. No matter what happens.”

No matter what happens?
Anne awakes at 4:00 AM to the melodious sound of ‘The Heart Remains a Child’ by *Everything But the Girl*. Ann is lying on top of her, her left arm stretched across Anne’s stomach, her left leg resting lazily between Anne’s legs, and her sandy blonde hair splayed across Anne’s chest and face. Anne pushes Ann’s hair out of the way, then leans over with one arm to turn off the alarm on her phone.

Ann hates mornings, and she wants nothing more than to shut out the world and bring her lover’s arms back around her body…especially this morning. **Today’s the day.**

All three teams are expected to meet in the lobby at 5:00 AM, fully dressed in their tactical gear and ready to move out. There’s just enough time for a quick shower and inspection of their gear before making their way to the lobby. As the women are about to head out the door, Ann comes up behind Anne, taps her on the shoulder, and moves in for a deep, strong hug.

“Please don’t think of last night as a ‘no’, Anne, it’s not. I love you more than life itself. Never forget that, okay?”

Anne kisses Ann’s forehead then gently lifts her chin so she can look in her beautiful blue eyes.

“I’ll never forget anything about you, Miss Walker. I like the idea of six months…it’s an indication of how seriously you’re taking this ‘proposal’. Oh, and by the way…179 days now. Just sayin’.” She finishes that last comment with a cute grin.

“Kiss me like it’s the last time…”

“Ann…stop that...you’re not going anywhere…today’s going to be just fine, so don’t go-”

“Shhhh…just do it.”

Anne takes Ann’s face in her hands and gives her a long, deep kiss, meant to stretch across a lifetime. With foreheads pressed together, Anne looks into Ann’s eyes, and says “Hey, sexy…let’s go catch us some bad guys.”

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Down in the lobby Anne groups everyone together by team. John Booth loads up with two of his teammates into one van, ready to shut down all surveillance equipment at the warehouse. Anne directs her two teammates, both from the military, into a separate van. She walks over to Ann Walker and her two teammates, along with their three German Shepherds, and ensures they have everything they need before loading into their van. She gives Ann’s hand a quick squeeze and looks into her eyes with a comforting smile. With everyone seated in his or her designated van, Anne and John check the communication signals with all headsets, as well as body cameras. Anne takes one last look around at everyone and quickly summarizes the mission one last time.

“Just a refresher…John Mallinson will jam all wireless communication signals from inside the surveillance van, preventing any remote detonation of any explosive devices, as well as any wireless alarms based inside the warehouse. Our own communications equipment is on a separate satellite signal and will not be affected by the jamming signal. We have no idea where Christopher Rawson and Mark Robinson are…it’s possible they are in the area and watching us as we speak. Given the condition of my now-destroyed car, we know they have remote detonation capability
using wireless devices. Therefore, we need to be extra careful, just in case. Once the signals are jammed, Team 1 will move in and cut all communication lines inside the warehouse, and extricate or destroy as many cameras as possible. John, your team will use the side entrance door. The Edinburgh surveillance team has already checked out the door, and they are positive there are no trip wires or wireless-based explosives connected to that door. Team 2 will then enter the warehouse, locate any and all explosive devices, cut their related wires and remove the devices from the premises. Once the “all clear” signal is given, Team 3 will enter the warehouse and attempt to locate Isabella Norcliffe, if she’s here, as well as any narcotics that may be on the premises. The objective for today is to get the narcotics on record using the body cams. If any are found, a separate hazardous materials team will be called in to remove them. Any questions? Is everyone a thumbs up?”

Everyone gives the thumbs up sign and Anne looks to Eliza Priestley for any last comments.

“Ma’am, anything you’d like to add?”

“Thank you, DS Lister. I just want to ask you all to please stay safe today…let’s make this an easy mission, 1-2-3.” She looks directly at Ann Walker and gives her a halfhearted smile, then nods her head once. The vans drive off to their designated locations, each parked in an innocuous spot to prevent detection from potentially prying eyes.

The surveillance van is parked high on a hilltop, overlooking the warehouse district and with easy viewing ability of the Rawson/Robinson warehouse using binoculars. John Mallinson double-checks everyone’s headset and body cam, as well as his own communications equipment inside the van.

At exactly 6:00 AM, Mallinson jams all signals within a one-mile radius. After a safe 30-second wait, John Booth’s team moves into position and cuts all alarm wires from the main electrical box that he pried open using special tools available only to police and military personnel. Within three minutes, Booth’s team breaks through the side door entrance to the warehouse and begins combing the interior for all cameras and other surveillance devices. Within 15 minutes, John and his team remove 22 cameras, and five Digital Video Recording devices, all used to monitor the comings and goings of warehouse visitors and employees.

At 6:20 AM, Anne and her team swap places with John Booth’s team, entering through the same side door of the warehouse. Using night vision goggles and with M16s in hand, Anne and her team carefully and quietly move throughout the main body of the warehouse. They locate six chunks of C4, along with a related wireless detonation transmitter tucked carefully into each chunk. Each of the three team members follows the exact steps to decommission the devices by cutting the wires in a specific order, removing the wireless transmitter, then carefully transferring the C4 to a heavy-duty explosives container. This is tedious work and takes the better part of one hour.

At 7:30 AM, Anne is now seated in the surveillance van and gives the signal for the Dog Unit to move in. DC Walker, her two teammates and their dogs, move into the warehouse and begin their search. Within minutes one of the handlers locates a 10’ X 20’ room packed full of plastic bins, each bin the size of a bale of hay. The bins are stacked up, all the way to the top of the 8-foot ceiling. Each container is loaded with what appears to be narcotics, ranging from heroin to crack to marijuana. The second member of the team locates another room full of the same type of containers and contents. As they move throughout the warehouse, everything the three members of the team say and do is communicated through their body cameras and headsets. Upon location of the two rooms, DI Priestley asks the two people on Ann’s team to remove one container from each room and bring it up to the surveillance van. Meanwhile, Ann Walker continues to move throughout the warehouse in an attempt to locate Tib.
Ann locates a hidden stairwell and informs Mallinson she is descending the stairs. As she makes her way downward, her body camera and headset begin to lose signal. Anne can feel her stomach clench as the communication signal weakens. They can hear roughly every third word from Ann’s headset, enough to piece together her status. However, her body camera signal is cutting in and out and is no longer reliable. She is able to communicate to the van that there are two rooms in the lower level and she is about to search each room.

Anne doesn't remember seeing this stairwell, so she quickly communicates with the other two members of her team whether they checked the warehouse space below the first floor. Both members of her team respond the same..."no, ma'am, we didn't see a stairwell."

“Ann, wait…we didn’t see that stairwell, we haven’t checked down there for explosives.” Anne's instincts are kicking in and she can feel a horrible, gnawing feeling creeping up her spine. “Ma’am, this is getting dangerous, I recommend we pull her out.”

“No, DS Lister, let’s allow her to continue.”

Ann opens the unlocked door to the first room and finds an old metal desk, an uncomfortable looking chair, an empty filing cabinet and a telephone. The second door is also unlocked. Through the grainy, sketchy video from her body cam, the team is able to see her enter the room and locate none other than Isabella Norcliffe. Tib is tied to chair with duct tape over her mouth, but she’s alive. Her eyes are wild and she’s doing all she can to communicate something urgent to Ann. She’s squirming so hard to free herself from the chair, as Ann attempts to calm her and cut her loose from the duct tape.

"I've...Tib...free....cutting loose..." Ann's voice communications are now severely hampered.

Anne is doing all she can to keep her breathing calm, as she rubs her hands up and down her cheeks. Thank God, Tib is alive!…Okay, get out of there, you two.

The team inside the surveillance van can no longer see the body cam video…the video signal is completely lost. Within 60 seconds of Ann communicating that she'd found Tib, a repetitive beeping sound can be heard over the voice line, with the interval between beeps becoming shorter and shorter. Anne knows exactly what’s about to happen.

“ANN, RUN!! GET OUT NOW!!” She rips off her headset, jumps out of the van and begins to run as fast as she can down the steep 1,500-foot slope toward the warehouse. She doesn’t even make it 300 feet down the hill. The explosion is astonishing. Sections of the warehouse disappear into thin air, as chunks of concrete and rebar catapult into the sky and turn into deadly projectiles raining down over a half-mile radius. The blast wave blows Anne back up the hill roughly twenty feet and knocks her unconscious.

At the explosion site inside the warehouse, the rapid, outward movement of the blast creates a vacuum. This vacuum immediately refills itself with the surrounding atmosphere, creating a strong pull on any nearby structural surface after the initial push effect of the blast has been delivered. As this void is refilled, it creates a high-intensity wind that causes fragmented objects, glass and debris to be drawn back in toward the source of the explosion. These objects are then pulverized into tiny fragments of dust and sand. What remains of the warehouse implodes with a bone-crushing roar, leaving no standing structure…no reinforcement beams, no brick, no nothing…it’s completely gone. A massive dust cloud hangs in the air and rapidly engulfs the entire warehouse district.

After a few minutes, Anne regains consciousness to find herself surrounded by DI Priestley, John Booth and John Mallinson. Her nose is bleeding profusely, her eyes are bloodshot, and she has added another fresh batch of scratches to her previous allotment from the bomb that exploded
inside her car. Once again, everything is moving in slow motion and she can barely hear what everyone is saying. There are police cars everywhere, lights flashing, sirens blasting…there are several fire trucks dousing the warehouse with thick streams of water…there’s a helicopter flying overhead. And then it hits her…

“Ann…where’s Ann?? Where’s Tib??”

DI Priestley looks at her with a sad, concerned look, communicating all Anne needs to know…Ann and Tib are gone. Her soul mate…the one person on the planet that understood Anne Lister and loved her regardless…the one woman who thrilled her with every kiss, every touch, every sigh…the only person who really truly mattered to her…is gone in a cloud of dust. All because of a bomb…a bomb that sat in a room Anne Lister failed to check.
Home on the Range

Anne is sitting in the oversized leather chair at Shibden Hall holding a glass of scotch on the rocks against her forehead, her eyes closed. This is how she’s been for the past five days…ever since that day. That horrible, fucking day. She simply sits. She has no energy to move a single muscle in her body…she’s not sleeping…the need for food doesn’t cross her mind…her phone is turned off…she hasn’t seen or spoken to anyone since the funeral. The funeral. There was a funeral service for both Ann and Tib. How do you have a funeral for someone who just disappears into thin air?

Nobody knew what to say to her…people just quietly milled about in their black mourning outfits, whispering…looking in her direction…talking behind their wine glasses. Anne has no idea who was there…it’s all a fog. She remembers seeing Elizabeth Sutherland…Ann’s sister. She came up to Anne, smiled sadly, squeezed her hand, then turned and walked away. Mariana was there, lightly running her fingertips up and down Anne's forearm in an act of comfort.

Half of Anne is missing…the better half. She is incomplete without Ann. Everywhere she looks she sees her love. The flower arrangements in the front hall…Ann put that together. The way the furniture has been re-positioned in the den. Ann rearranged it all to take advantage of the sunlight. Ann’s side of the bed is empty…it’s so cold. Do I sleep on my side of the bed or move to the middle?

The loss of Ann isn’t just the loss of a single person….it’s many people…Anne’s friend, her lover, her peer, her confidant, her travel companion, her date. What am I supposed to do now?

This is all my fault. Ann and Tib would be alive today if I had done my job. I should have done another check…I would have found that stairwell. Fucking Eliza Priestley…she should have listened to me. It should have been me that died.

Anne jumps up and throws her drink against the stone fireplace, sending shards of glass, ice and alcohol flying through the air. She bends over at the waist and screams at the top of her lungs. There are no more tears left to cry...the pain in her gut is excruciating and continuous...there's no relief.  She is suddenly overcome by the need to leave…to run away…go somewhere, anywhere.

She is driving Ann’s car now, with her own car having been destroyed in the earlier bomb blast outside the station. She grabs the keys off the foyer table, jumps behind the wheel of Ann’s BMW 5x and punches the accelerator to the floor, sending grass and gravel flying in her wake. She doesn’t care if she gets caught speeding…she doesn’t care if she crashes the car head-on into a brick wall…she simply does not care about anything.

Without realizing the various turns she has taken along her mindless journey, Anne finds herself at the shooting range. It’s mid-morning on a weekday and the place is empty…except for one other person…Thomas Ainsworth.

Anne watches him through the windshield of the car. He loads his service weapon, steps up to the firing line, positions his body in the proper stance, then fires off 17 rounds at the target…the full magazine capacity of the Glock 17. Anne counts every shot. She’s thinking about the day she saw Thomas in the coffee shop with Harriett Parkhill…and all the times she should have seen him while she was at Tib’s pub, but he was never visible…and how the Rawson’s and Mark Robinson have always been a step ahead of her team…and it all clicks into place. He’s a fucking mole.

Anne gets out of the car and makes her way over to the weapons table. Thomas is moving down the firing lane toward his target to inspect his work. His weapon is sitting on the table with the magazine removed…proper procedure when using a weapon at this range.

Anne calls out to him. “Hello, Thomas.”
“Oh…DS Lister…Hi…I didn’t see you there. How…how are you?” Thomas begins to make his way back down the firing lane toward the table.

“No…stay there, Thomas, would you? I could use your help setting up a target.”

Thomas stops about 25 feet away and watches as Anne picks up the 12-gauge shotgun, deftly loads in 6 shells, then pumps the slide with a little more force than necessary. She turns to face him, the gun butt resting on her right hip and the barrel pointed straight up into the air.

“You know, Thomas…it’s uncanny. That day…in the coffee shop…when I saw you with Harriett Parkhill. Something about that entire scene bothered me, but I just couldn’t put my finger on it. But now I think I understand. It took me a while, but I eventually put it together. She was giving you information about the Rawson case, wasn’t she?”

“What?! No! No, of course not!”

Anne brings the shotgun up to aim position then fires a single shot…BOOM!!…sending a slug plowing into the ground, five feet in front of Thomas. Dirt and grass and rocks fly into the air, some going straight into Thomas’ eyes. He screams like a three-year old child.

“DS Lister! Please…stop!! My eyes, I can’t see!!”

Anne continues. “And while you were supposed to be undercover at Tib’s pub, you were giving the Rawsons information about what she was doing…photographing the files and uploading to our server. Jeremiah confessed that they switched the files and used sanitized versions of their records, making their businesses look above board. That was you helping them…wasn’t it?”

“No! Please, ma’am, no! Stop!! Don’t shoot me!!” Thomas is desperately attempting to wipe debris from his eyes, holding his hands up and squatting slightly in fear of Anne’s next move.

Anne holds the shotgun up again, takes aim and sends a second slug into the ground, two feet to the left of Thomas’ right foot. BOOM!! The same result…debris flying upward, spraying all over Thomas.

“PLEASE, DS Lister!! Please, stop, I’m begging you!!”

“And when we put together the mission to raid the warehouse…you gave all the details to Mark Robinson and Christopher Rawson…they knew we were coming, they knew our exact plan…all because of the information you gave them…isn’t that right, Mr. Ainsworth?” Anne's voice is dripping with disdain.

“Oh, God, PLEASE…STOP!”

With the shotgun held in aiming position, Anne walks toward Thomas and stops when the end of the barrel is two inches from his forehead.

“Thomas, let me make this perfectly clear…I don’t give a shit what happens to me…I’m dead inside already. So I’m very happy to kill you. The outcome of this discussion is completely in your hands…you have control. But we are here because of you. If you hadn’t given the Rawsons all that information, we wouldn’t be having this friendly little chat. And two people near and dear to me would be alive. So if you want to live, you’d better start talking.”

“I…yes…I did it…I did everything you just said.” Thomas proceeds to wet his pants, a dark stain spreading outward from his zipper.
“What exactly did you do, Thomas?” Anne holds the gun steady, ready to blow Thomas’ head completely off his body if he doesn’t cooperate.

“I told the Rawson’s everything! What you were planning and doing…what Tib was doing. I convinced Harriett…no…that’s not true…I blackmailed Harriett…into giving me the details of the bomb fragments she was testing for you …and…and I gave that information to the Rawsons…I told Mark Robinson about the raid on the warehouse. I… I did it all. But I never intended for anybody to get killed! I promise!”

“How did you blackmail Harriett?”

“She…she’s been stealing opioids from the evidence room…and selling them. She needs money for her son…he needs an operation of some sort…I don’t know the details. I have her on camera stealing the drugs.”

“Guess what we’re going to do now, Thomas?”

“I dunno…Wha…What?”

“We’re going to take a little drive. We are going to drive down to the station and you’re going to have a chat with DI Priestley. And you’re going to tell her everything. Everything you just told me and more. And if you mention one word about our little chat here today, I’m going to drag you back out here and slowly kill you. I will start by shooting every one of your limbs off your body…and then I’ll do everything in my power to keep you alive. And once you’ve healed, I’ll bring you back out here and we’ll go at it again. It will take a very long time for you to die, Thomas…and it will be excruciating, I promise you. I will make that my life’s mission. Do you understand me, Thomas?”

“Yes…yes…I do…I promise, I’ll tell her everything.”

Anne walks Thomas at gunpoint over to Ann’s car, opens the rear hatch and removes a pair of handcuffs from her kit bag. She snaps the cuffs on Thomas’ wrists, tighter than necessary, and stares into his eyes as he cries out in pain. She grabs him by his skinny bicep and shoves him into the backseat of the BMW. She uses a second set of handcuffs to secure his wrists to an anchor strap on the floorboard of the car. Thomas will be hunched over for the entire ride to the station, with no ability to move his arms.

“Don’t get your piss all over my girlfriend’s seat, you shit bag.”

Anne shuts the door and pulls out her phone to contact DI Priestley. When Eliza answers on the second ring, Anne is to the point.

“This is Anne Lister. I’m bringing in our mole. Meet me in the interview room,” and hangs up.
But You'll Come Back?

Thomas Ainsworth is waiting in Interview Room 1 dressed in an orange jumpsuit, courtesy of the Greater Halifax Police Department. He is seated in an uncomfortable plastic chair, his legs nervously bouncing up and down. His hands are handcuffed to an iron u-shaped bar anchored to a small table in the small room. He is sweating, he’s nervously licking his lips, and he stinks like piss.

He knows this drill…he has seen it hundreds of times. DI Priestley will soon be sitting across from him, grilling him a million different ways to Sunday. She is a highly skilled interviewer, as is DS Lister and several other members of the team. They know all the right questions to ask and all the right buttons to push; they are ruthless in their pursuit of the truth. He knows it will be a waste of time not to come clean. Besides…she will kill me!

Anne Lister and Eliza Priestley are in the observation room next door watching Thomas through a one-way mirror. Anne gives Eliza the sanitized version of her discussion with Thomas, leaving out the more interesting parts about the shotgun and threats to kill him if he didn’t tell the truth.

Anne can’t look Eliza in the eyes; she is beyond angry with her. Anne will never be able to forgive her for not following her recommendation to pull Ann out of the warehouse while there was still time. Anne has lost complete confidence in her leader. She wants nothing more than to get this interview over with and get out of town…forever.

“Anne, this is really great work. This is exactly the break in this case we’re looking for.”

“Hmm. Too bad I didn’t put it together sooner...this story would have had a very different outcome.”

Eliza looks at Anne with sadness in her eyes. “I need to chat with you after the interview, Anne. Would you mind hanging around?”

“Maybe…we’ll see. I don’t think I should do this interview with you...you need to do it yourself. I’ll observe from here. If I go in that room it will take every ounce of energy I have left not to kill him.”

“Yes. Agreed. I’ll expect to see you afterward.”

With Ainsworth’s lawyer now present, Eliza enters the interview room and begins to slowly pick him into a million tiny pieces. Every relevant question is asked multiple ways, ensuring honesty in Thomas’ answers. Eliza takes her time...she wants this entire experience to be as painful as possible for him.

Anne is in the observation room listening dispassionately…until Eliza gets to the last part of the interview. Anne leans forward in her seat as she feels the discussion turning in a different direction.

“Thomas, we have been looking for Mark Robinson and Christopher Rawson for quite a while, and we seem to just miss them at every turn. Where do you think they are?”

“I think they’re at their other warehouse, ma’am.”

“What other warehouse?”

“Their warehouse in Inverness…in Scotland. They have a second warehouse up there where they
have started to store the drug supply that will be sold in the North. They’ve had it for several months. And with the recent explosion of the Edinburgh location, I feel certain they will redirect their supply that’s coming in by boat to the Inverness location. They’ll have to spend time at that warehouse to get it ready. The demand for their drugs is insatiable…they can’t be out of commission for very long.”

“I’m going to need the address of this warehouse, Thomas.”

“15 Point Road, Inverness, ma’am. It’s located across the Kessock Bridge in North Kessock.”

"What's the security situation at that location, Thomas?"

"Not nearly as sophisticated, ma’am. Mark Robinson is in charge of security, and I doubt he’s had an opportunity to wire everything up like they had in Edinburgh. I think they have a watchdog at night, maybe a camera or two. That was as of two weeks ago, so things may have changed."

Eliza pauses to look hard at Thomas. “It baffles me, Thomas…how someone like yourself with so much promise could turn on the people who thought of you as family. You’re the first person I’ve ever known who truly disgusts me. I hope you rot in hell.”

She leaves Thomas behind in a puddle of his own tears, with an officer re-cuffing him prior to escorting him to a public jail cell.

Eliza goes into the observation room expecting to find Anne, but the room is empty. She goes upstairs to the bullpen…no Anne. She tries to call her on her cell phone…no answer. I’ve got to talk to her…she’s coming apart.

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Anne is in Ann’s BMW, speeding toward Shibden Hall with reckless abandon. Another warehouse...Damnit!

It’s now dusk and Anne can feel her eyelids starting to drag. She knows she’s running on fumes, and if she wants to be successful in pulling off her next mission, she’s going to need sleep. She has a plan and it involves no one else…she’s going alone. Eliza's worst nightmare. Good.

She pulls into the driveway and sees Mariana’s Tesla parked in Ann’s spot. It punches Anne in the gut and she’s not certain why…disrespect on Mariana’s part? Mariana knows where the key to the house is hidden, so it’s only natural she would let herself in. Anne finds her in the den sipping on a glass of expensive red wine. Typical Mariana...only the best for her.

“Freddy...hi. I hope I’m not barging in...I wanted to see you.”  Anne can't help notice how voluptuous Mariana looks in her sleek black suit with a low-cut, v-neck silk blouse underneath her jacket. Even so, Anne is not in the mood for Mariana this evening.

“Hello, Mariana...what can I do for you?”

“Fred...please. Don't sound so happy to see me. I come here as your friend. I wanted to make certain you’re all right. You don’t look so good, Anne.”

“Thank you, Mariana, it’s nice to see you, too,” she says sarcastically. “Look…I’m rather tired and would like to get some sleep. I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m going to turn in early.”

“Anne...I just want to be here for you. I’m extremely concerned about you. How about we go upstairs and I sit with you until you fall asleep? You don’t look like you’ve slept for days...I
imagine it hasn’t been easy…”

The reminder that Ann will not be in her bed tonight…again…causes Anne to acquiesce to Mariana’s suggestion.

“Fine…whatever…I’m going up.”

They move upstairs with Mariana taking a seat at the foot of Anne’s bed. Anne grabs a soft-sided suitcase and tosses in several changes of clothes, shoes, undergarments, toiletries, extra magazines for her Glock and a jacket.

“Are you going somewhere, Anne?”

“Yes…I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“Where are you going?”

“No place that would interest you.”

“Oh. When are you coming back?”

Anne doesn’t respond…she freezes in place and stares down at the suitcase.

“Anne? When are you coming back?”

“I don’t think I am.”

Mariana feels her breath catch and her heart clench.

“Freddy…please…come sit down on the bed. Let's talk about this.”

Anne moves over to the foot of the bed next to Mariana and collapses into a seated position. Mariana moves in behind her and starts to massage her shoulders. Anne is so exhausted, she gives into the wonderful feeling of Mariana’s strong fingers working out the kinks in her shoulders and back. *Ann used to do this for me…she gives great massages.* Her head is lolling backward, her eyes closed…she’s starting to relax for the first time in a long while. She feels herself starting to slip into some kind of dream state…where Ann is in the room with her…sitting on top of her…leaning down to kiss her…her long hair brushing Anne’s cheeks as her soft lips meet her own. Anne reaches up to cradle Ann’s face and bring her in for a stronger kiss, tugging on her lips and searching for her tongue.

“Ann…”

“What?!”

“I’ve missed you so much, sweetheart…”

“Anne!” Anne is suddenly wide awake with Mariana sitting on top of her, a shocked look on her face. Anne sits up quickly and pushes Mariana off to the side. *What am I doing?! God, that was so real…Ann was here.*

“What the hell, Mariana?!”

“I just wanted…I thought we…God, Anne, I'm sorry…”

“You need to leave, Mariana…now.”
“Yes… I think you’re right. I’m sorry, Anne, I truly am.”

With no words left to speak, Mariana gathers her things and leaves Anne behind in the bedroom. She leaves through the front door of Shibden Hall, wondering if she’ll ever pass through its doors again, and whether Anne Lister is gone from her life forever.
The next morning is overcast and cold, a reflection of Anne’s dark mood. She has packed her belongings into Ann’s BMW and is now going through the house to do a final check on things before leaving on this extended trip. Will I live to see Shibden again?

The irony of walking away from Shibden Hall is not lost on Anne. To all her ancestors who fought so hard to keep and work the land, to reap the profits and sustain the lives of so many who went before her, she offers up a silent apology for abandoning the homestead as she walks out its front door.

On the way into town Anne gives a voice command to the BMW’s audio system to call Mallinson. John Mallinson answers on the second ring.

“DS Lister, how are you?”

“I’m okay, John, thanks for asking. Listen…I need a favor. Can you meet me at the Pennine Coffee Shop? And there’s something I need you to bring with you.” Anne gives John specific instructions on what she needs, along with a warning not to tell anyone where he’s going or what he’s doing.

30 minutes later Anne and John are seated in a booth in the back of the coffee shop, quietly conversing over a cup of coffee.

“Tell me how it works, John.” Anne is holding a signal jammer in her hand. It’s roughly the size of a credit card in length and width, and about a half-inch thick. There is a small antenna on the side of the jammer that enables a signal reach of roughly 3,000 feet—a little more than half a mile.

“Disrupting a cell phone is the same as jamming any other type of radio communication. A cell phone works by communicating with its service network through a cell tower or base station. Cell towers divide a city into small areas, or cells. As a cell-phone user drives down the street, the signal is handed from tower to tower. A jamming device transmits on the same radio frequencies as the cell phone, disrupting the communication between the phone and the cell-phone base station in the tower. It's called a denial-of-service attack. The jammer denies service of the radio spectrum to the cell-phone users within range of the jamming device. In the case of Mark Robinson, he’s using cell phone towers to communicate signals to his bombs to detonate. Jam his signal and you prevent the bomb from detonating.”

“Ok, got it. And how long with the signal jam last if I hit this button?”

“Usually it’s only for as long as you press the button. But this is no ordinary jammer…it’s from our friends in the military. If you hit that button you won’t have any type of cell service in your area for 10 minutes. To make the jamming signal last longer, you simply hit the button again and it will refresh the jam command for 10 minutes from the time you hit the button. May I ask, Anne…what are you intending to—“

“No, John…please don’t ask me that. It’s for your own good. I appreciate you sticking your neck out to bring this to me, but I can’t tell you any more than that.”

“Very well, ma’am, I understand. If you need some help I’d be more than willing to come with you.”

Anne smiles sadly at John, recognizing how much he and the rest of the team mean to her…how
she’s walking away from her family. Tears begin to well in her eyes and she quickly brushes them away with a thumb.

“Thanks, John…that means a great deal to me. But I won’t ask you to do that.”

They say their goodbyes and Anne reaches out to John for a hug. It’s an odd behavior on Anne’s part…she’s never really been all that physically affectionate with anyone on the team. John feels like she’s communicating a “goodbye forever” message in her embrace.

John watches Anne as she gets into the BMW and drives away with a two-finger wave. Back at the station John enters DI Priestley’s office with a quick message.

“Ma’am? She’s on her way.”

DI Priestley, with a knowing look, acknowledges John’s update with a nod of her head. She opens her laptop to view a map with a single blue dot icon moving north up route A9 toward Inverness.

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After a long day’s drive, Anne checks into the North Kessock hotel, a quaint, old establishment, only 500 feet away from the Rawson’s second warehouse. Anne was able to secure a room with a window facing the direction of the warehouse, enabling her to surveil the building from the comfort of her hotel room. She sets up her spotting scope and begins to observe the comings and goings of warehouse personnel. Within minutes she strikes gold…Mark Robinson and Christopher Rawson exit the warehouse and stand out front having what appears to be a heated conversation. Mark stomps off and gets into a haggard-looking green pickup truck, leaving Christopher at the front door with a snarl on his face. Anne makes note of the license tag number then turns her attention back to the building.

Based on what she is able to see on the exterior of the building, she confirms what Thomas Ainsworth told Eliza…there is minimal security. She spots one security camera located on the loading dock. Being blind to the other sides of the building, it’s difficult to be certain whether this is the only camera. It’s a risk she’ll have to take.

Around 5:00 PM Anne notices a dock worker pull up and unhook a German Shepherd from its leash, then lock the animal behind a wire fence around the loading dock. The dog looks young, strong and well trained to protect and defend. Anne checks her watch, then sets an alarm for midnight.

Before retiring for the evening Anne walks down to a local convenience store to purchase a loaf of bread, peanut butter and plastic sandwich bags. My secret weapon. She returns to her hotel room and spends the next half hour making peanut butter sandwiches, sealing them in plastic bags, and placing them in a backpack. She gets dressed in black sweats, a black long-sleeve t-shirt and a black hoodie. She lies down on her bed, closes her eyes and tries to pretend Ann is beside her breathing gently into her ear.
Anne is roused from sleep by a rendition of ‘Symphony’ by Suranne Jones and a children’s choir from the album *Got It Covered*. She brushes her teeth, drinks a can of Red Bull, then grabs her backpack and heads out the door. She leaves the old hotel through a side door that is not monitored by any equipment, and not visible by the front desk. Her goal is to remain as inconspicuous as possible as she makes her way toward the warehouse.

She arrives as the warehouse and within minutes locates the junction box on the left side of the building. She looks all around the perimeter, up high and down low, but does not see any security cameras, except for the one on the loading dock. She opens the junction box, turns off the main power switch, then removes from her backpack the tools necessary to disable the box entirely. It will take an electrician to get power restored to the warehouse.

Using her lock-picking skills, Anne easily gains access to the building through a glass door near the junction box. She pulls out a small flashlight and takes stock of the floor plan. It’s a fairly simple layout…one story with three enclosed rooms on the right side of the building; a loading dock with three bays in the back, each with a garage door opening to access the corresponding bay; and a metal walkway 15 feet above the floor that goes around three sides of the building’s interior.

There are roughly 100 storage bins, the same as those found in the Edinburgh warehouse, stacked in the back of the warehouse. Anne opens one of the bins and finds it contains smaller packages of what she assumes are drugs. *Looks like they’ve already cut the product, making it ready for distribution.*

Anne quickly checks the three rooms on the right side of the building and finds only old office equipment…desks, chairs, cabinets and phones. As she’s checking the last office she hears a growl. She slowly turns around and sees the German Shepherd standing in the doorway, drool dripping out of its mouth. Anne speaks quietly to the dog while removing her backpack and placing it on the desk.

“It’s okay, boy, I’m friendly…I’ve got a treat for you.” The dog tilts its head sideways in a curious regard. Anne opens the backpack, removes a peanut butter sandwich and tosses it to the floor in front of the dog. The dog gobbles it down in one swallow and looks at Anne approvingly. Anne pulls out another sandwich and repeats the process, only this time flinging the sandwich over the dog’s head, further out into the warehouse. This pattern repeats itself until Anne is out of the office and into the main body of the building. She begins tossing the sandwiches back toward the direction of the office, encouraging the dog to go into the room. Anne looks into her backpack…*Only two left.* She tears the sandwiches in half and repeats the process until the dog is in the back of the office, then she shuts the door. *Whew.*

Anne hears the sound of a car approaching the loading dock, its headlights visible through the dirty windows of the bay doors. She quickly looks around and decides to run up the metal stairs to the walkway above. She does her best to make herself as small as possible in a dark corner of the walkway as one of the bay doors opens to reveal Mark Robinson’s green truck. Mark backs the truck up to the edge of the bay, then gets out of the vehicle to help a second vehicle back into the adjoining bay. *A delivery truck.* Christopher Rawson also exits Mark’s vehicle and barks out orders to the driver of the delivery vehicle. He makes his way up the loading dock stairs, unlocks the back door to the building and goes to switch on the lights…no power.

“Bloody hell! Robinson! Go check the junction box, we haven’t got any power.” Anne slowly and quietly pulls her Glock 17 out of her backpack, ready for what’s next. She reaches into her pocket,
turns on the signal jammer and presses the button. Meanwhile, Mark Robinson leaves to check the
power, then quickly returns to inform Christopher, “the power to the building has been cut.”

“What?!”

Christopher opens the door to his office and finds the dog, growling and ready to attack. The dog
lunges at Christopher and takes a hold of his left leg in his jaws, chomping down hard. Christopher
screams in agony as Mark Robinson runs to find any sort of weapon or tool he can use to disable
the dog. Anne steadies her aim and shouts at Robinson…’POLICE! DON’T MOVE!’

Mark looks up, sees Anne on the walkway and laughs. With his cellphone in his hand, he presses a
button, fully expecting a bomb planted somewhere in the building to detonate…no such luck. A
look of confusion crosses his face as he tries again…same result.

“What the…”

“Drop the phone, Robinson.”

Suddenly there’s gunfire from the bay door where the delivery van is parked. The driver of the
delivery van is releasing a barrage of bullets in Anne’s direction. She’s a sitting duck on the metal
walkway and her only chance of survival is to run and hope the driver can’t hit a moving object. As
she runs for her life, Mark Robinson runs out of the building. Before he hops into his car Anne is
able to fire one shot that lands in Mark’s left butt cheek. Then she turns her attention to the
delivery van driver. With absolute precision, she ducks down onto her right knee and fires two
shots, directly into the driver’s head.

Christopher’s leg is still in the clutches of the animal’s jaw and he is writhing in pain. Anne uses
the last half of a peanut butter sandwich to distract the dog back into the office and closes the door.
She walks over to Christopher, leans over him and points her gun at his forehead.

“Where is he going, Christopher?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“You’re the mastermind of this whole operation…I’m guessing you know everything.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. For all I know he’s leaving to plot his next move on
you…I sure would.”

Suddenly there are police cars with flashing lights everywhere. More than half of the Inverness
Police Department has surrounded the building, and its senior leaders are now entering the
warehouse. Anne holds up her badge, identifies herself and explains the situation to their
commanding officer.

“We know all about it, ma’am. DI Priestley has already filled us in.”

“Priestley? How did she…”

“Your unit has been following you, ma’am…they were concerned for your safety.”

“Ah…I see.” Mallinson wasn’t so secretive after all.

Anne spends the rest of the night in interviews with Inverness Police, completing paperwork on
Christopher Rawson’s arrest. The plan is to extradite him to Halifax where he will stand trial on
multiple charges. With the evidence they have on hand and Jeremiah’s willingness to testify
against him, Christopher will never see the light of day again. Good riddance.

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Anne makes it back to her hotel room at 5:00 AM and collapses on the bed, falling into a delicious dream of her making love to Ann. When she awakes two hours later, she hangs her head and cries for a few minutes, unable to escape the deep depression that has engulfed her life. She takes a shower, gathers her gear, checks out of the hotel, and prepares to drive...somewhere. And then it hits her...I’ll drive over to see Elizabeth...see how she’s handling things. Anne plugs her address into the GPS and finds she’s only 20 minutes away in Fortrose.

A short while later Anne pulls into the driveway of the 18th century home. It’s lovely...a stone facade all around, with ivy covering a portion of its walls...an expansive yard out the back toward the cliffs overlooking the Moray Firth, drifting out toward the North Sea. On an unusually sunny and unseasonably warm day like today, Anne feels like she could stay here forever.

She knocks on the front door and a housekeeper answers, who tells her Mrs. Sutherland is upstairs with their youngest child and will be down shortly. She escorts Anne to the library, giving her a chance to take in the expansive view out the back of the house. It’s breathtaking. She can see a group of children playing, and there’s a woman in the mix, too, as they circle around her in a game of ring-around-the-posy. Anne feels a flutter in her stomach as she looks at the woman.

Elizabeth walks into the library and is shocked to find Anne in her home.

“Anne!...What...what are you doing here?”

“Oh...Elizabeth...I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to shock you by showing up so unexpected...I was just in the area on business and I thought...”

“No, no, you’re always welcome! I guess DI Priestley has told you then?”

“Told me what?”

“Oh dear...Anne...”

Anne hears a familiar sound out the back window...Was that...

“Anne...I think you should sit down.”

She turns to look out the window and sees the sun reflecting brilliantly off a head of blonde hair.

“Anne? Please...sit down.”

Anne feels a gravitational pull yanking her out the back door from the library, onto a stone patio, down a few steps and into the yard. She knows she’s moving but she has no idea how. She gets within 20 feet of the woman and gasps...

“Ann?”

Ann Walker looks up and sees Anne. Her mouth is agape and her hands begin to shake. She quickly ushers the children toward the house with a simple statement.

“Children...I want you to go to the house...now.” She’s now standing 10 feet from the love of her life, and she can’t hold back the tears any longer. Through her sobs she begins to explain.
Anne! Oh, God, Anne! They made it look like Tib and I died…they had to. Mark Robinson and Christopher Rawson were coming after you. DI Priestley made me promise not to say anything because your life was at stake. They programmed the video to make it look like we got caught in the bomb blast, but we were actually a mile away when the building exploded. I don’t know how Mallinsson did it, but he was able to make the video look like we were still in the building and had died. They were able to determine that Robinson and Rawson were nearby watching the explosion…they thought you would be the one killed in the building, not me or Tib. They put us in witness protection out here…until they’re caught. DI Priestley was supposed to tell you all this, Anne. When I found out she didn’t, I was so cross! I wrote you a letter…she was supposed to give it to you…to tell you how sorry I was…and to please…wait for me. But she told me later she didn’t give it to you.”

Anne is in utter shock. Is this real? Is Ann alive?

“Say something, Anne…please.”

“You…you agreed to die…for me?” Anne takes two steps closer to Ann.

“Yes…and I’d do it again if asked.” Ann takes a few steps closer to Anne.

"And you wrote me a letter?"

"Yes...a very long one...a love letter."

A simple whisper of her name…

“Ann…”

…and Ann rushes into her arms. The shock of it all is overwhelming. Anne grabs Ann’s shoulders in each hand and pulls her back to look at her. “This is real? You're real? This is happening?”

“Yes…we’re both here…I promise.”

Anne is suddenly overcome by the sadness she’s been living with for the past two weeks, and the rage she feels right now toward DI Priestly. She drops down to the grass and buries her head between her knees and sobs. Anne drops down behind her, wraps her arms around her, and rocks her back and forth in an attempt to comfort her.

Through her sobs, Anne tries to talk.

“You have no idea…none…what the past few weeks has been like…feeling the pain of your loss…the emptiness in the house…the thought of you everywhere I went…the absence of you from our bed…the lack of your voice…your touch…everything… just…gone!”

“Oh, Anne…I’m so sorry…I really thought you knew…Priestley told me she would tell you…I don’t understand why she didn’t. Oh baby, I’m so sorry!”

They stay in this embrace for a long while as Anne accepts the reality of the situation. Elizabeth is watching from the library window. Look at them…I wish George worshipped me like that…would hold me like that.

Elizabeth asks her housekeeper to put together a picnic basket which Elizabeth delivers to the women a short while later, along with a blanket, a bottle of wine and two glasses.

“I thought you might like a little food to go along with this homecoming celebration.”
“Elizabeth,” says Anne. “You knew about this at the funeral.”

“Yes, Anne, I did. And I’m so sorry. I didn’t say any words to you because I knew it would all come spilling out. DI Priestley made me promise not to tell you. I hated it…I absolutely hated lying to you like that. She’s very worried about you, Anne…you might want to let her know where you are.”

“Oh, she knows exactly where I am. In fact, I’m betting she’ll be here by day’s end.”

“Just know, Anne, that none of us wanted to keep you out of the loop. We thought DI Priestley would have told you shortly after the funeral. She wanted to make certain everyone thought the deaths actually occurred, especially the Rawson Brothers and that horrible Mark Robinson. I can’t explain her rationale for not telling you. I’m just so sorry you’ve been living with this pain for this long.”

Anne nodded her head, acknowledging Elizabeth’s kind comments. “I’m going back inside to manage the crew…I’m sure Sackville is terrorizing his sisters by now. You two enjoy yourselves. We’re going to have a special dinner tonight! I’ll see to it.”

Anne and Ann spread out the blanket, pop the cork on the wine bottle and open up the basket. They’re both starving, but what they are really hungry for is not in this basket. Anne looks at Ann, takes her face in her hands and gently kisses her.

“Every time I closed my eyes, Ann…there you were. I missed you so much…there are no words to describe how much.”

“I don’t ever want to be apart from you like that again.”

“You won’t be. Hey…where’s Tib?”

“She and George are out on the boat…fishing.”

“Fishing? Tib?”

“Yes, and she’s quite good at it. The last time they went out, George was so embarrassed. He brought home about a third of what Tib caught! His manhood wouldn’t allow him to be happy for her…he’s such a pompous little twit! But I have been living under his roof for the past few weeks…I suppose I should be grateful for that.”

“Tib…fishing…I can’t see it.”

“Come…lie down next to me.”

They spend several hours lying on the blanket, looking up at the clouds and envisioning animal shapes as they float by. There’s lots of laughter…one rolling on top of the other to gaze into the other’s eyes and press their lips in a kiss…feeding grapes and olives to each other. It’s a magical day…life has been breathed back into Anne Lister’s soul and she feels a renewed purpose in this world.

When George and Tib pull up to the dock around 5:00 PM, Anne is there waiting. The reunion is a happy one. Big, long hugs…lots of tears…profuse apologies…promises to never put the other in danger again…and more.

“And Anne…I promise…I never made a move on your girl the entire time we’ve been out here.”
“Well, thank goodness for small favors! I’ll tell you what…when we get back to Halifax, I’m going to help you find the woman of your dreams.”

“I’m going to hold you to that promise!”

There’s a celebratory dinner that evening. Even George is in a good mood. Multiple bottles of wine are consumed…stomachs are stuffed to the gills…long, desirous looks are exchanged between Ann and Anne…it’s a wonderful night.

A cold front is moving in, bringing with it a storm that is expected to produce a great deal of thunder and lightning. As the happy group begins to shut down for the night, Mark Robinson is 100 yards away in the backyard…a towel pressed to his left side, staunching the flow of blood…plotting his next move.
Want You in a Thousand Ways

It’s 10:00 PM that same evening and a storm is raging outside. Lightning lights up the sky in spiderwebs of electricity, with rolling thunder following shortly behind, indicating the proximity of the storm. Anne is in a guest bedroom taking a few things out of her bag when she notices a note on her pillow. She opens it and finds a message in Ann’s handwriting:

My love,

Do come quickly for I am dull and want you in a thousand ways.

xxx Your Girl xxx

Anne’s heart lurches and she lets out a stifled chuckle. She quickly changes into her pajamas…drawstring pants and a sleeveless t-shirt. It’s chilly in the house, so she zips up her hoodie over top the t-shirt. More for Ann to take off.

She moves to the bathroom to finish her nightly routine…brushing her teeth, rubbing moisturizer on her face and hands, applying cherry Chapstick to her lips, and for tonight, placing a dab of perfume on the pulse points of her neck. She’s nervous…so much has happened in a little more than a fortnight, but it feels like years…and it feels like she’s about to enter Ann’s bedroom for the first time. She places her hands on each side of the sink, stares into the mirror and whispers to herself…”Relax, Anne.”

Ann’s bedroom and Anne’s guest bedroom are on the third floor, with Tib in a separate guest bedroom on the second floor, along with the children’s bedrooms. George and Elizabeth are on the first floor. Propriety dictates separate bedrooms, but that’s never stopped Anne before…and definitely not tonight.

She slips down the hall to Ann’s bedroom, lightly taps the pad of a single finger twice on the door, and it immediately opens, with Ann standing in front of her. She is an absolute goddess. Her long, blonde hair draping down over her shoulders, framing her face just so. Her mauve-colored robe hanging open over her knee-length, silk nightgown. Her lips parted and her eyes indicating the fire burning deep inside her. All Anne can do is stare…the rest of her body is not functioning. Ann takes Anne’s left wrist in her right hand, pulls her inside the room, then presses her own back against the door, pulling Anne toward her.

“God, Anne, I’m so nervous…”

“Me, too…I don’t know why…but I am. I think…I think I just…want to look at you…for a minute.”

Anne takes a thick strand of Ann’s hair in right hand and lightly follows it down the side of her face to her shoulder, then lets her hand trail down her arm to her hand. She lifts her hand to her lips and kisses each of her knuckles, then turns it over to kiss her palm and wrist. She lightly strokes her thumb across Ann’s lips and whispers to her, “I missed you so much, Ann…I feel like I’ve been granted the ultimate wish…to have you back for even just one more day.”

“Oh, Anne…I plan on being back for a lot longer than one day.” Ann reaches up to Anne’s neck and pulls her toward her. Their lips are an inch apart, their breathing is shallow. “But if you don’t kiss me right now…I will surely die.”

“Well…we can’t let that happen again, can we?”
Ann gently tugs Anne’s neck toward her as Anne leans in for the most wonderful, magical kiss she has ever had. She literally sees fireworks, as her heart explodes into a million pieces. She swears she can hear angels singing and that she’s floating in the air. Tears start to leak out of the corners of her eyes.

For Ann, it’s no different. Her entire body is covered in chill bumps and she feels overwhelming emotions bursting inside her body. She, too, has tears in her eyes. After a long while they break the kiss and look at each other, their faces damp.

“Look at us,” says Anne as she laughs. “We look like blubbering fools in love.”

“We do…we are.”

Anne snakes both her hands inside Ann’s robe and places her hands on her waist, pushing her gently against the door. Her nightgown feels so cool and slinky against her skin. Anne leans in and kisses away Ann’s tears, then grabs her lower lip with her teeth and gently pulls on it.

“I think we should go sit on that bed.” She tugs on Ann’s lip again. “It looks much more comfortable than leaning against this door.” Another bite and tug of the lip. “Would you agree?” Anne swallows Ann’s response in a deep kiss.

She pulls Ann toward her as she walks backward toward the bed. The rain is pouring down outside and the wind is howling. A brilliant flash of lightning rips across the sky, with a deafening clap of thunder that rumbles through the house like an earthquake. The lights flicker then go out. There’s a small fire burning in the fireplace in Ann’s room, which casts a romantic glow across the bed and takes the chill out of the air. Ann can’t imagine a more perfect setting for this night.

Anne guides Ann to the bed and gently pushes her down on her back, then lies down beside her. She uses her fingertips to brush back Ann’s hair from her face and tuck it behind her ear.

“Ann…,” she whispers. “You have no idea what you mean to me. You wormed your way into my heart so quickly, I just didn’t see you coming. I don’t care how long it takes for you to decide about my proposal…I just know I don’t want to be apart from you for one more day…not one more minute.”

“Well, Miss Lister…that makes two of us.” Ann grabs Anne’s hoodie by the strings and pulls her on top of her for a bruising kiss. Anne snakes her right leg in between Ann’s legs and brings her knee against her crotch causing Ann to release a light groan, which Anne swallows in a kiss. Her hands push Ann’s arms above her head toward the headboard, as her tongue travels down her neck, kissing and nibbling her skin down to her chest.

Anne sits up and pulls Ann into a sitting position, then tugs on the robe to lift it up and slide the sleeves down Ann’s arms. Anne lets the garment slip to the floor then turns her attention to the nightgown. She slowly pushes the hem of the nightgown up Ann’s thighs, up her torso, then pulls the gown up and over Ann’s head and arms, revealing her porcelain skin and delicate breasts. Anne cradles Ann’s neck and gently lowers her down to the pillow, while pressing her lips to Ann’s, communicating an “I love you” in their connection. Ann’s hands come up behind Anne’s neck, as she allows her tongue to explore the depths of Anne’s mouth. God, Lister, you feel so good.

Anne’s hands find their way to Ann’s breasts, with her lips and teeth following shortly behind, as she nips and tugs at her nipples, causing Ann to push her hips upward toward Anne’s chest. Anne’s mouth takes a journey around Ann’s body, from her neck and collarbones, to her stomach and thighs. Each delicate kiss causes Ann to emit another light groan or desperate plea to take her. Anne is craving every inch of Ann’s body, inside and out. She feels her own desire pooling below
as she settles her body on Ann’s leg and begins to pulsate.

Anne goes back to Ann’s lips, kisses her gently and whispers, “I want to taste you, Ann.”

Ann’s eyes flutter close as she grabs Anne’s face and plans a desperate kiss on her mouth. “Oh, God, yes…please, yes!”

Anne lightly drags the fingertips of her right hand down the middle of Ann’s body, causing goose bumps to spread across every inch of Ann’s skin. Anne continues by dragging her hand down the outside and inside of Ann’s legs, with her lips following right behind. Anne is not into delayed gratification this night and wastes no time finding Ann’s most sensitive region with her hands and lips. Ann is so very ready as Anne dips her fingers into Ann’s wetness and lightly spreads it up and down her folds. Two of Anne’s fingers easily slip inside, as her lips and tongue seek out Ann’s clit. Her tongue lightly flicks out, causing Ann to buck and whimper. Her hands are gripping Anne’s shoulders, pushing down and pulling up as the in/out motion continues down below. Her hands move up to Anne’s head, hair and ears, with delicate pulling and pushing in rhythm. Anne’s lips are now covering Ann’s entire clit as her tongue and teeth lick, bite and tug, as she pushes another finger inside. Ann’s walls are closing in as her head pushes down on her pillow and mouth falls open in a loud moan. Anne slides her left hand up Ann’s body and slides two fingers into her mouth, which Ann eagerly sucks on as Anne quickens her pace. Anne can feel Ann reaching her peak as she bears down with her mouth and tongue, curling her fingers below. Ann’s back arches upward as she moans with delight, and begins to buck her way through an explosive climax. Anne hangs on for dear life, relishing every single second, every single emotion, as their bodies settle back to earth. No words are needed. They simply kiss for hours, touching each other’s skin, stroking each other’s face, looking into each other’s eyes.

The storm has died down, with a mostly light rain and a cool breeze blowing outside. The power has not yet been restored, but Anne is happy with that…she prefers the romantic firelight in their sanctuary. The sun will be rising in another hour or so. As Anne gazes into Ann’s eyes, she knows this isn’t a dream state…this is real. She suddenly remembers what happened with Mariana, and she knows in her heart she needs to tell Ann what happened. She doesn’t want any secrets between them.

“Ann…there’s something I need to tell-“

Anne hears a noise outside that causes her to sit up quickly and crane her neck toward the window. It’s the rustling of footsteps through leaves.

“Anne? What-”

“Shhhh….” Anne slides off the bed and goes to the window. She looks down and sees the dark form of a man…a large man…bending down and walking around the perimeter of the house. Oh my God, it’s Robinson.

Anne rushes back over to the bed and takes Ann’s hands into hers, pressing her palms lightly.

“Ann, listen to me very carefully. Mark Robinson is outside. I’m going to slip downstairs and see what I can do to take him down. I don’t want to alert the house. Stay here, it will be alright.”

“Anne, no! I’m coming with you.”

“No, Ann, stay here. You’re not dressed. I’ll be right back.”

Anne grabs her hoodie and slides it on as she slips out the bedroom door to her room, where she
grabs her Glock and an extra clip. She slips on her shoes then glides down the dark stairway to the
back door. She quietly unlocks the door and slips out into the night, her weapon loaded and in her
hand, safety off. She steps ever so carefully…inch by inch, so as not to make a sound. She comes
to the corner of the home where Ann’s bedroom window is positioned and looks down to the
ground. She bends over to see a chunk of C4 with a transmitter sticking out of it. The infamous red
and green wire is sticking out of the material, extending around the perimeter of the home.
Robinson has positioned a small chunk of C4 every 20 feet around the structure…all the chunks
are wired together and will operate off the one transmitter. When Robinson presses the code on his
phone, the entire home will be decimated. Oh my God...

Anne reaches into the pocket of her drawstring pants and realizes she has left the signal jammer
upstairs. At this very moment she hears the gravely voice of Mark Robinson.

“Drop your weapon, Miss Lister, and toss it toward me.” Robinson is standing 15 feet away. Anne
has no choice. She’ll do anything to buy time…perhaps appeal to Mark’s senses. She tosses her
Glock toward him and puts her hands in the air.

“Mark, this really isn’t necessary. This is between you and me…let’s leave the innocent lives
inside the house out of this. They’ve done nothing to you. It’s me you want.”

Mark leans over, picks up the weapon and sneers at Anne.

“You stupid Jack! You just couldn’t keep your nose out of it, could you? You kept pushing and
probing, like a determined dog!”

“It was my job, Mark, it’s not personal.”

“Bullshit, MISS Lister! I had so many opportunities to take you out. Too bad you found the bomb
in your car. And imagine my surprise when I followed you here yesterday morning, only to find
your friends, little Miss Walker and Isabella Norcliffe, alive and living the life of luxury.”

Robinson raises Anne’s weapon and aims right between her eyes.

“I’m going to blow up this house and walk away to the millions that await me. I can just slip away
and nobody will ever find me, and then I'll be the one living the life of luxury! You'll be dead in
your grave...all of you!”

“Please, Mark…you don’t need to do this.”

“Shut up! Get down on your knees!”

Anne sinks to the soggy ground and feels the moisture soaking into her pants. She is shutting down
internally. She’s mentally saying goodbye to everyone she knows and loves, especially Ann. The
situation is hopeless and there’s nothing she can say or do to change his mind.

“Kiss your ass goodbye, Miss Lister!” Mark backs up 20 feet and stands behind a large tree, then
pushes a code into his phone…nothing. He tries again…same result.

“What the -“

Anne hears the CRACK! of gunfire and watches as a bullet enters Mark Robinson’s left eye and
exits out the back of his skull, taking bone fragments, grey matter and blood along with it, spraying
it all over the nearby tree. He falls to the ground in a heap, dead as a doornail.
Still kneeling on the damp ground, Anne is having difficulty processing what just happened...her eyes and brain slowly start to merge. She turns her head to the right and sees Ann standing at the corner of the front of the house with a rifle, steadily aimed at Mark Robinson, a little trail of smoke wafting out the end of the barrel. She is in her nightgown...no shoes, no jacket, no robe...just her silky soft nightgown. Damn!

Anne watches as Ann tosses the rifle to the ground then turns to run toward her.

“Anne! Oh my God, Anne, are you alright?!”

“Wha...yeah...yeah, I think so...are you?”

“Yes. Oh my God, he’s got to be dead. Do you think he’s dead?” Ann is a nervous wreck and is talking very fast.

“Uhhh, yeah...you nailed him...he’s definitely dead. Ann...the bombs...they didn’t go off.”

“No, they didn’t. I was running through your room...looking for a weapon, and I saw the jammer...sitting on the dresser. At first I ignored it...but then I remembered John Mallinson had one just like it in the van, so I...I grabbed it. I saw what he did to operate it, so I pushed the button...and then I ran downstairs and got a rifle out of George’s gun cabinet.”

“Wow...wow, wow, wow...what kind of gun?”

“What kind of gun?? Umm...a .22 rifle.”

“Damn!...you really were #1 in your class!” She flashes her brilliant white teeth at Ann and reaches up to pull her in for a bruising kiss.

“Ann, you did it...you saved eight lives tonight...and who knows how many more he would have killed in the future. You killed the man who killed you parents and brother...God, Ann, you did it!!”

“I don’t want to think about that right now. Let’s get inside. It’s cold out here and we need to call the police.”

Ann grabs Anne’s hands and pulls her up to her feet, her pants soaking wet, and leads her into the house. The entire household is now awake, except for the children...they sleep through most anything. The police are called and within minutes, the front yard is crawling with crime scene investigators, patrol officers, a bomb squad and numerous high-ranking officials. How did they all get here so fast?

Ann and Anne are interviewed multiple times, with each interview ending in a “Congratulations, you got him,” and a slap on the back from appreciative law enforcement personnel. All of the C4 is collected by the bomb squad and placed in an explosives container, then removed from the property. Mark Robinson’s body is zipped into a large black bag and placed inside the coroner’s white van...a quiet end to a violent life. Ann and Anne are seated in the library at the back of the house finishing a discussion with the Inverness Chief of Police. The Chief looks at both women and says, “Nice job...now please...get out of my town, you cause too much trouble,” and smiles.

Anne looks out the window and sees the sun rising in the East. I’m so tired.
“Ann? I’m really tired. I’m going to go upstairs and get some sleep. Would you like to join me?”

“Yes, but only if you really mean to sleep. I know your devious ways, Miss Lister.”

Ann grabs Anne’s hand, tugs her out of the chair, and leads her up the stairs toward the third floor.

“Drop your pants, cutie…you’re not getting into the bed with wet and muddy clothes.”

“Ohhh, I love how you tell me what to do,” giggles Anne.

Someone had stoked the fire in Ann’s bedroom…it’s now crackling nicely and putting out the perfect amount of heat. They crawl into bed and Ann immediately cozy’s up to Anne, lying in the crook of her arm, tossing her arm and a leg over Anne’s body.

“Wow…for the first time I feel like I don’t have to sleep with one eye open worrying about—“

…and Ann is snoring…loudly. *How does she fall asleep that fast?!*

Anne wraps her other arm around her, closes her eyes and drifts off into the best sleep she’s ever had in her entire life. They sleep 16 hours, wake up, make love, and fall asleep again.

+++++++  

The next morning, Anne and Ann are packing up the BMW with their belongings, and saying their goodbyes with promises to visit soon, with no weapons or bad guys chasing after them. Tib has been invited to stay an extra week so she and George can continue their jaunts out on the boat.

“Tib…you surprise me everyday…fishing?” says Anne.

“Yeah, I don’t know what it is…it’s meditative, it takes patience…it’s pulling out of me the things I never bothered to incorporate into my life. I could get used to this. Besides…I don’t have a pub to go back to…I might as well stay here.”

Anne feels a wave of guilt wash over her, thinking about Tib’s pub.

“Let me see what I can do about that, ok? Meanwhile, enjoy yourself…but call me when you get back, I’ll pick you up at the train station. I love you, friend.”

With hugs all around, Anne and Ann climb into the vehicle and begin their 6 ½ hour journey home. They drive the entire way, constantly touching. Hands clasped, a hand dragging up and down a thigh, sneaking in kisses on the cheek…it’s continuous and affectionate. They can’t stop smiling. Ann leans across the console toward Anne and welcomes the warmth of her arm as Anne wraps it around her.

“Hey, do you have any plans next weekend?” asks Anne.

“Ummm, no…because I’m dead, remember? How in the world are we going to undo all of this? How am I going to explain it to the people that attended my funeral?! Good heavens, I haven’t really thought about all that until just now…So no, I don’t have plans, what do you have in mind?”

Anne chuckles, “It’s a surprise. There’s this place I want to take you, if the weather’s nice.”

“Where?”

“I can’t tell you that, then it wouldn’t be a surprise.”
“Ooooh, a mystery! Count me in! But first...you have to go see Priestley. No groaning! You have to do it, Anne, she's your boss.”

“Mmm...yes, about that...”

“What?”

“I've been thinking...I don't know if I want to do this job any longer.”

“You're joking,” Ann sits up and looks at Anne's face. “You are joking, aren't you? You? Not an investigator? Pull over, I think the world just stopped revolving.”

“Ha! I don't know...this last operation just really sucked the life out of me...it made me realize how high a price we pay to do this job, and I'm beginning to question whether it's worth it. I haven't quite made up my mind yet what I'm going to do.”

“Oh, Anne...I never would have agreed to do as Priestley requested if I had known this would have been one of the related effects! Oh baby, I'm so sorry!”

“No, Ann, it's not all that, I promise. It's more that Priestley didn't trust me enough to bring me in on the plan...that bond is now broken and I don't think I can go back there and work for her.”

Ann sits quietly and thinks...”What about another unit?”

“I don't know...I just have to let these thoughts and feelings flow through me...let it all play out.”

“Keep me in the loop? We can talk about it before you make any final decisions?”

Anne brings Ann's hand to her lips and kisses it gently. “Of course, my love. You are my #1 consult. You know...I haven't had a chance to commend you on that shot. How you pulled that off, I'll never know...it was a dark night, there was wind, Robinson was in the shadows...how on earth did you do it?”

“A little luck and the dim glow of his phone. When he held his phone up to punch in the code to detonate the bombs, there was just enough light from his screen to tell me where his temple was. I squeezed the trigger and hoped for the best.”

“Wow......just WOW. You're smart, level-headed, fun, creative, gorgeous, SO hot in the sack...and you can shoot! How did I ever get so lucky?”

They both laugh and Ann leans in to kiss her on the cheek.

“Careful, Miss Walker, I'm driving your car.”

“Yes, I noticed that. Will I ever get to drive it again?”

“I don't know, I kind of like this car. I've been thinking of getting one just like it. Maybe I'll just keep this one and we'll get you something like a scooter.”

"A scooter?! Oh, Anne, you're killin' me!"

+++++++It's Friday and Anne has to face the music...she has to report to the station and speak with DI Priestly. Ugh, I do not want to do this.
She takes a deep breath and knocks on Priestley’s office door. “Come in.”

“Ma’am.”

“Please…take a seat, Anne. I’m glad to see you’re back and looking well.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“I’m assuming that you and I have something in common at this very moment…neither of us wants to be having this discussion.”

“I’d say that’s fairly accurate, ma’am.”

“I would appreciate your letting me start…I owe you a massive apology, Anne.”

Anne was not expecting this and her puzzled facial expression shows it.

“I should have brought you in on the plan from the beginning…you should have been given the opportunity to participate in the planning effort. Please…let me explain why I did what I did. That day…when Jeremiah Rawson showed up at my office…we had several follow-up discussions. They were quite candid conversations and very enlightening…and also very alarming. He told me his brother, Christopher, and Mark Robinson would stop at nothing to have you killed. As if the bomb in your car wasn’t enough, they apparently had some other pretty gruesome ideas cooked up to eliminate you, and I couldn’t let that happen.”

“Perhaps that was the case, but you should have told me. You should have trusted me.”

“I know…I know…But I needed you focused on the task at hand, not looking over your shoulder every five minutes. The idea about Ann and Tib came to me after I discussed the situation with the Edinburgh Police Chief and the head of their Special Weapons team, along with my superiors, of course. I brought Ann into the plan early one morning…she was shaken by our discussion...she left my office in tears. She told me she needed a night to sleep on it. The next day she called me and confidently stated she wanted to help. She’s very brave…she cares about you very much.”

“Yes…she is…and she does.” Anne can feel herself softening a bit, while Eliza continues.

“I kept in close touch with the Edinburgh police unit monitoring the warehouse. Their team saw Christopher and Mark move Tib to the warehouse the day before we conducted our raid. The team had a thermal camera and they were able to identify Tib and pinpoint her location inside the building. I met with Ann and Mallinson off-site, and we quickly came up with the plan. Mallinson came up with some fancy loop process to make our video look as if Ann and Tib were still in the warehouse when the bomb exploded. The grainy video and sketchy audio were intentional…it helped to mask the fact that we were taking them out a door nobody could see from their vantage point, get them into a van and away from the warehouse as fast as possible.

"We had eyes on them…Christopher and Mark. They were in a green truck parked a half mile away on the opposite side of the hill looking down over the warehouse. We don’t know if they were able to intercept our video feed or not, but we couldn’t take any chances…we had to assume they could. Also, I needed everyone on the team to think Ann and Tib were dead…because I knew we had a mole…I just didn’t know who it was. I couldn’t take any chances. The message that Ann and Tib were dead had to get back to Christopher and Mark.

“As for the bomb, Mallinson set his signal jammer for a time delay of 60 seconds. As soon as Ann entered the stairwell to go down to the lower floor, Mallinson started pushing the button on the jammer every 60 seconds…he did that until we had Ann and Tib out of the building and safely on
their way. Robinson probably noticed the bomb didn’t detonate exactly at the time he thought it would, but it did eventually detonate, which likely removed any suspicion on his part. It was a delicate operation, but it worked.

“But why them?! If they wanted me, why didn’t you send me down there?!”

“We wanted them to think you would want revenge…that you’d go rogue and hunt them down on your own, leaving you exposed…no resources to back you up. So they could eliminate you, too. And that’s exactly what you did.”

“So much could have gone wrong, Eliza. You really hung me out to dry…you let me think Ann and Tib were dead for two weeks! TWO WEEKS! And then you LET me go rogue…no resources were anywhere near me when the shit hit the fan!

“I know, Anne, and I’m sorry. I was going to tell you right after the session with Thomas Ainsworth, but you’d left and you weren’t answering my calls. As far as resources, we were tailing you. We had a sniper on the hill outside the warehouse. And if you look at the delivery driver’s autopsy, you’ll find that your bullet hit him between the eyes, and the sniper’s bullet hit him in the heart. But I have to admit…we could have done a better job once you went to the Sutherland home. We lost track of Robinson after he fled the warehouse. We had resources searching nearby, which is why everyone converged so quickly at the Sutherland’s after Ann shot him. You’re right…you were on your own there. But I knew you could handle it…and you did…you and Ann both did.”

Anne is listening with a pained expression on her face. “Eliza…your actions have broken the bond of trust between us, and I don’t think I can do this any longer. I don’t think I can trust you…and that’s not good.” Anne stands up, removes her badge and gun, and places them on Eliza’s desk.

“Anne…please…don’t do this. Look…how about this….how about you take some time off. You’ve been through a lot recently and I’d hate for you to make such a significant decision about your career right now. Take a few weeks off. God knows you deserve it. Tell you what…I’ll hang onto your gun and badge…they’ll be here when you get back. But take some time, think it over…talk to Ann about it…then come back and see me. Let me build that trust back. I promise you I’ll do everything I can to make that happen.“

Anne looks down and shuffles her feet, then lets out a heavy sigh. “Okay…I’ll take the time…but I need a favor.”

“Name it.”
Ann is sitting in her bedroom looking around at all her belongings, thinking about her future and what that might look like with Anne Lister. *But where would we live? At Shibden? Hmmm…it is a pretty cool place…but drafty…I do love this house…but Anne’s at Shibden…and I want to be with her.* Ann’s mobile chimes with the receipt of a text from Anne.

‘*Meet me out front! Bring a jacket.*’

Ann smiles, jumps up, grabs her jacket, runs downstairs and out the front door, her gorgeous hair flowing behind her.

Anne is standing next to her brand new, silver Range Rover Sport, her right arm tapping the top of the roof.

“Do you like it?”

“WOW!!! I LOVE IT!!! Oh my goodness, it’s so YOU!!!”

“Hop in! I’ll take you for a spin. Also, Tib called, and she’s arriving on the train in 15 minutes. I promised to go pick her up. I have a surprise for you both.”

“Boy, you are just loaded with mystery these days!”

“I have to keep you guessing, Miss Walker! Otherwise you might get bored and tire of me too quickly.”

“Ha! Not likely.”

They pile into the car and Ann breathes in the scent of new, rich leather. “Ooooh, I love that smell.”

Anne proceeds to show her all the nifty things about the car, and tell her how she browbeat the salesman into giving her the price she wanted to pay. “It was the most fun I’ve had in weeks!”

They cruise down to the train station, and standing out front, waiting patiently, is Tib.

“Well, well, well…look at you in your fancy new car! Nice job, Ace!”

“Thanks! Welcome back! Let’s load up your stuff. I’ve got a surprise for you!”

They drive through the streets of Halifax, arriving quickly at Tib’s pub.

“Come on…I want to show you both something,” says Anne. Ann and Tib are looking at each other, confusion written all over their faces.

Anne walks to the front door, cuts the crime scene tape off the door, pulls out a key, unlocks the door and strolls in.

“Anne…I don’t think we’re allowed to do this…are we?” asks Ann.
“Yep, we sure can. Because I now own Tib’s pub.”

“You what??” Ann and Tib exclaim in unison.

“Yes, I now own Tib’s pub. The Rawson’s properties all went on the auction block. Given they are all in Jeremiah’s name, and he is now an admitted and convicted felon, the government can seize and sell off his assets. I worked it out with DI Priestley, and I was able to purchase Tib’s pub for an incredibly low price. I closed on the paperwork just last night. So Tib, here’s the deal…if you want…and when you’re ready…I will sell you back your pub for what I paid for it, plus 3% interest. I think the price will be much less than what Jeremiah paid you for it. All I want to do is cover the cost of inflation. You can take all the time you need to purchase it. And if you don’t want to buy it, that’s okay, too. But I really hope you’ll come back to run it. This is your place, Tib…nobody else’s…it’s your home. Whattya say?”

Tib looks around…the dust has accumulated over the past several weeks…dirty dishes sit on tables from when everybody fled the building at Anne’s command…peanut shells litter the floor…but it’s home.

“Anne, I…I don’t know what to say…this is just so overwhelming…I get my pub back? All mine?”

“Yes, Tib…all yours…no strings attached.”

Tib walks over to Anne and envelops her in a huge bear hug and sobs. Ann is looking on, tears streaming down her face.

“Ooooh, this is amazing. I get my pub back!”

“And I’ve hired a cleaning crew to come in tomorrow to help get this place back in shape. I’m coming over, too, to help out. It’ll be fun.”

“Hey, count me in!” says Ann.

“You gals are incredible. Anne…you’ve got a deal!”

+++++++  

The sun rises the next Saturday morning to reveal a picture-perfect, blue sky day and an unseasonably warm temperature. Anne pulls out her phone to check the weather app…The high today will be 65 degrees, no wind…excellent. Anne is running around the house with a smile on her face as she puts together a delicious picnic basket, grabs blankets out of closets, and chills a bottle of Pinot Grigio.

Ann is at home struggling to put together her outfit for this outing. She has no idea where they are going or what they’ll be doing, so figuring out what to wear is frustrating her to no end. She stops for a minute, smiles slyly, then pulls out a cute skirt, a t-shirt, a v-neck sweater, a scarf and low-heeled riding boots. She’s got a surprise for me?  Well I’ve got one for her!

At 11:00 sharp, Anne pulls up to find Ann sitting on her front steps…and she looks absolutely amazing. She hops up, opens the car door and jumps inside to Anne’s waiting lips.

“Wow…Ann…you look really nice.”

“Why, thank you, Miss Lister…I always aim to impress.”

“Well then, well done you…you’ve succeeded.”
“Where are we going? And will there be food?”

Anne chuckles. “I can’t tell you where we’re going, but yes, there will be food. Where do you put it all, Miss Walker?! I dare say you have a healthy metabolism because you are thin as a rail and eat everything in sight.”

“Hmm…everything?”

Anne looks at Ann out of the corner of her eye and smirks. “Okay, Miss My-Mind-Lives-In-The-Gutter Walker!”

“Hey! You’re right there with me!” Ann leans over to give Anne a kiss on the cheek, then says “Floor it.”

Anne puts the car in drive and they are off to their mystery destination. 20 minutes later Anne turns up an old gravel road, which quickly turns into a two-track path with grass growing down the middle. It’s quite a climb up the road and very bumpy.

“Where in the world are we going, Anne?”

“Shush.”

After 10 minutes of being tossed about by the rough road, Anne stops at an old wooden gate, jumps out, unlocks the padlock on the gate and opens it wide. She returns to the Rover, moves past the gate, then jumps back out to close and lock it. No trespassers, no interruptions. They drive a short distance to the top of a high hill that overlooks Shibden Valley. Anne leads Ann to an old tree stump, sets down their picnic items, then guides her to the edge of a small area at the very top of the hill. The scenery is stunning…fall colors still abound, washing the landscape in gold, copper, red and yellow hues…the green grass rolling out in every direction.

“Anne…this is beautiful! I had no idea this place existed! Whose land are we on?”

“Mine…it’s part of the Shibden Estate.”

“You’re kidding me? This is gorgeous!”

Anne turns around and points behind her. “A long time ago there used to be a coal mining pit over there…and a little house nearby.” Anne goes over to the tree stump and takes out the blankets, spreads them out, then opens the bottle of wine.

“Come on over, have a seat. Have a glass of wine.”

“Oh, how sweet! What a wonderful way to spend a beautiful day.” Ann flashes that golden smile that makes Anne’s knees go weak. She pours them each a glass of wine and they settle in on the blanket.

“I like to come up here sometimes and just think. Every time I come up here I get the feeling something very important happened right here on this spot. It’s hallowed ground to me.”

“What do you think happened?”

“I don’t know, but I’m definitely going to respect it.”

“Hey…that was a pretty incredible thing you did for Tib and her pub. You might come across as a hard-ass sometimes, but you’re really just a big ol’ softy.”
“Oooh, my secret’s out! She deserved it…everything I asked her to do and put her through…I just wanted to help her out.”

“And you spoke with Priestley…have you made any decisions?”

“No, not yet…still pondering. I was just hoping…that maybe…I’d have something to tie me down here before I start thinking about other places…other jobs.” She looks at Ann…hoping.

“Well…I’ve been thinking…a LOT.”

“Oh?”

“Yes…and it all comes down to this…You have a very strong personality, Anne…so the question is…will you do as I say?”

“Do as you say?”

“Yes…if this relationship is going to last, it's going to have to be an equal partnership, and you, my dear, are going to have to learn to do as I say and not always be in charge.”

“Pffft. This is easy. Of course I can do as you say. And I’m not always in charge.”

“Ha! Okay…then let’s start right now.” Ann grabs Anne’s wine glass and sets it down in the deep grass, then hikes up her skirt and throws one leg over Anne to straddle her.

“Whoa! Okay, what’s going on here?” Anne places her hands on Ann’s thighs and moves her hands underneath Ann’s skirt…only to find she’s not wearing any underwear.

Anne licks her lips and smiles…“Miss Walker…are you trying to kill me?”

“I’m testing you. Lock out your arms behind you and lean back on your hands.”

“But-“

“Now.”

Reluctantly, Anne does as instructed…she’s leaning back at a 45 degree angle, eager to see what Ann has planned and thinking about what’s NOT underneath that skirt.

“Okay, Miss Walker…look at me, doing exactly as you say.”

“Shush. Now…no matter what I do, you cannot take your hands off the grass. If you do, our relationship will not move forward.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“I’m dead serious. Do as I say or your will suffer the consequences.”

“I accept your challenge, Miss Walker, do your worst.”

An incredibly sexy smile spreads across Ann’s face as she leans in and slowly kisses Anne, her hands behind Anne’s neck, her mouth open, her tongue slipping in and out of Anne’s mouth, causing her to elicit a low moan.

“Don’t you dare let go of the grass, Miss Lister…your future depends on it.” Anne grips the grass in her hands to ensure she doesn’t let go.
Ann starts to slowly grind her hips against Anne’s pelvis, while she moves her hands up to Anne’s sweater, and drags its zipper all the way down until it falls open. While continuing to kiss her, Ann deftly unbuttons Anne's blouse from top to bottom, exposing her bra, chest and stomach. Anne’s breathing has definitely increased and her hands are squeezing the life out of the grass behind her.

Ann begins to lay a trail of kisses and gently bites down Anne’s jaw and her neck, as she reaches behind Anne and unhooks her bra, while running the back of her nails across Anne’s stomach.

“Ann…” she whispers.

“Shhhhhh…”

Ann moves back up to Anne’s lips and runs her hands underneath Anne’s bra to gently massage her breasts. Anne feels dizzy with excitement, and the wonderful smell of Ann’s perfume leaves her wanting to flip her over right now and have her way with her…

“I can’t let go of the grass.

Ann slides down Anne’s body and pushes up her bra, moving her lips and tongue around each breast. Oh, God, does that feel good.

Staring directly into her eyes and licking her lips, Ann slowly unbuckles Anne’s belt, unsnaps the single snap on her jeans, and unzips her fly. Anne can feel her body starting to hum and moisture building below. Ann hooks her fingers into the waist of Anne’s jeans and tugs downward.

“Lift your hips a little,” instructs Ann. Anne obeys as Ann drags her jeans and underwear down to her knees, then crawls back up to straddles Anne’s thighs.

“Remember…don’t let go of the grass.”

Anne gulps and feels her jaw go slack. Ann reaches down with her left hand and presses upward against the skin beneath her curls, exposing her clit. With her right hand she reaches down with her index and middle fingers, and dips into Anne’s folds to find her sopping wet…oh so ready.

“Mmmm, Miss Lister,” Ann whispers. “I think somebody needs a little relief.”

Anne is now pulling so hard on the grass, some of it is coming out of the ground at the roots. Ann begins to swirl her fingers around Anne's clit and tease her, back and forth, around and around.

“Oh, God, Ann…” Anne’s eyes are starting to flutter.

“Keep your eyes on mine, Anne…I want to see you come undone.”

Anne does as instructed. Ann continues the swirling of her fingers, keeping Anne’s legs pinned down. She can’t move and it only serves to heighten the intensity of everything she’s feeling. Ann leans in again to kiss her and tug on her bottom lip.

“You’re doing so well, Miss Lister…hang onto that grass.”

Anne is breathing heavily and she knows it’s only a matter of minutes before Ann delivers the Holy Grail.

“Faster, Ann…” She’s breathing so heavily now, as her head falls backward and she lets out a strong moan and involuntarily drives her hips upward as her interior walls explode and vibrate. She collapses flat to the ground, breathing so hard, but still holding onto the grass. Ann moves upward and leans over her, smiling, and quite satisfied with herself.
“Well, Miss Lister, I’d say you did very well with that little test!”

Anne wraps her arms around Ann’s waist and pulls her down on top of her, while craning her neck upward to deeply kiss her.

“I think it’ll be about a month before I can walk again,” says Anne, in the midst of a chuckle. “So what do you think? Did I pass?” Anne begins to pull her clothing back together.

“Hmmm…it’s a good first start.”

“What? Now come on…you said I had to do as I was told and hang onto the grass. I did that…I never let go. So I passed.”

“Yes, you passed the first test.”

“The first?? How many tests are there?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” Ann squeaks out as Anne flips her over and begins to tickle her.

“Miss Walker, you’re so mean to me!” There are lots of laughs and kisses, just a wonderful morning.

“Hey…did you say there was food?”

Anne chuckles, “Yes, I promised you food and I will feed you.” Anne lays out the smorgasbord and Ann wastes no time digging in.

“Oh my, this is so good. You’ve passed the second test, Miss Lister…you brought all my favorite foods.”

“Well, I do pay attention now and then, Miss Walker…but there is so much more to learn about you. I hope you’ll give me the opportunity to do that.”

Ann sucks olive oil off her pinky as she looks at Anne and smiles, refusing to respond to her comment. “Yummmm…I love Italian bread and olive oil…it’s got the potential to be so messy.”

“You are such a tease, Miss Walker!”

“Hey…sorry to get serious for a second, but there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you…what happened to Harriett Parkhill?”

“Don’t know…I asked Priestley about that the other day…she’s disappeared. Her flat is empty, her relatives don’t know where she is…she has vanished into thin air…which worries me.”

“When they find her, will she be arrested?”

Anne releases a heavy sigh. “I don’t know that either…what she did was definitely illegal. But I got the impression Priestley has a soft spot for her, so I don’t know what she’ll do. Maybe she’ll recommend community service only, or something like that. I worry about what will happen to her son. He’s really sick…he needs a bone marrow transplant, but apparently she can’t afford it.”

Anne notices Ann is starting to slightly shiver. The temperature has dropped a few degrees as the day drifts into mid-afternoon.

“Hey, you cold? We can go whenever you’re ready.”
“This has been so pleasant a day, I hate to leave.”

“Well, perhaps we can turn this into so pleasant an evening,” says Anne, as she moves in to kiss Ann’s cheek.

“Hmmm, I think I’d like that. Also, the test isn’t quite over, so…”

Anne reaches over and pulls Ann down on top of her again and kisses her one last time before they leave this hallowed ground. They pack up all their belongings and Anne opens the rear hatch to load up the Rover. She puts all rear seats down, revealing a large, carpeted area in the back of the car.

“Ann, can you help me here a second?”

Ann walks over as requested, and Anne wraps her right arm around her waist, positioning her backside on the opening of the hatch, then leans over her, pushing her down on the carpet and scooting her forward toward the front seats.

“I think it’s time you gave me an answer to my proposal, Miss Walker,” says Anne.

“I told you, Miss Lister…you have to pass the test.”

“Will I get extra credit if I do this?” Anne leans down and kisses her passionately, leaving Ann’s lips swollen and red, and breathing heavily.

“Maybe, but-“

“And what if I do this?” Anne pushes her right knee against the inside of Ann’s left leg, causing her to spread her legs a little wider.

“Well, that-“

“And if I do this?” Anne reaches her right arm down and pushes it underneath Ann’s buttocks, lifting her upward so she can hike up her skirt, exposing her most sensitive area. She places her fingers between Ann’s folds and dips her fingers into a wet pool, causing Ann to moan.

“And if I do this?” Anne isn’t wasting any time…she knows Ann is already excited and she isn’t going to hold back. She inserts two fingers between her legs and begins to push in, curl her fingers and pull all the way out…in, curl, out. Ann is sighing, her eyes closed, her hand hanging onto Anne’s left forearm. Anne inserts a third finger, causing Ann to moan a little louder. She holds her hand still, allowing Ann to adjust, then resumes her motions.

Ann’s body is starting to writhe. Anne adds a fourth finger, causing Ann to gasp and moan even louder.

“Are you okay?”

“Y..Yes…” Anne waits for her to adjust, then slowly curls her fingers and twists her wrist.

“Oh my God, Anne!” Anne can feel the pressure building as she continues her motions. Within seconds, Ann’s body convulses as she rips through a massive orgasm, her inner walls throbbing around Anne’s hand. It takes a full minute before Ann can speak through heavy breathing. Ever so slowly, Anne collapses her hand inside Ann and guides it out between her thighs.

Anne leans over her again and says, “And if I did that?”
Ann starts to laugh in between her heavy breathing. “Okay, you win...yes...I say yes. Yes!”

Anne drops down on top of her and hugs her so hard, smiling and kissing her, saying, “Ann...I promise I’ll do everything I can to make you happy...I love you sooooo much. I’m going to smother you in kisses every night,” says Anne, as she peppers Ann with kisses all over her neck and cheeks.

“I love you too, baby...just feed me and make mad, passionate love to me...you’ll be in good shape.” They both laugh.

“I think we’ve made a mess of your skirt. But I have to say...the idea of you going anywhere commando...well, I won’t be able to contain myself...word of warning.”

“That was my plan, Miss Lister. Now that we’ve indoctrinated your new car, how about we go to my place...I’m hungry.”

“Again?”

Chapter End Notes

I lied...not the last chapter :-)
How Could You?

Today’s the day! Anne is absolutely giddy with excitement. Today is the day they begin to move Ann’s belongings into Shibden Hall. For Anne, this date demarcates not only the “before Ann” and “after Ann” milestones, but the beginning of the life she has dreamed of since she was a teenager. For the past week she has been purging old cupboards and closets of dusty, trivial belongings – from earthenware to socks and shoes – all in an effort to make room for Miss Walker. Why does anyone need three spatulas?

As she goes about her task of determining “Keep”, “Donate” or “Trash” for each item, she realizes how cathartic it feels to be throwing out the old to make way for the new. A new life…and soon, a new wife.

God, how she wants this…has only ever wanted this. To wake up every morning next to the woman she loves and who loves her in return. To travel together, see the world and experience all it has to offer. To love, honor and cherish each other, in sickness and in health. I do.

Every piece of furniture, paneling, shelf and lamp has been dusted; every carpet has been steam cleaned; every dish washed and placed in a sparkling cupboard. As she moves about the house she mentally says goodbye to physical relationships with past lovers, especially Mariana. They will have to develop a new normal for their relationship…not just friends, but more like family.

Anne stuffs the trash and recyclable items into their respective bins, loads the donate items into her Rover, then bounds up the stairs to take a quick shower before heading to the donation center. From there, she’s off to collect Ann and her initial load of belongings. Ann.

Ann sits on her bedroom floor going through several boxes of memorabilia, touching each and every item, paying respect to the memories they evoke as they swirl through her mind like long ago dreams. Some memories are good, some not so much. Items that conjure the latter feelings will no longer claim a space in her life, as she is determined to start this new chapter surrounded by only the good things. Anne.

Ann hears the doorbell ring, then the squeak of the metal slot in the door, as the daily mail lands on her foyer floor like the sound of rustling leaves. She bounds down the stairs to pick up the day’s paper bounty and moves to the couch in the den to sort through the mail. As she carelessly tosses the advertisements and catalogs aside, she finds one small envelope with no return address, a red wax seal on its back. How formal and ornate.

Ann slips her index finger under the seam of the envelope and slides it to the right, revealing a single note card with large hand-written print in black ink. Her eyes scan the note…once, twice, three times…and the card falls from her hands onto the rug below. No…this can’t be true, that desperate voice whispers from within. Of course she and Mariana had always been a ‘thing’…probably always would be. Has this all been a game? I was out of the way so she was free to return to her usual ways? Ann can feel the nausea building, accompanied by a pain in her stomach that causes her to double over in pain. The tears begin to flow and her entire body shakes violently.

A short while later, Ann hears the sound of Anne’s car pulling into the gravel driveway, the large tires crunching the small rocks under the weight of the vehicle. Anne bounds up the front stoop, two stairs at a time, blows through the front door and swiftly heads toward the stairs leading up to Ann’s bedroom, almost missing Ann sitting on the sofa. Ann wishes she had.

Anne reverses course as she spies Ann out of the corner of her eye.
“Hi, gorgeous! Your carriage is here, ready to whisk you off to Shibden!” Anne sees the look on Ann’s face… tears lay wet on her cheeks…her knees together and her feet pointing inward toward each other…her hands on the couch…limp…palms up. Her mascara is smeared under her red eyes, her cheeks blotchy.

“Ann?” Anne whispers. “What’s happened?” Anne can feel the knot in her stomach moving up to her chest, unsure of what’s coming next.

“I’ve had…a letter,” says Ann meekly, looking down at the card on the floor. She snifs hard, a wet snif revealing she’s been crying for a while. Ann opens her mouth to speak again, but only manages a squeak before tears roll forward once again.

Anne strides over and drops to her knees in front of Ann, her hands placed gently on Ann’s knees, a pleading look on her face.

“Sweetheart…what’s happened? May I read it?”

Ann simply stares at her with a hopeless look.

Anne picks up the card and quickly scans the foreboding print, her eyes growing big as the message is revealed.

Miss Lister cannot be trusted in the company of other women. Ask her about her sleeping with Mariana Lawton just days after your so-called “funeral”.

Sincerely,
A Well Wisher

Anne collapses down to a seated position on the floor, her right hand massaging her temples.

“Ann, please…you have to listen to me. Nothing happened with-“

“I always knew that Mariana was your grand passion,” Ann chokes out through a sob.

“Ann, no…please-“

“I’ve always known I wouldn’t be good enough for you…you’re so clever and interesting, so dynamic. I mean, really…why would you want to be with someone like me?”

“Ann, sweetheart, don’t do this, I’m-“

“I know you thought I was dead…but in less than a week you crawl into bed with another woman…your ex…or so I thought…a married woman, at that!”

“Damn it, Ann, no, that’s not how it happened, you have to believe-“

“Not how it happened?! So you admit you were with her?!“ Ann is gobsmacked.

“Mariana was at Shibden, but that’s-“

“I can’t do this, Anne.”

“No, Ann please…I tried to tell you about this in Inverness, but then Robinson showed up and we had that whole hoo ha, so it became a low priority, but-“

“I need you to go…Anne…I don’t want you here right now.”
“Ann, please…let’s talk this through…you have to hear my side of-“

“Please, Anne…just go…now.” Ann stands up from her place on the couch, steps over Anne’s legs and moves up the stairs to her room, slamming the bedroom door and turning the lock behind her with a flick of her wrist, collapsing face down on her bed, sobbing.

Anne remains on the den floor, a million thoughts swirling through her brain, none of them good.

Who wrote this?!

She doesn’t believe me…she won’t even let me explain!

How could I lose her again so quickly?

Doesn’t she trust me?!

How can I fix this?

Do I want to fix this?

Will she always be like this? Always shutting me out when there’s a disagreement?

How can she not see how much I love her?!

HANG IT!

Anne is furious, desperate and in total disbelief, her emotions ricocheting like a bullet throughout her body. Her typical façade of self-control is completely gone and replaced with something resembling shattered glass. She wants to run…she needs to run. She stands up from her seated position and moves to the bottom of the stairs, one foot on the first riser, her left hand on the banister. What’s the point…she won’t even listen. Instead she yells at the top of her lungs.

"THAT’S NOT WHAT HAPPENED!!"

She turns and leaves through the front door, slams it behind her, gets into her Rover and guns the accelerator, spraying the neatly manicured gravel all over Ann’s front lawn.

Ann watches her leave from her bedroom window, feeling the walls of her life collapsing down around her. Anne…how could you?
The halls of the courthouse are cold and draped in shadows, creating an uninviting, ominous environment. The benches outside the courtrooms are stiff and uncomfortable, and Ann can’t decide if it’s sitting on the hard wood that’s causing the pain in her lower back, or if it’s her nerves anticipating public speaking.

Ann is one of four officers about to testify in a case involving a child kidnapping. Ann and other members of the Dog Unit tracked the suspect down and arrested him without incident, five hours after the kidnapping was initially reported. The young woman the suspect kidnapped at gun point was rescued without injury. All in all, this is an open and shut case. In fact, the prosecutor is currently attempting to negotiate a plea agreement, eliminating the need for any of the officers’ testimony.

Ann hates testifying. She should be used to it by now, she’s done it so many times. But each time she’s called to the witness stand her self-confidence is put to the test, especially when she’s cross-examined by a defense attorney. She leans her head back against the cold wall of the corridor and closes her eyes, mentally preparing for what’s to come…but all she can think about is Anne. It’s been two days since she’s seen or heard from her, the last image of her speeding away in her Rover. The passage of time, albeit brief, has allowed her to reflect on how poorly she handled things, and her will to stay away is waning.

Ann is suddenly brought back to the corridor by the sound of high heels clicking down the hallway. She looks to her left and sees Mariana Lawton walking toward her…dressed in her Armani suit, Jimmy Choo shoes, swinging an expensive leather briefcase…hair pulled back in a loose bun…looking like a million bucks. Ann self-consciously tugs on the sleeves of her simple cotton sweater, and feels her throat going dry as Mariana approaches and stops in front of the officers.

“Good morning. For those of you that don’t know me, I’m Marianna Lawton, the prosecutor for this case. We just successfully negotiated a plea agreement with the defendant, so your testimony is no longer required. I want to thank you for taking the time to come here today, and for whatever time you dedicated to prepare for your testimony. So you get the gift of time back on your calendar…you’re free to go.”

Ann gathers her belongings and stands up to leave when Mariana turns to her and says, “Ann, may I see you for a few minutes?” Mariana extends her arm toward the door of a private room. Ann hesitates, sighs, then moves to the door and enters the small, stuffy room, trying to decide whether she wants to sit or stand. Mariana seems to sense this.

“Please, Ann, let’s sit for a minute.” Ann reluctantly takes a seat then settles her eyes on Mariana.

“How can I help you, Mariana?”

Mariana sighs, a mix of kindness and regret on her face.

“Ann…I owe you a tremendous apology, and certainly an explanation.” Ann is taken aback.

Mariana continues. “I spoke with Anne two days ago…well, actually, I should say Anne spoke…more like yelled…at me…two days ago. She told me about a letter you received from an anonymous well wisher, and I believe I know who wrote it.
“Ann… I know you know of my history with Anne. It goes back many years, and it’s extremely complicated… mostly because of my marriage to my husband, Charles. In all honesty, Anne and I were probably always meant to be good friends and nothing more… I think it would have been better that way for all involved. But nonetheless, we have a history… and my husband knew it. He’s always been jealous of Anne, and he has always found a way to mess us about over the years. I believe it was him who wrote the letter.

“From the day you came into Anne’s life, she has made it perfectly clear to me that you are her priority.” Ann is sitting perfectly still, but her insides are coming unglued. Her lungs are screaming for breath and her eyes are brimming with tears. Mariana continues.

“I can’t say it didn’t hurt, but I certainly respected it. I knew she wanted you in her life, and when Anne Lister wants something, she goes after it with gusto. And it seemed like you were both headed down a great path. But then you ‘died’, and Anne absolutely fell apart. I’ve never seen anything so awful. She was the antithesis of her normal self… she became somebody I didn’t know or recognize. She couldn’t function, she wouldn’t communicate with anyone… she barricaded herself at Shibden and nobody could get to her. So… one day I went there… to try and get her to talk to me. She wasn’t at home, but I know where she keeps a hidden key, so I went inside to wait for her. When she finally showed up, there was this anger seething underneath the surface, and she was eager to pack her belongings and leave… for good.

“I followed her upstairs to her room and watched her pack, then convinced her to sit down and talk to me. She was exhausted… she hadn’t slept in days and you could see it all over her face. When she sat down I started to rub her shoulders to get her to relax. She was lying on the bed… and I… I leaned over and started to kiss her. I’m so sorry, Ann, I didn’t plan on doing this, it just happened. But then she said your name… she thought I was you. She was so tired, I don’t think she knew where she was or what was happening. We both quickly came to our senses and stopped, and agreed this wasn’t going to continue… she asked me to leave and I left. Ann, I’m so sorry. This isn’t Anne’s fault… it’s all mine. Anyway… Charles found out I had been to see Anne and he became jealous… again. Then after you ‘came back to life’, I believe he sent you that letter to get back at Anne… to wreak havoc on her life.”

Ann is dumbfounded. Her eyes are darting back and forth, trying to decide what she needs to do next.

“Ann… I hope we can figure out a way to get past all this… I’d like to find a way for us to all be friends. Anne will always be a part of my life, and I’m certain you will always be a part of hers. So I’m hopeful we can navigate our way to a great friendship.”

Ann stands up and gathers her things. “Mariana… thank you… thank you for this. Yes, I’m hopeful we can get there, too. But right now, I need to go find Anne. I need to fix this.”

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It’s just after noon as Ann’s car skids into Tib’s parking lot. She jumps out of the vehicle and walks quickly through the front door, scanning the room for Tib. She’s in her usual spot… behind the bar.

“Ann, hi…”

Ann’s eyes are wild and she’s talking non-stop.

“Tib, thank goodness you’re here. I’m trying to find Anne… I’ve been calling her and texting her, she’s not responding. I’ve been to Shibden… she’s not there. I’ve been driving all around town, but she’s not at her usual haunts. Do you have any idea where she is? I’m so worried, Tib. I really
screwed this up…I got this letter and it said she slept with Mariana… and I confronted her about it, but I didn’t even let her talk. I just assumed she’d done it. And then I asked her to leave and she did and I haven’t seen her since. Then Mariana told me what happened, and it’s not anything like I thought. I’ve got to find her, Tib, I’ve got to fix this. She’s everything to me, and I can’t-”

“Ann, stop…relax. Anne was here a little while ago.”

“Here? Is she okay? Is she upset?”

“Yes, she was here. Yes, she’s okay, and yes, she’s upset. She’s sad and hurt, Ann. Yeah, you did kind of screw up, but don’t give up…love wins. And Anne hasn’t stopped loving you…I can tell.”

“Where did she go, do you know?”

“All she said was she was going someplace to think…but I have no idea where that might be…any ideas?”

Ann face scrunches up as she thinks hard about where Anne might be.

“I think I have a pretty good idea.” She turns on her heels and walks out the door, determined to find Anne and win her back.

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Ann drives up the steep two-track road, the car rocking side-to-side as her tires ground through the deep ruts in the hard ground. She looks ahead at the locked gate and sees Anne’s car. Oh thank God! She hops out of her car, ducks under the gate and hurries toward the overlook they visited a few weeks ago. Sitting on the tree stump looking out over the valley is Anne. The mere sight of her brings a rush of emotions, ranging from relief to dread to excitement to love.

“Anne?”

Anne stands up and turns around at the sound of her voice…a shocked, but hurt, look on her face. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you…”

“Well…congratulations, you found me.” Ann takes several steps toward her and Anne backs up a step toward the edge of the steep slope.

“Anne, please…let me speak…I have so many things to say to you, it’s difficult to know where to begin…but let me start with I’m sorry…Anne, I did it all wrong. I should have listened to you, but I had it cemented in my brain that what was in that letter actually happened…but now I know differently. Seeing that letter brought up all my insecurities…and it reinforced old beliefs that someone like you would never want to be with someone like me.”

“Ann…after everything we’ve been through…after all we’ve shared…how could you possibly think that?!”

“Because Ann…sometimes the bad stuff is just easier to believe…I just didn’t think I’d be enough for you…I mean…you’re Anne Lister. You’ve got more swagger than Hans Solo…you’re like a super nova with little chance of burning out. You’re intoxicating, you’re sweet, you’re funny, you’re confident, you’re captivating. You’re a sex bomb, for God’s sake! I’m none of those things…in fact, I’m the polar opposite. And I just couldn’t imagine I could hold your attention for very long. But there are a couple of people who have convinced me otherwise…and I owe them a
debt of gratitude I can never repay…Tib and Mariana.”

“Mariana?” Anne is perplexed.

“Yes…we spoke this morning. She told me what really happened…what I should have allowed you to tell me…I’m so sorry, Anne. To be honest, that whole situation would never have happened if I hadn’t agreed to fake my death. Regardless, I should have listened to you…and I didn’t. I was wrong and I’m asking you…I’m begging you…to forgive me, Anne.”

Anne takes a step toward Ann, reducing the gap between them to a foot.

“Ann…I’ve never been so frustrated…you wouldn’t even allow me to speak. Is that how it’s going to be? Because if it is, that won’t do for me.”

“No, Anne, no…I promise. From this day forward, we talk about everything…everything…the easy stuff and the hard stuff. Things that matter are scary to talk about, but we matter…and I promise I won’t walk away or push you away. I absolutely hate it when we’re apart…whether physically or emotionally. I realized that I’m more myself with you than I am when I’m by myself…and I hope that’s enough for you. If you say it is, then I believe you.”

Ann looks down and notices that Anne is holding a letter. Anne responds to her glance by holding up the letter, saying “I’ve received a job offer…Lead Detective for the Crime Unit in Edinburgh…it’s a decent salary increase…they want me to start in two weeks.”

“Oh…I didn’t know you-“

“But I don’t think I’m going to take it.”

“Oh?” Internally, Ann is breathing a sigh of relief.

“I don’t know…I don’t think it would be as much fun as working in Halifax. Plus there’s Shibden to consider, and I don’t want to leave Tib hanging with the pub and all…”

“Oh…I wish…I wish you could say you were staying because of me.”

Anne steps forward and takes Ann’s hands into hers. “But that is why I’m staying…because of you. So…what now?”

“Well…I don’t want to assume…”

“What do you want, Ann?”

“What I want…what I want is for us to go to my place, pack up my stuff and start moving it over to Shibden.”

“Hmm…”

Ann looks down, crestfallen. “I guess that’s probably a bit much to-“

“Are you going to make me carry all the heavy stuff?”

Ann’s head snaps up and looks at the smirk on Anne’s face, and a smile spreads across her own.

“No, not all of it. We’ll start with only the important things.”

Anne cups Ann’s face in her hands and looks deep into her eyes. “Ann…I love you. If you don’t
know that by now, then I’m not doing a very good job communicating it. I promise to do better. My world is worthless without you. You are the very best part of it…the only part I care about. Let’s just move past all this crap and get on with it…what do you say?”

“Yes…I say yes.” Ann’s eyes are sparkling as she realizes she’s being given a second chance to get this right.

Anne leans in and lightly kisses her lips, then quickly pulls back. “Hey…I’ve got an idea…”

“Uh oh…what?”

“What if…what if we got married right here? Up on this overlook. We could bring in tables, a tent…we could have it catered…a simple affair. Family and close friends…focus on what’s important. What do you think?”

Ann’s biting her lower lip and smiling. “I love it! You always said you thought something significant happened here…we can just add to the legacy. We can exchange our vows right here in front of God and everybody! I love that idea, Anne! We could set up the tent right over there, and bring in some white tablecloths, and maybe a DJ, and-“

Anne swoops in with a bruising kiss, cementing their agreement on their future plans.

“You’re still talking, Ann…shut up and kiss me. And don’t ever stop.”

--- THE END ---

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