The Summer of Us

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: When friendship isn't enough...

Paige hasn't been on vacation since her parents split, eight years ago, and her memories of sun and sand are all too distant. So when her best friend, Olivia, invites her on a trip to the coastal town of Whiterock, she seizes the chance.

Only, things have been different between them since they started college, and Paige is battling feelings—romantic feelings—for her best friend that she's struggling to understand.

Five days in a small beach cottage—with only one bed—enjoying romantic sunset walks and exploring miles of sandy coastline… what could go wrong?

Total Pages (Source): 39

CHAPTER ONE

Paige combed a hand through her brown cotton-soft curls and blew out a breath.

A weathered black travel case was propped open on the bed in front of her, neatly-folded shirts stacked together in swathes of pearly white and blue, her signature colours.

Why do I feel like I'm forgetting something?

She flicked an appraising glance around her room, the plush grey carpet hidden beneath piles of tossed clothes and jeans she had decided not to bring with her and chewed on her fingernails; a habit she had been trying to shake for years, with little success.

Before she could figure out what was missing, her phone began to vibrate against the nightstand, almost toppling over the edge as she swooped to catch it.

With a short huff, she slid the pad of her thumb across the screen and answered without checking the caller ID. Only one person would be phoning her at half-past eight in the morning.

"Thank God you're awake." Olivia's voice was as cheerful as a summer breeze.

"I had to set three alarms, but I made it," Paige said, adjusting the bottle of sun cream peeking out of the case's rear compartment. "You're still coming for nine, right?"

"Absolutely," Olivia confirmed with a click of her tongue. "How's the packing coming along?"

Paige cast a dubious glance over the tangle of sheets, clothes and cosmetics scattered along her bed. "I should have listened to you and packed everything last night," she admitted.

Olivia let out a short laugh. "Seriously, Paige, when was the last time you went on holiday?"

Paige shifted the phone and counted the years off her fingers. "Let's see… at least eight years. Maybe more. I'm a little out of practice with this sort of thing." She hadn't been on a proper vacation since before her parents split, and her memories of sun and sand were all too distant.

Moving aside the travel case, she perched on the end of her bed. She was still wearing her cotton grey and pink pyjama shorts, and she stretched out her pale, freckled legs with a sigh. "I never realised how little summer clothes I owned until I had to pack for this trip," she continued with an abysmal groan.

"You have always been a fan of jumpers."

"Yeah," Paige muttered, casting a wry look at the cable knit jumpers and grey sweatshirts poking out of her wardrobe, woefully abandoned in favour of loose cotton shirts.

"Anyway, I'd better let you go. I bet you're not even dressed yet. I'll be there soon!" She hung up with a breezy goodbye, and Paige tossed her phone onto the bed, stretching her arms over her head with a sigh.

Her blue bedroom curtains fluttered in the early-morning breeze, warm sunlight

pouring in through the windows and scattering rainbows along the bare walls as the light refracted through the sun-catcher stuck to the glass. It had been a present from Olivia on Paige's fourteenth birthday; a butterfly stencil that filled her room with vibrant colours on sunny days. The edges had started to peel and lose their adhesiveness over the last three and a half years, but Paige couldn't bring herself to take it down.

Nestled between the sheets behind her, her phone buzzed with a message. She opened the notification.

Olivia: Btw, don't forget to pack your toothbrush!

Paige snapped her fingers together. That's what she'd been forgetting. A faint smile tugged at her lips as she typed out a reply.

Paige: You know me too well.

Somewhere outside her room, Paige heard a door creak open and then the slow shuffle of footsteps across the landing. Her mother was finally awake. Part of her had been hoping to slip out before her mum was up. She hadn't been entirely enthusiastic about Paige going on holiday to begin with. Paige figured it had something to do with jealousy or guilt—that she had to rely on someone else to take her own daughter on vacation—but she tried not to dwell on it. Her mother tended to be bitter about most things, and Paige had learned to take her mum's grievances with a pinch of salt.

With a glance at the time—almost twenty-to-nine—she changed into a pair of denim shorts and a white cap-sleeve shirt, and pulled her short brown hair back to her neck, cinching it with a bobble to keep it out of her face. It had grown just long enough to tie back now, but a few short strands still drifted over her eyes, curling against her pink, freckled cheeks.

"Alright, just gotta grab my toothbrush, and I'm ready," she muttered to herself, zipping up her travel case and tidying up the crumpled sheets on her bed. She didn't want to work up a sweat before stepping out into the 26°C heat, so she left her floor in a partial jumble-sale state and called it done.

There was a short tap against her bedroom door, and Paige's mood soured for just a moment before she fixed her expression into something more neutral.

"Yeah?"

The door creaked open, and her mother's tired face peered through the widening gap.

"When are you leaving?" That was it. No good morning pleasantries, straight to the point.

Paige pressed her hands against her thighs, letting her gaze drift over her mother's shoulder as she stood in the open doorway. "Olivia's picking me up at nine."

Her mother nodded, leaning back against the doorframe. She was wearing her silk dressing gown, her dark hair tousled from sleep. "Are you all packed?"

Paige jabbed a thumb towards the case behind her. It had been her mother's, stashed away in the attic cupboard among the dust and mothballs, barely used. "Just about."

Her mother shifted her pink lacy slippers until she finally said, "Have a nice time, yeah?"

Paige relaxed her shoulders. "Yeah, I will. Want me to bring you back any souvenirs? Some strawberry-flavoured rock?"

Her mother's thin eyebrows arched. "You know I don't eat sweets."

Paige fought the urge to roll her eyes. "Right, sorry."

"I'm going for a shower, so I probably won't see you off. Stay safe." She slipped away like a pink, lace-clad shadow and shut the door behind her.

Paige flopped back onto her bed, the ceiling swimming above her. "Thanks, Mum," she said under her breath. It wasn't like her mother didn't care for her; she just had a hard time showing her feelings after her husband had left her. Paige had grown used to reading between her words and tight-lipped expressions for any glimmer of compassion. It was there, if she looked hard enough.

She sat up, her hair now tousled, and rubbed her eyes. "Crap," she muttered as she heard her mother lock the bathroom door. "My toothbrush."

Just over fifteen minutes later, a car horn blared somewhere outside, and Paige threw a glance at the window, spotting Olivia's shiny red Citroen idling in the driveway of their semi-detached.

Paige's mum was still in the shower—she could hear the rushing water as she wheeled her case past the bathroom door—so she left without saying anything, locking the door behind her and tossing the keys into her rucksack.

Olivia rolled down the passenger side window and leaned over the seat to give her a wave. "I'm here!"

Paige arched a brow, dragging her travel case over the gravel drive, pieces of loose stone chipping under the wheels. "I can see that," she said dryly, popping open the boot of the car and tossing her case inside. Most of the interior space was already occupied by Olivia's large white suitcase, but she managed to squeeze her luggage in beside it.

Slamming the latch shut, she circled round to the front passenger side and slid into the empty seat. The leather upholstery was already hot and sticky from basking in the sun, and Paige reached for the air conditioning, twisting it towards her. Cool air blasted her face, drying the perspiration on her skin. An open bag of crisps and a can of Sprite were already resting on the centre console, crumbs dusting the sleek black dashboard.

"Hey," Olivia said with a toothy grin. "Glad you could make it."

Paige clipped her seatbelt into place, folding her hands in her lap to distract her nerves. "You seem awfully chipper this morning."

Olivia threw back her head with a laugh. "Of course I am. We're finally going on vacation together. It's about damn time, don't you think?"

The two of them had been close friends since Year 3 at Hawthorne Community Primary School; that was a lot of summers that had been and gone without so much as a glimpse of the seaside.

"Ready to get on the road?"

Paige nodded, adjusting the strap of the seatbelt so that it didn't dig into her stomach. She didn't usually suffer from travel sickness, but her nerves were making her feel extra fluttery this morning. "Yep, all ready."

Olivia's gaze darted to the mirrors before she shifted the gearstick and began to reverse out of the driveway, gravel crunching beneath the tires. Paige gave a half-hearted glance towards the house—with its chipped porch, strangled with weeds and uncut grass—as they drove away.

"How was your mum this morning?" Olivia asked, her tone idle.

Paige leaned back against the headrest, flicking away a strand of hair tickling the base of her chin. "She didn't say a lot."

Olivia shot a sympathetic glance across the seat. "I'm sure she'll get over it."

"Yeah."

They joined the line of early-morning traffic heading out of the city, and Paige bridged her hand beneath her chin, watching the neighbourhood pass by in shades of concrete and terracotta.

"Mind if I turn the radio up?"

Paige responded without turning her head. "Go for it."

From the corner of her eye, she saw Olivia's hand reach for the dial on the dashboard, and the speakers began to thrum with low bassy tones. Paige sneaked a glance towards her friend when she started drumming her fingers against the steering wheel, a little out of sync with the music, and a small smile flitted across her lips. She really hadn't changed a bit.

They pulled up to a red traffic light, and Paige felt Olivia's stare shift to her.

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"Your hair's finally growing out, huh?" Olivia observed. "It looks nice."

Paige subconsciously reached up and tucked a curl behind her ear. "Oh, thanks," she said. In contrast to her short, dark curls, Olivia's honey-blonde hair was like molten sunlight, falling around her shoulders in long, beachy waves. It was hard to see her full-ensemble in the cramped space, but Olivia was donning a flowery top with thin straps, and a pair of thigh-length white shorts, her long, tanned legs disappearing beneath the steering column.

"You look great, too," Paige said, trying to get the word gorgeous out of her head. Olivia had always had that natural sort of beauty that most girls coveted: clear skin, silky hair, natural curves in all the right places.

"Thank you," Olivia said, her sea-green eyes sparkling as she smiled. "Alright, here we go." The light changed the green, and the car revved as she hit the accelerator a little too eagerly, sending the car speeding off.

"I hope you're not going to drive like a madwoman the whole way," Paige said, gripping the glove compartment to steady herself.

Olivia laughed, blowing a curtain of hair out of her face. "Can't promise anything."

As they fell into their usual back-and-forth, Paige felt some of her reservations melt away. She'd been nervous about the trip after the last year of college had chipped away at the sense of familiarity they'd always shared. Their conflict of academic interests had sent them down different paths, and Olivia had grown close to her new coursemates, leaving Paige sitting alone in the corridors outside the science lab on

most days, wondering what her best friend was getting up to.

Maybe this was Olivia's way of saying that nothing had changed between them, but Paige wasn't sure. After all, compared to Olivia's new friend group, Paige was… boring. Predictable. Maybe Olivia wanted something else. Something new and exciting.

Or maybe Paige was overthinking it. They'd been friends for just over ten years. Surely Paige wouldn't be that easy to replace.

Olivia's phone began to ring from the cupholder, and Paige reached for it before Olivia had the chance.

"Hands on the wheel," she warned, before glancing at the screen. "It's your mum."

"Can't ignore Mother," Olivia joked. "Can you answer it for me?"

Paige nodded, sliding a finger across the screen. "Hello?"

"Ah, Paige, is that you?" Rachel Bennett had the same cheery phone-voice as her daughter.

Paige put the call on speaker. "Yeah, Olivia's driving."

Olivia kept her eyes on the road as she spoke. "Hey Mum. Have I forgotten something?"

"Your purse," her mother said with a sharp tut. "I found it on your dresser."

"Crap, I thought I'd packed it," Olivia muttered, tilting her head back with a sigh. "Alright, I'll be there in a few minutes. Just gotta do a U-turn."

Flicking on the indicator last-minute, Olivia swerved the car to the right, climbing up someone's driveway before reversing onto the other side of the road.

"Jesus," Paige blurted, reaching for the dashboard again as her heart jumped into her throat.

Olivia blurted out a laugh. "Sorry," she said without sincerity. "I forgot you have a weak heart."

Paige rolled her eyes. "Driving a car isn't supposed to feel like you're on a rollercoaster," she shot back.

"Olivia, behave yourself," Rachel's disapproving voice drifted from the phone.

"Sorry, sorry," Olivia said, gesturing for Paige to cut the call.

"We'll see you in a bit, Ms. Bennett," Paige said before hanging up. As the call ended, Olivia's lockscreen popped up, and Paige felt her heart sink low into her stomach. Instead of a photo of her and Paige, like it had been for the past three years, it had been replaced with two new faces—the friends she'd made at college.

Returning the phone to the cupholder, Paige swallowed back the lump in her throat.

Perhaps she was easy to replace after all.

CHAPTER TWO

"Sorry about the detour," Olivia said as they turned a corner onto the street where Paige had spent so much of her past summers. "I could have sworn I'd packed it."

Sunlight bounced through the front windshield, making Paige squint as they pulled up

outside a two-story detached residence. Compared to the slate-grey ex-council house that Paige shared with her mum, the house's tawny bricks, pitched roof and rose trellises felt like another world.

"You coming in? I won't be a minute," Olivia said, turning off the engine and climbing out.

Not wanting to stay inside the sweltering car, Paige followed her out, her white trainers hitting the cobbled drive with a soft crunch. The sun warmed the back of her neck, giving the tips of her curls a golden sheen.

"Mum?" Olivia called as she opened the front door, her voice echoing around the high-ceilinged hallway.

"Back so soon?" a voice said from somewhere above, and Olivia groaned out loud.

Footsteps thudded down the stairs, and Olivia's little sister appeared in front of them, her blonde hair plaited over her shoulder and her blue eyes narrowed. The only difference between them was Olivia's sea-green eyes and fuller figure, but otherwise they looked just like sisters.

"Hi Beth, it's nice to see you again," Paige said cordially.

Beth's expression softened. "I don't know why someone as nice as you still puts up with her," she said, rolling her eyes towards Olivia, whose puffed-out cheeks made it clear she was displeased by the comment.

"That's because we're just as bad as each other in reality," Olivia supplied before Paige could say anything, slinging her arm around Paige's neck and pulling her closer.

Paige froze, her body flushing where Olivia's sun-warmed skin touched her own. She could feel her friend's breath on her cheek, lemonade-sweet.

"If you say so," she said quietly, shoving her hands into the pockets of her shorts.

"Your purse," Rachel said as she came out of the kitchen with Olivia's pink floral pouch in her hand. It had been a present from Paige five years ago and, like the suncatcher, it was starting to get old and threadbare, but apparently Olivia shared the same sentiment of not wanting to replace it just yet.

"Thanks, Mum," Olivia said, pulling away from Paige and planting a kiss on her mother's cheek.

Paige felt a pang in her chest, envy, perhaps, or sadness. Her relationship with her own mother couldn't have been more different.

"Before you go, do either of you need the bathroom? It's a long way to go with a full bladder."

"Jeez, Mum, TMI," Olivia muttered, throwing Paige an embarrassed look.

"You two have a lovely time," she said, before turning to Paige with a wink. "Keep an eye on her, yeah?"

Paige merely smiled.

"Alright, let's get going," Olivia said, giving Beth a careless wave before grabbing Paige's hand and dragging her out of the house after her. "Sorry you had to witness that."

Paige gave a lopsided shrug. "Parents will always be parents," she said, her tone

jaded.

"Well, this trip is parent-free," Olivia said with a wink. "Just you and me. Like old times."

"Yeah," Paige said soberly, "like old times."

She reached for the car door, the black plastic handle scorching beneath her touch, and pulled. When it didn't open, she shot Olivia an unimpressed look. "It's locked."

"Right, right," her friend muttered, trying to hide a smile behind her hand as she unlocked it and climbed inside.

Paige shook her head, but a smile flitted briefly across her lips, small and secretive.

"Just think, in a few hours, we'll be sinking our feet into the sand and breathing in all that sea-salt goodness," Olivia said dreamily as they pulled out of the suburban neighbourhood and onto the thoroughfare through town.

Paige wanted to look forward to it just as much as her best friend, but something was holding her back. Something she couldn't quite get a grasp on yet.

"I might need you to set up the SatNav when we get on the motorway," Olivia said, flicking on the indicator and checking the junction before pulling out. "I pretty much know the way, but I'm unfamiliar with some of the twisty coastal roads."

Paige nodded, digging into the glove compartment for Olivia's beat-up navigation system. "What's the address?"

"Uhh…" Olivia sunk her teeth into her bottom lip, tapping her fingers against the wheel. "I don't remember the exact address. I think the cottage is called Breezehome

or something. Just search Breezehome, Whiterock, and I'm sure it'll come up."

Paige typed the address into the search bar and waited for the results to load. "Alright, I think I've found it," she said, clicking on the top result and bringing up a map of the Northern Coastline. "We should arrive there just after midday."

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"Sounds about right," Olivia said, rolling down her window and letting the breeze play with her hair. "God, it's stifling."

Paige stuck the SatNav to the front windshield and prayed it stayed in place. The adhesiveness on these things were tenuous at best. "It's going to climb up to 30 in the cities. Luckily, it should be cooler on the coast."

Traffic was starting to pick up as they headed out of the city and joined the queue of idling cars, the air hazy with smog. "Looks like everyone else had the same idea as us," Olivia observed dryly. "As soon as we get out of the city, it should be smooth sailing." She laughed at her own joke. "Get it? Because we're going to the beach."

Paige rolled her eyes. "You really do have a terrible sense of humour."

Olivia lifted a hand from the steering wheel to flip her hair over her shoulder. "I know. But you love it."

The sun was high and full now, beating through the windshield and warming Paige's face. Olivia had rolled her window back up once she'd realised she was letting in more exhaust fumes than fresh air, and the humidity inside the car had already doubled.

"Mind if I turn the air con up?"

"Go ahead. I'll turn it off on my side, since it makes my eyes sore," Olivia said, turning the fan away from her. Cool air blasted from the grills, sending the air freshener spinning from the rearview and chasing away the heat.

"Remind me why I'm going on holiday with you when I hate the sun," Paige remarked, fanning herself with her hand. Her neck felt damp with perspiration, and the leather seats were sticking uncomfortably to her bare legs.

"It's not as though we're going anywhere exotic. It's the British seaside. It'll probably rain half the time we're there."

Paige arched a lazy brow. "I can't say I'd complain if that is the case."

Olivia tutted. "Don't say that," she whined.

"I know, I'm kidding," Paige said.

They inched forward after the traffic, and bright sunlight dappled through the windows. Paige threw up a hand to shield her eyes, cupping the top of her brow.

Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, Olivia dug into the driver's side compartment and withdrew a pair of brown sunglasses. "Here," she said, offering them across the console, her eyes fixed on the road. "I don't like wearing them when I'm driving anyway."

"Are you sure?" Paige said, accepting them hesitantly. Her fingertips brushed against Olivia's, warmth flooding through her skin.

"Mhm. I'll just put my visor down," she said, fumbling to pull down the screen, casting the top half of her head in shadow.

"Thanks," Paige said, slipping the glasses onto her nose. The world immediately went darker, appearing in a spectrum of brownish-red through the tinted lenses. "I've never really suited glasses."

Olivia shot a glance across the seat. "Are you kidding? You look great in those!"

Paige rolled her eyes. "You're just being nice."

"I'm not. Take a look." She gestured to the visor above Paige's head, and she pulled it down, glancing in the mirror. Most of her hair had fallen out of her bobble, tousled from the wind and curling around her chin. Even she had to admit that Olivia's rectangular glasses seemed to fit her face well.

"See? You look great," Olivia said with sincerity, a soft smile on her lips.

"Hm," Paige murmured, flipping the visor back up and watching the landscape pass by the window in shades of tinted brown and orange.

"Paige, you're gorgeous. Don't ever think you aren't."

Paige felt warmth flood her cheeks at the compliment. Gorgeous wasn't the word she'd associate with her freckled face and short hair and almost boyish features. From anyone else, she would have brushed it off. But when Olivia said it, it seemed to go right to her heart. "Thank you."

Grinning to herself, Olivia reached forward and turned the radio up again, humming under her breath.

Paige rested her hands in her lap and pressed her ankles together, leaning back against the headrest. Silence threaded between them, and in those moments of quiet, Paige wondered if she ought to bring up what had been on her mind lately: the fact that they had been spending less time together.

With Olivia at her side, Paige had never felt like she needed to branch out socially. But if Olivia decided her new friends were more interesting, where did that leave

Paige?

"Are you asleep over there?" Olivia's voice interrupted her thoughts, and Paige sat up, blinking out of her daze.

"Not anymore," she said, pulling the sunglasses off her nose and squinting against the sudden glare of light.

Olivia pouted. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Paige said, stretching out the cramp in her shoulders. "How are you holding up?"

"Getting hungry," Olivia said, flicking a glance towards the clock on the dashboard. It was almost ten, and the crisps on the dashboard had already been finished off.

"Didn't you have any breakfast?"

"Yeah, like twenty minutes before we set off."

Paige shook her head, a smile tugging at her lips. "Maybe wait a little longer, and then we can stop somewhere for a snack."

Olivia whined softly. "Fine. But if I faint from hunger, remember it's your fault."

Paige said nothing, used to Olivia's empty threats by now.

Forty-minutes later, Paige pointed out a sign for a service station off the M1 motorway, and Olivia took a sharp turn, cutting across two lanes.

Paige lurched to grab onto something. "Olivia, I swear, your driving is going to be the death of me," she blurted, her heart dropping into her stomach.

"I didn't want to miss the turning," Olivia said calmly.

Paige rolled her eyes, settling back into her seat. "Next time, a little warning."

The car jolted over the ramped entrance, and Olivia followed the narrow lane between two rows of shrubs and bushes into an open car park. A petrol station was on their left, a trail of cars waiting to fill up, with a large white-washed building on their right. A plastic directory listed Costa Coffee, Greggs and Subway as the main outlets inside.

"Perfect, they have a Greggs here," Olivia said, cutting the engine. "I've been dying to try their new vegan chicken range."

They climbed out of the car, and Paige groaned as the midday sun sizzled above, warming the asphalt and creating a balmy haze in the air. "God, it's so hot," she said, a thin layer of sweat building on her brow. She wiped it off with the back of her wrist, hoping her face wasn't too flushed.

"You're going to have to get used to it," Olivia said, hooking her arm through Paige's, car keys jangling in her other hand.

Olivia's skin was just as clammy as Paige's as their elbows touched, Olivia's tanned forearm drawing Paige's gaze for a brief second before her eyes flitted back to her feet, white trainers hitting the ground beside Olivia's suede sandals.

"Hopefully there's air-con inside."

The service station did have an air conditioning unit, and Paige spent a full minute standing beneath the fan, letting the cool air skim over her face, until Olivia dragged her away towards Greggs.

"Are you going to get anything?" Olivia asked as she selected a vegan-chicken baguette and a bottle of Fanta, balancing both in the crook of her elbow as she fished

out her purse.

Paige eyed the pastries behind the counter, chewing on her bottom lip. "I might just get a cookie or something. I'm not that hungry."

"Alright." Olivia shrugged. "But you're welcome to try some of my chicken-free chicken," she added with a wink.

"Thanks."

After paying for their food, they carried it over to the plastic white chairs in the corner of the service station, beside a drab-looking arcade claw machine, and sat down. Olivia tore into her sandwich while Paige nibbled on her double-chocolate cookie, casting a look around the station. Several families and groups of holiday-goers were loitering beneath the air-con and sipping from cans of ice-cold fizzy drinks, fanning themselves with straw boaters and leaflets from the nearby tourist stand.

Paige unscrewed the cap of her water and took a long sip, relishing the coolness as it washed down her throat.

Behind them, the automatic doors slid open, letting in a gust of warm air and low, masculine voices.

Olivia turned to look, and Paige did the same, casting a cursory glance at the boys that had just walked in. There were five of them, perhaps a few years older than them, in cargo shorts and sweat-dampened shirts.

Paige immediately turned away, uninterested, but Olivia's gaze lingered, and Paige felt a smaller shimmer of jealousy that was gone before she could fully grasp what it meant. She cleared her throat, drawing Olivia's attention back towards her. "Guess

most people had the same idea as us," she said casually.

"It is the summer holidays. Tourist season is officially in full swing."

Paige gave her a half-hearted smile. "Yeah."

More footsteps squeaked past their table, and Paige lifted her gaze. A couple of the guys were casting blatant looks towards Olivia, and Paige shuffled in her seat, trying to block her from their sight.

Olivia, if she noticed, didn't say anything, taking a bite out of her baguette instead. "Have you ever been to Whiterock?" she asked, picking a crumb off the front of her shirt.

Paige shook her head, dusting off her fingers. "Nope. I haven't even been to the beach since that school trip to Whitby."

"Ahh, the Captain Cook Museum. Wait, you've not been to the beach since then? Jeez, Paige, have you been living under a rock?"

Paige's gaze slid down to her lap, cookie crumbs scratching against her throat. "Pretty much, yeah."

Olivia's expression softened. "Sorry. I forgot about your mum."

"It's fine. No need to tiptoe around the matter. She's miserable and hates anyone else being happy, including me." She shrugged, trying not to let the truth sting too much. She'd grown used to her mother's moods that ranged between bitter and melancholy and not much else.

"Have you heard from your dad lately?"

Paige gave her a wry smile. "No. Too busy with his new family in London," she said.

"Sorry. I sound just like my mum, don't I?" She laughed, but it sounded hollow. She cleared her throat. "Anyway, I'm going to nip to the loo."

Olivia nodded, dabbing the corner of her mouth with her napkin. "Sure. I'll wait here."

Pushing back her chair, Paige stood up and followed the signs to the Ladies' room. It was empty inside, but one of the fluorescents was faulty, leaving a dark patch in the corner. Paige slid into one of the empty cubicles, cursing softly at the lack of toilet paper. Part of her was already missing home comforts, but the other part knew she needed this break, needed this chance to get away from her depressing mother and reconnect with her best friend.

Twisting on one of the rusted faucets, she washed her hands in the sink, peering at herself in the mirror. Her cheeks were still pink from the sun, and her hair had turned wispy, curling around her face. She attempted to neaten it up, smoothing her fingers through the messy strands until someone else walked in, and she left.

Her heart immediately sank when she saw that Olivia was no longer alone at her table. Two boys with identical undercuts were standing beside the potted plant on Olivia's right-side, trying to engage her. Olivia was smiling, but Paige could tell by the pinched edge to her expression that she was uncomfortable.

Lifting her chin, Paige hurried over to them, catching Olivia's eye. "Hey, are you ready to leave?"

Olivia stood up, scrunching up the empty packet in her hand and tossing it into the bin behind her. "Yep. Sorry, you'll have to excuse me." She squeezed past the two boys and hooked her arm through Paige's, hurrying away.

"Are you alright? Were they bothering you?" Paige asked, tossing a dirty look at

them over her shoulder.

"No, it's fine," Olivia said with a flippant wave. "Thanks for coming when you did, though."

Paige's gaze lingered on her friend's heart-shaped face and bottle-green eyes. It was no wonder she drew so much attention with her natural beauty. She tended to brush most of it off with the same casual ease as she did anything in life. Once upon a time, Paige would have killed to have that kind of confidence, but over the years, those thoughts had mellowed out, and now she was content with things the way they were.

"Now that you're not going to faint from hunger, are you ready to get back onto the road?"

Olivia flashed a grin, her excitement palpable. "Hell yeah! Whiterock, here we come."

CHAPTER THREE

Paige stuck an arm out of her open window as Olivia brought the car to a stop at a traffic light, leaving the engine purring. The breeze was warm and humid, and Paige scraped her hair back out of her face with a sigh. "I'm seriously not made for hot weather," she said. "Though I'm glad I don't have long hair anymore. I think that would kill me."

"You really do look amazing with short hair," Olivia said, her lips parted slightly, looking full and pink. Paige tried not to let her gaze linger. "I don't know why you didn't cut it sooner."

Paige felt heat creep up her neck. "Thanks. I definitely feel more… me, with short hair. Maybe that sounds silly."

"Not at all." The light changed, and Olivia put her foot down on the pedal. "I've been thinking of cutting my hair short for a while too."

Paige's eyebrows arched. "Really? I thought you liked it long." She traced her gaze over Olivia's golden beach-waves flowing over her shoulder.

Olivia shrugged, shifting her hands on the wheel. "Sometimes I feel like it weighs me down," she said, her tone ruminative. "I mean, both in the physical sense, but also in terms of trying to keep up with beauty standards, you know? Having to style it every morning so that it doesn't look like a bombshell."

"I didn't realise," Paige said softly. "I always assumed you liked it that way."

"I don't know for sure," she added, "but I just want something… different."

Paige nodded, mulling over the revelation. Olivia felt burdened by beauty standards? How come she had never mentioned that before?

"Do you think it would be a mistake?" Olivia continued, her gaze thoughtful. "Cutting my hair?"

Paige's lips had gone dry from the air con, and she licked them before answering. "I think it doesn't matter what other people think. It's your hair, and you can do what you want with it, what you're comfortable with. My mum didn't want me to cut my hair short, but I did it anyway because it's not up to her," she said honestly, tugging at the frayed edge of her shorts. She pulled out a thread, letting it blow away through the open window. "At the end of the day, it'll always grow back. So, if you want to go for it, then don't let anything stop you."

Olivia's expression rounded with surprise, before her lips pressed into a smile. "Thanks, Paige. That's one of the things I love most about you."

Paige's heart fluttered. "What is?" she said, her tongue curling against the roof of her mouth.

Olivia shot a glance towards her, but Paige couldn't bring herself to meet it, her mind still caught on those words. One of the things I love most about you.

"Your honesty. Your… compassion. I always feel like I can be myself around you, and I know you won't judge me for it."

Paige stared at the dashboard, her hands still fiddling with the edge of her shorts. "I mean, of course. That's what friends do, right?"

Olivia shrugged. "I asked Jordan and Rachel the same thing," she continued, and it

took Paige a moment to realise she was talking about her new coursemates, "and they told me I'd regret cutting it."

Paige frowned, finally lifting her gaze. "Why?"

Olivia fidgeted in her seat, her fingers tightening around the wheel. "They said that guys like girls with long hair."

Paige tried not to scoff, sinking her teeth into her lower lip. "Is that what's important to you? Attracting guys."

Olivia let out a breathy laugh. "Of course not," she said, sobering. "That's literally the last thing on my mind right now. After the disaster with Mike, I'm laying low on relationships for the time being. Trying to… figure myself out first."

Paige mulled over her words. "I'm glad," she said. "I'm glad you're focusing on yourself. Do what's best for you, nobody else."

Olivia grinned at her across the console, and Paige felt another soft tug at her heart, like silky moth wings fluttering behind her ribs. "Yeah," she said. "I will."

"Look over there! You can see the sea," Olivia said, her voice giddy with excitement.

Paige shook herself out of her doze and pulled herself upright, leaning her chin against the window. Peeking out from behind the headland was a glittering blue horizon.

"Wow," Paige mumbled, the cool sea breeze touching her cheeks. "It's so pretty."

Olivia flipped her sun visor back up. "Isn't it? I'm so excited to get there."

"We can't check in yet though," Paige said, pulling up the time on her phone. It was a little past half-twelve, but their check-in slot wasn't until two.

"They might be able to let us in early," Olivia pointed out. "Or we can head into town and do a little exploring before we head to the cottage."

"I suppose we could have a walk around town. I could definitely do with stretching my legs," Paige said, shuffling her feet.

"And I could definitely do with some lunch," Olivia added, making Paige snort.

"I take it the sandwich didn't fill you up?"

"Driving is exhausting," Olivia replied with a soft huff.

Taking a left at the end of the junction, they passed a town sign welcoming them into Whiterock, population of 10,000.

Ignoring the SatNav's directions to their beach cottage, Olivia instead followed the signs pointing them towards the town centre. "Oh, jeez, look at all this traffic."

She slowed the car to a crawl as they turned onto the main road into town, joining the line of cars disappearing under the stone archway ahead of them.

"Not quite the quaint seaside town I was expecting," Olivia murmured, drumming her fingers against the wheel as she inched the car forward. "I guess once tourists got wind of this place, that was it. No more peaceful summers."

"You do know we are said tourists," Paige pointed out, wiggling her fingers in gesture to her and Olivia.

"Yeah, yeah. We might struggle to find somewhere to park, that's all," she said, biting her lip in concentration. "Keep an eye out. As soon as you see a free space, tell me."

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"And risk you cutting traffic? I don't think so. I'd rather keep my life over a parking spot, thank you very much," Paige remarked.

Olivia tutted. "I would never do such a thing."

They weaved through traffic and narrow side-streets for a further twenty minutes before they finally snagged a parking space in a small, off-peak car park. "Is it pay and display?" Paige asked as Olivia pulled into the spot, narrowly chipping her wing mirror against the minivan parked askew beside it. She unclipped her belt and twisted round in her seat to look for a parking metre.

"Looks like it. I'll go grab a ticket. Be right back." Olivia threw open her door and was gone before Paige could offer her any change.

Paige leaned back with a sigh, spying Olivia in the rearview as she strode towards the ticket machine. Her long, tanned legs stretched out from her shorts, her hair sashaying along her back like liquid sunlight. She'd always been a stunner, but it was like Paige was noticing for the first time how… attractive she was.

Paige blinked, shaking the thought from her mind. Where had that come from?

She leaned her elbow against the open window, trying to cool the flush on her skin from those unbidden thoughts.

It was difficult to meet Olivia's eye as she came back, ticket clutched in one hand, purse in the other. "Three quid for an hour's parking! Ridiculous," she muttered as she tucked the ticket between the dashboard and the windscreen, the timestamp

printed in bold letters. "Anyway, we need to be back here for ten to two. That's enough time, isn't it?"

"Plenty," Paige said, reaching into her bag for the water she'd packed.

After taking a sip to quench her thirst, she screwed the cap back on and climbed out of the car, stretching her arms over her head. The edge of her shirt rode up, exposing a strip of pale stomach, and she caught Olivia's gaze flit towards the bared skin before quickly looking away. Her stomach fluttered.

"Was that water?" Olivia said, clearing her throat. "Could I grab a sip?"

Paige nodded, tossing the bottle towards her. "It's a bit warm."

Olivia shrugged, taking a long drink and letting out a refreshed sigh. "Alright, let's head into town."

They crossed the stretch of carpark, and Olivia paused by the parking metre to pin her hair back out of her face with her sunglasses, fishing a stick of lip balm out of her bag. Paige couldn't help but watch as she glossed it over her lips, leaving behind a soft pink hue.

"Did you lock the car?" Paige blurted, if only to stop her mind from going places it shouldn't.

Olivia rolled her eyes, playfully poking Paige's elbow. "I'm not that forgetful," she said. "But now you've said it, I'm second-guessing myself." She turned round, pointed the keyfob in the general direction of the car and clicked the button. "There, should be good now." She dropped the keys back into her tote bag with a soft clink.

Paige toted a travel-sized black backpack of her own, and she was already regretting

not swapping it out for a smaller shoulder bag. She fumbled with the straps until they no longer dug in, then realised Olivia was watching her with an amused smile.

"All of that sun cream weighing you down?" she teased, and Paige made a point of ignoring the comment.

They left the car park through the pedestrian exit and stepped out onto a charming cobblestone path that wound its way through town. The buildings here were tall and narrow, built from marble-grey rock that had been weathered by salt and wind. The sea wasn't visible above the shingled rooftops, but the air had an echo of fish and brine that made Paige breathe a little deeper.

"How about we stop by a cafe and grab a drink for now," Olivia suggested, pressing close to Paige as a group of tourists hurried by, red-faced and ferrying beach balls and buckets. Olivia's arm chafed hers, creating static in the air between them. "Then, once we've checked in and unpacked, we can hit the beach. I hope you brought some swimwear."

Paige scratched her cheek. "Um, kind of."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Olivia said, stepping off the path and onto the road to let a woman with a stroller go past.

"It means I don't actually own a swimming costume," Paige admitted. "I figured I'd just wear some shorts and a top or something if we did go swimming."

Olivia stared at her, dumbfounded. Her sunglasses began to slip down her forehead until she nudged them back up. "I can't believe you came on holiday without a swimming costume."

Paige shrugged. "I figured it wouldn't be a huge deal."

Olivia composed herself. "It's not. But maybe we can find something in one of these shops." She pointed to a small boutique across the road, selling handbags and neck scarves and other nautical-themed accessories.

"Or maybe I can just stay on the sand while you go frolicking in the waves." For no more than a moment, Paige imagined Olivia in a bikini, her golden-tanned body splashing around in the waves, and her throat went dry.

Olivia snorted out a laugh. "I did notbring you all this way so you could just stay on the sand. And I don't frolic either."

Paige smiled despite herself. "Fine."

They had finally made it into town, judging by the proliferation of cafes, bars and souvenir shops lining the street. Postcard stands were perched out on the pavement, set beside displays of buckets and nets for rock pooling. It reminded Paige of the seaside holidays she used to go on, back when her parents were still together, still happy. Those memories were distant now though, like grains of sand slipping between her fingers.

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"Bags of shells! I used to love collecting these as a kid," Olivia said, dragging Paige over to one of the souvenir shops. Netted bags full of auger shells, whelks and the occasional sun-bleached conch were on sale for £4 each.

"Want a bag?" Paige said, picking one of the conches from the basket and pressing it against her ear. The familiar whooshing sound inside made her smile. Her dad had once managed to convince her that she could hear the ocean through the shell, until she had learned about sound resonance. Still, it was nice to think that there might be a whole other world hidden inside those pearly walls.

"I'm good," Olivia said as Paige returned the shell to the pile. "Maybe I'll bring something back for Beth."

"Just don't expect her to appreciate it," Paige said, knowing Olivia's little sister was approaching her rebellious pre-teen stage.

Olivia pulled a face. "That's true. She's turned into such a brat lately. I miss the days where she thought I was the cool big sister."

"Were you ever the cool big sister?"

Olivia turned away with a sulky sigh. "I'm totally a cool big sister."

Paige touched her friend's shoulder to let her know she was joking. "You totally are. She'll realise that soon enough."

Olivia glanced over her shoulder, a twinkle in her eyes, and Paige felt her breath

catch for a second, her heart fluttering in her chest.

Paige was still trying to figure out what was making her feel like this when Olivia snapped her fingers in front of her face. "Earth to Paige?"

"Huh?"

"Are you alright? You look a little out of sorts," Olivia said, pressing the back of her hand to Paige's forehead. "You don't have heat-stroke do you?"

Paige waved her hand away, a little dizzy. "I haven't been in the sun long enough yet," she muttered, taking a step back and almost bumping into someone skirting behind her. "But maybe a break from the heat would be good."

Olivia nodded. "Sure. Let's go find somewhere to cool down."

"Thanks," Paige said, following Olivia out of the giftshop with her gaze downcast, trying to figure out these weird, complicated feelings that had risen to the surface. All of this heart-fluttering and palm-sweating was strange and unfamiliar. Paige had never experienced anything like this before, with anyone. So why now? And why Olivia?

These things she was feeling—it sounded like the kind of thing that girls used to talk about at school when they had a crush on someone. Is that what was happening?

Or was it simply a misunderstanding of feelings? She hadn't spent time with Olivia like this since they'd started college, so maybe it was just her mind—and body—re-adjusting to being around her again.

Whatever it was, she wasn't going to let it get in the way of enjoying this holiday. She wasn't going to overcomplicate things by giving into this strange, unbidden

attraction that she should not be feeling towards her best friend.

No. She would enjoy the rest of this holiday with Olivia, as friends.

Just like they'd always been.

CHAPTER FOUR

Breezehome Cottage was a small, white-bricked bungalow sitting at the top of a sandy slope. The sea, bright and glistening, was visible from the wooden deck, a short walk away across the rocks and sand. In the distance were the marble-white cliffs that gave Whiterock its name.

"Wow," Olivia murmured as she climbed out of the car, pulling the sunglasses off the top of her head as she gazed at the view. The sky was a deep summer blue, golden sunlight bouncing off the waves to create a stunning vista. "It's beautiful."

Paige climbed out after her, using her hand to shield her eyes from the glare. "I didn't realise we'd be so close to the sea," she said, circling around the car's bonnet to stand beside Olivia on the edge of the gravel driveway. They had gotten lost a few times on the way, with the navigation system pinning their location in the middle of the ocean at one point, but they'd finally made it.

"Oh man, I am so excited," Olivia said, shimmying her hips in a little dance. "As soon as we get unpacked, we're going down onto the sand."

Paige wrinkled her nose. "Do you think we could have a quick rest first?" she said, nibbling on the edge of her lip. "I'm still a little tired from travelling."

Olivia pouted. "I guess so," she said. "But after you've had a rest, we are going down to the beach, right?"

The corner of Paige's lips twitched at the imploring look Olivia was giving her. How could she ever say no? "Of course. That's what we came here for."

Clapping her hands together, Olivia unlocked the boot of the car and began to haul their bags down onto the gravel. "Thanks," Paige said, grabbing the handle of her case and lugging it up the wood-slatted porch, before returning to help Olivia with hers. "The key should be in the safe, right? Do you have the code?"

By the side of the door was a small, electronic keysafe, the buttons rusted from the salt air. "Yeah, hang on a minute." Olivia pulled out her phone and squinted at the screen. "Oh, here it is. 5383 should be the code," she read out, and Paige diligently pressed it into the keypad, hearing a faint beep before the tumblers unlocked and a compartment popped open. Inside was a small silver key.

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"Got it," Paige said, closing the safe and inserting the key into the front door.

The white wooden boards of the porch creaked as the two of them dragged their luggage into the open doorway, gazing around with bright eyes. "Wow, it's so pretty."

Everything inside was whitewashed and breezy, as though the sea air had seeped into every crack and crevice of the building and called it its own. The furniture was white rattan layered with blue accents, and touches of nautical aesthetics were minimal but effective.

The cottage was all one level, and the kitchen opened directly into the lounge, with large bay windows overlooking the sea outside. The white shutters were all drawn up, basking the rooms in warm sunlight.

Directly on the left was a small coat closet, and at the end of the hallway was the bedroom with an ensuite. Olivia had already told Paige they would have to share the room, but they would have their own beds, so she hadn't minded the compromise.

With one hand still clutching her case, Paige used the other to push open the bedroom door and peer inside.

The lower half of the walls were made of white wainscot panelling, and the top half was painted a light coral blue. The furniture was the same white rattan as the rest of the cottage, accented with seashells and starfish, and a sand-coloured jute rug stretched out across the oak floor.

It was exactly what Paige had been expecting, until her gaze landed on the bed.

"Um, Olivia?"

"Yeah?"

"I thought you said there were twin beds," Paige said, the handle of her travel case slipping against her palm.

"That's what it said on the website. Why?" Olivia came up behind her, a soft breath touching Paige's neck. "Oh."

Instead of two single-sized twin beds, there was only a queen-size divan in the middle of the room, a lush sea-coloured throw draped over the edge.

"I swear it said there were two beds," Olivia said, cupping her chin with her fingers as she stepped into the room. "There must have been a mistake on the website."

Paige bit at her nails. Would this mean they'd have to share? Somehow, that thought bothered her more than it should.

Already accepting the situation for what it was, Olivia shrugged, tossing her suitcase into the corner of the room and jumping onto the bed, creasing the white bedspread. "Oh well. Guess we'll just have to share."

"Um… I can sleep on the settee. There's one in the living room."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "It's no biggie," she said. "I promise I don't snore," she added with an unruly grin that made Paige wonder if she was lying. It had been more than a few years since their last sleepover, and Paige couldn't remember what it was like.

"If you're sure," Paige finally said, shifting her feet and trying not to think too hard about the fact they'd be sharing a bed. They were just friends, after all. Paige had definitely shared a bed with Olivia before.

So why did this feel so different?

"Let's get unpacked, have a cuppa, then head down to the beach. Sound good?"

Paige forced herself to smile, banishing the thoughts from her mind. "Sounds great."

"I just need to top up my suncream, and I'll be ready," Paige said, grabbing her bottle of Factor 50 and squirting a dollop into the palm of her hand.

Olivia leaned against the bedroom doorframe, folding her arms. "Put any more of that on and you'll look like a ghost," she commented.

Paige ignored her, rubbing the lotion onto her face before lathering it onto her arms and legs. "Unlike you, I burn easily. Must be the Irish blood in me."

"I'll go and pack some towels, in case we go for a paddle," Olivia said, calling over her shoulder: "You'd better be ready by the time I'm done."

Once Paige had finished slathering her body with suncream, the two of them grabbed their bags, slipped on their shoes, and headed out into the mid-afternoon heat.

Everything was cast in a golden haze as they descended the slope down onto the beach, Olivia's sandals clicking against her heel. There was a pleasant breeze rolling off the sea, blowing sand against their ankles.

"We should try and get down early tomorrow," Olivia said, raking her gaze over the dozens of towels and beach chairs and parasols already occupied by families, "before

it gets too crowded."

"One of the perks of being right by the sea," Paige added. "We don't have to wake up ridiculously early to claim our spot."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "I forgot you like to sleep in. How do you manage to get up for college?"

Paige shrugged. "Most of my lessons don't start until after eleven, so it's not so bad."

Olivia snapped her gaze towards her. "What? All of mine have nine o'clock starts," she groaned. "How lucky are you?"

Paige merely smiled.

"How are you getting on with your courses? I feel like we haven't spoken much about it recently," Olivia said, tapping her fingers against her bottom lip.

So she was aware that they hadn't been speaking? Paige wondered if it had bothered her at all, not spending as much time together. Olivia was a natural at making new friends, but not Paige. It was unlikely she'd missed Paige as much as Paige had missed her. But then again, why had she invited her on this holiday if not to make things right again?

"Yeah, I'm enjoying them. For the most part, anyway. Coursework is kind of a pain."

"Tell me about it," Olivia said with a dramatic sigh. "I know our timetables are different, but maybe we should try and meet up more between classes. I miss hanging out, you know."

Paige's gaze softened. "Me too."

They reached the bottom of the slope and took off their shoes, sinking their bare feet into the sun-warmed sand. It had been a long time since Paige had felt the sensation of sand shifting between her toes, shells and pebbles cracking underneath her heel. She found herself thinking of her parents, and all the seaside holidays they had gone on when Paige was young. It was a shame not all relationships had a happy ending; her parents' had ended when Paige's dad decided to move to London, leaving them behind.

Olivia threw out her arms and spun round, kicking up the sand with her feet, and Paige found herself entranced with the girl in front of her. The girl who had found her crying on the playground one day after her parents had spent the morning arguing. The girl who had invited her to play hopscotch and draw pictures with chalk and swing hula-hoops around their waists. The girl who had wiped away her tears and reminded her how to laugh.

Since that day, Olivia had been the only friend Paige had needed. Even now, watching that carefree smile, the bright glimmer of her emerald eyes, her long, fluttering lashes, was enough to pull Paige out of her slump and let out a smile.

"I'm so glad you agreed to come with me," Olivia said, grabbing Paige's hand and pulling her through the sand, her skin warm and soft and dewy from the seaspray. "I've been so caught up with the newness of college that I forgot what things used to be like. When it was just me and you."

Just me and you. That's all Paige had ever known. It's all she had ever needed.

"So, are you joining me for a paddle?" Olivia said, leaning towards Paige, her lips parted, her gaze expectant.

Paige could hardly bring herself to refuse, so she simply nodded, wordlessly, as though Olivia had asked her to follow her to the ends of earth.

Together, they weaved between deckchairs and parasols and stepped over shoddily-built sandcastles fortified with shells and seaweed, until they reached the sun-kissed shoreline. The waves were calm, lolling back and forth over the sand. Children squealed and laughed as they ran in and out of the water, splashing frothy waves.

"Do you think it's cold?" Olivia said as she dumped her bag and sandals onto a dry patch of sand.

"Probably," Paige answered, dipping the edge of her toes into the water and instantly recoiling. "Yep. Definitely."

Olivia laughed, offering her hand once more. "Well? Shall we go together?"

Paige eyed Olivia's outstretched hand, her stomach fluttering, before she slid her fingers against Olivia's. Warmth spread along her skin, curling around her wrist and up to her elbow, but she tried not to think too much about it, or what it meant.

"Ready?"

With a grin, Olivia stepped into the water, pulling Paige alongside her.

The coldness hit her with a shock as it enveloped her feet, lapping along her ankles, and goosebumps broke out along her bare legs.

"Next year, we're going somewhere tropical," Olivia said between chattering teeth as she stomped her feet up and down, splashing water against the back of Paige's legs.

Paige was already acclimatising to the temperature, wading further out with her hand still clasped between Olivia's. "It's not so bad, once you get used to it."

Olivia stopped shivering as the water adjusted to a more comfortable temperature,

sloshing around their ankles, and then up to their calves as they went deeper in, leaving the sandy shore behind them.

Droplets of saltwater glistened on Olivia's skin as she closed her eyes against the sun, her golden hair framing her face. "This feels so nice," she said, and Paige flicked a glance down at their hands, still laced together. Should she say something? Olivia hadn't seemed to notice, so Paige decided not to bring it up.

A white-crested gull swooped low over their heads with a shriek, and Olivia released Paige's hand to shoo it away. A cold patch formed on Paige's skin where Olivia had let go.

"Damn seagulls. That's one thing I hate about the seaside," Olivia muttered, glaring at the bird as it winged away with an indignant squawk.

"I've heard they're pretty notorious for stealing chips," Paige said, rubbing her hand over her shorts.

Olivia tutted, before her expression brightened. "Ooh, chips and batter. That's tea sorted. I saw at least five different chippies on our way to the cottage."

"I'm pretty sure the batter isn't vegetarian," Paige pointed out, but Olivia shushed her.

"We're on holiday. I'm allowed a little cheat every now and then," she said with a wink.

A young boy floated past on an inflatable unicorn lilo, and Olivia watched him go with a longing sigh. "We should have brought something like that."

"Knowing you, you'd fall asleep and get swept out on the tide."

"That happened to my uncle once," Olivia said fondly "We had to call the lifeguards out and everything."

Paige pulled a face. "Maybe not a good idea, then."

Olivia laughed. "I love that you have such trust in me," she teased.

"Always."

Paige was nervous about going to sleep that night. It shouldn't have bothered her that

she was sharing a bed with her best friend, just like they had countless times before, but it did. They were older now. And things… were changing. Paige didn't understand what, or why, only that they were. She was feeling things for her friend that she shouldn't be feeling. Feelings she'd never felt before, that made her giddy and nervous.

"I love your PJs," Olivia said as she came out of the bathroom, combing a brush through her hair. "They're so cute."

Paige stared down at her frilly blue shorts and oversized polka-dot t-shirt. "Oh, thanks," she muttered, feeling vaguely embarrassed about the childish ensemble. "I hope it isn't too warm tonight. I'm a terrible sleeper when it's hot."

"Ugh, me too. We'll probably have to leave the window open all night. As long as the noise doesn't bother you."

Through the open window, they could hear the soft crash of waves against the shore, and the cries of nesting gulls. It was just after nine o'clock, and it was still light outside, the sky a beautiful blushing-orange hue. A few couples strolled along the sand, but most of the beach-goers had already packed up and headed home.

"I don't remember the last time I felt so tired this early," Olivia said, stifling a yawn.

"All that sea air."

Olivia gave her a sleepy nod. "Yeah. Oh, I was thinking about what to do tomorrow. Instead of heading down to the beach right away, I thought we could grab breakfast in town, and maybe do a bit of shopping. Parking's probably going to be a nightmare again, so we'll look up the bus route. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good to me," Paige said.

"Great, then it's a plan. But now, we sleep." She stretched her arms up over her head, giving Paige a view of her stomach—and the little silver belly piercing she'd had since Year 10—before climbing into her side of the bed.

Paige remained on her feet by the dresser until Olivia patted the space next to her. "I already told you, I don't snore."

"I know," Paige said softly, climbing beneath the cotton linen sheets.

Olivia sat scrolling through her phone for a few minutes, responding to the various notifications she had ignored all day, while Paige stared up at the ceiling, her dark curls spilling out over the pillow. After a moment of hesitation, she reached for her phone and sent a quick text to her mum. Her mother hadn't asked her to keep her updated, but Paige figured she ought to at least let her know she was still alive and hadn't met with some unfortunate accident on the way.

She didn't receive an immediate reply, so she put her phone back on the side table and rolled over so that she wasn't facing Olivia.

"Are you going to sleep now?" Olivia asked, her voice sleepy and quiet and intimate.

Every nerve in Paige's body shivered, and she curled her legs up to her chest, as though it would somehow keep her reaction contained. "I think so."

"Me too," Olivia decided, and Paige felt the bed dip behind her as she wriggled deeper under the covers. "I hope you sleep well."

"Yeah, you too."

"Goodnight."

"Night."

CHAPTER FIVE

When Paige woke the next morning, her leg was trailing over the edge of the bed, and she was squished right to the edge of the mattress, Olivia's elbow digging into her ribs.

Blinking away the grogginess in her vision, she turned her head, only to find herself inches away from Olivia's, her warm breath falling against Paige's cheek.

For a moment, Paige was frozen in place, hardly daring to move.

There was something soft and intimate about Olivia's face while she was asleep, and it captured Paige's attention completely. She was close enough to smell the mango and coconut shampoo Olivia had used last night, and see the tiny mole that sat above her lips, barely visible against her sun-kissed skin. A strand of honeydew hair drifted over her face, and Paige went to brush it away before she caught herself mid-motion.

Lowering her hand again, she sighed softly, her breath stirring the air between them.

When Olivia started to rouse, Paige drew away, back into the cold patch of bed behind her. Olivia didn't open her eyes and just as quickly fell back into the rhythm of sleep.

Deciding there was no point lying there, awake, Paige slipped out of bed as quietly as she could and tiptoed bare-foot into the bathroom.

The white tiles were cold, and she absently curled her toes as she splashed her face

with water, scrubbing away any lingering sleepiness. As expected, the night had been warm, but at some point, the air had cooled enough to have her reaching for the cover again.

Blinking rivulets of water from her lashes, Paige dabbed her face dry and ran her fingers through her tangled curls. They'd both taken it in turns to shower last night, washing off the salt, sweat and suncream that had accumulated throughout the day. She'd let her hair dry naturally overnight, but now she regretted not taking the time to ease some of the knots and tangles out of her hair before going to bed. Now it stuck out in unruly waves, tickling the edges of her chin. Not in the mood to deal with it, she scraped it back to her neck and fastened it with a bobble.

By the time she stepped out of the ensuite, Olivia was already awake, squinting at her from the bed as she rubbed her eyes. "You're already up? What time is it?" she asked, her voice a sleepy drawl. "I didn't oversleep, did I?"

"No, it's only eight o'clock. I haven't been up long," Paige said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "How did you sleep?"

"Pretty well, actually. I must have been tired," she said, her words interrupted by a yawn that she didn't bother to cover. "How about you?"

"I think I slept okay."

"So I didn't snore?"

"Not that I remember."

With a satisfied nod, Olivia threw the covers off her legs and stretched out her toes. "Good. We'll need our energy today. We have lots to do."

Paige brushed a strand of hair out of her eye. "I can't wait."

The closest bus stop was a twenty-minute walk from the seafront cottage, up a sandy hill, and Paige was out of breath, her face covered in a thin sheen of sweat, by the time they'd reached the top. She wiped the back of her wrist across her forehead. "You didn't tell me it would be such a trek," she said breathlessly.

Olivia propped her hands on her hips, unfazed by the workout. "You're so unfit, Paige, that was nothing."

Paige pouted, fanning her face with her hands to cool down. A soft breeze blew sand across the road, rustling the reeds by the side of the path. On their left, the expanse of white cliffs stretched around the coastline, the sea bleeding into the sky in shades of indigo.

"Looks like this is our ride," Olivia said, lifting her chin. A double-decker blue bus crested the hill, and Olivia stuck her hand out, her blonde hair fluttering behind her. "I'll grab the tickets; you find us some seats."

Paige nodded, and they boarded the bus as the doors slid open with a hiss.

Once they were both seated on the lower deck, Olivia tucked her ticket into her purse. "That'll be going in the scrapbook," she said absently.

Paige bit back a smile. "You still keep a scrapbook? I thought you'd given that up ages ago."

Olivia chuckled. "I did stop for a while, but I recently got back into it. I like looking back on memories."

Paige leaned back, her knees bumping the seat in front. "I remember making a

sleepover scrapbook, for every time we slept over at each other's houses," she said, "but that's it."

"I remember that too. We used to make our own stationery and write each other notes to stick in it," Olivia said, tilting her head with a wistful smile. "And friendship bracelets. We made so many friendship bracelets."

"I probably still have them, somewhere. I never throw anything out."

Olivia's smile dimmed. "Don't you ever wish things were how they used to be? Just… so much simpler."

Paige turned her gaze to the window, glimpsing her watery reflection in the glass. "I suppose so. But things can't stay the same forever." Just like us. Things between us are changing, and I don't know what to do about it…

"You're right," Olivia said, her expression easing. "New adventures await."

The bus pulled into the small bus station in Whiterock town, and the two of them followed the other tourists down off the step, onto a cobbled path.

"We made it," Olivia said. "So much easier than trying to find a parking space."

Paige nodded, glancing around and not recognising her surroundings. "So, uh, where are we?"

Olivia spread her hands. "I have absolutely no idea," she said cheerfully. "Let's just follow the crowd, and I'm sure we'll get where we need to be."

"I wish I had your confidence," Paige muttered.

"You don't need it, when you've got me," Olivia said, hooking her arm around Paige's and giving it a squeeze before letting go. Paige wished she'd stop doing that without warning, if only because it sent her heart racing every time.

It was just after nine in the morning, but there was already a shimmering haze in the air from the heat. Light bounced off a wind chime hanging outside someone's house, sending the colours of the rainbow dancing across the street.

Olivia must have noticed it too, because she said, "Remember that suncatcher I bought you like five years ago?"

Paige scratched her cheek. "Actually, I still have it."

"You do?"

Paige looked down at her feet. "Yeah. Only because if I peel it off, it'll mark the window," she added with a half-teasing smile.

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Don't ruin the moment. But seriously, I can't believe you still have it."

"I like it," Paige said simply, seeing Olivia's lips tweak into a smile.

"So, where shall we go first?"

"I'm going to take a wild guess and say you're probably hungry," Paige said, "so why don't we grab some breakfast first?"

Olivia's sea-green eyes twinkled. "I like the way you think. I'm craving something sweet."

"I'm sure we can find a bakery or something around here."

"Oh yeah, we passed a patisserie yesterday. We should try and find that again."

They walked past quaint little houses built from white stone and stopped to admire a door made entirely of shells and driftwood that sparkled in the sun. As they got closer to town, they passed a row of market stalls, peddling cockles and oysters and fresh crabs, and the air smelt like salt and brine and seafood and Paige found it delightful.

The roads were easy to navigate, and they soon found themselves in familiar surroundings, back on the street they had explored yesterday.

"This is the one," Olivia said as they stopped beside a chalkboard reading Delilah's Delicacies in swirly handwriting. Beneath it, written in a slanted, hasty scrawl, were the words: Isla's Knickknacks and Antiques, Upstairs.

"It smells amazing. Let's go in."

Without giving Paige a chance to refuse, Olivia dragged her inside the patisserie, where they were immediately confronted by the smell of sugar and yeast.

"It all looks so good, I don't know what to choose," Olivia said, almost drooling as she joined the back of the queue, gazing along the glass display cases crammed with cakes and pastries and sweet rolls dusted with icing sugar.

Paige decided on a simple cream doughnut, reaching into her bag for her purse. "We could always grab some to take back to the cottage," she suggested when she saw Olivia was still struggling to decide.

Her eyes lit up. "That's a good idea. As long as they don't melt while we're walking around town."

"Then we can come back for them later," she said instead.

"Hi there. What can I get you?" the woman behind the counter said in a cheery voice when it was their turn to order. She was a small woman, with caramel-coloured skin and black curly hair piled up in a messy bun. When she smiled, her cheeks dimpled, bringing out the lustre of her brown eyes.

"One of those cream doughnuts, and a chocolate eclair please."

The woman nodded, grabbing a pair of metal tongs and taping the cakes up into a pink stripy box. She fastened it with a handmade sticker before sliding it over the counter.

Olivia handed her the fiver that Paige had shoved into her hand, and Paige grabbed the change. "Thank you!"

They stepped back out onto the warm pavement and sat down on the wooden bench right outside the shop to eat their cakes.

"This is so freaking good," Olivia said around a mouthful of eclair, licking the chocolate off her fingers.

Paige took a tentative bite out of her own doughnut, trying—and failing—not to get jam and cream everywhere. She wiped her mouth with her fingers, lacking the grace with which Olivia had done the same, and took another bite.

They finished eating in silence, and then sat for a while, soaking up the sun and the breeze and the smell of the sea.

"Want to see what's upstairs?" Olivia suggested when she caught Paige eyeing the sign for the knickknack shop outside the bakery.

"I am curious," Paige admitted, dusting the sugar off her hands. "I'll just have a quick look, if that's okay."

Olivia nodded, jumping to her feet, and they headed up the covered stone staircase by the side of the patisserie. At the top of the stairs was a wooden door, propped open with a cracked ornamental vase.

Inside was a dimly-lit room, the air heavy with the scent of dust and incense. There was something alluring yet eccentric about it all, and Olivia gently nudged Paige inside when she hesitated on the doorstep.

"Look at this place," Olivia said with a quiet sort of wonder. "I feel like I've stumbled into some kind of witch's lair."

The room was illuminated by old brass lanterns that flickered with an ochre glow, elongating the shadows that stretched across the walls. Rickety wooden shelves extended the length of the room, crammed with knickknacks and ornaments and other curiosities, old maps and posters pinned up on the patches of plaster wall in between.

On the other side of the room was a small desk and cash register. Paige had been half-expecting to see an old man sitting at the counter, as ancient as the relics in the shop, but instead there was a woman, perhaps in her early- to mid-twenties, with dyed black haired and heavy jewelled necklaces wrapped around her neck.

"Morning," the woman said when she noticed Paige's gaze, glancing up from the book she had propped open in her lap. "Give a holler if you need any help."

Paige offered her a smile before drifting over to a shelf in the corner, which had a display of nautical-themed items; a boat made entirely of carved driftwood, and some jewellery crafted from shells and seaglass. A necklace caught her eye, and she lifted it carefully from the display stand. The chain was silver, decorated with pieces of wire-wrapped seaglass and a bluish-white pearl.

"That's pretty," Olivia said over Paige's shoulder, her hair tickling Paige's neck.

"Yeah," Paige said, setting the necklace back down before inspecting a bracelet adorned with a starfish charm.

"Looks like they're all handmade," Olivia said, picking up a brown tag attached to the stand. "By someone named Isla."

"That would be me," a voice said from behind them, and they glanced at the woman behind the counter.

Olivia smiled at her. "You're very talented. Are all the materials local?"

The woman—Isla—nodded, the jewellery around her neck clinking as a half-smile touched her lips. "Yes. The shells and glass are all from the beach. You can find a lot of great treasures in the sand, if you're patient."

"We'll keep that in mind," Olivia said.

The woman went back to reading, her expression unchanging.

"There's a lot of nice things here," Olivia said, showing Paige a dusty trinket box she had found, the lid carved with whales. "I might grab something for my mum. She loves stuff like this."

Paige wondered if her mother would even bother to appreciate any souvenirs she brought back. She would most likely shove it in a drawer and forget about it.

They looked around for a bit longer, until Olivia found a small vase covered in glass flowers to buy for her mum, then headed back out into the blistering summer heat.

CHAPTER SIX

After leaving the antique store, Olivia begged Paige to check out some of the fashion and accessory boutiques that dotted Whiterock's main high street.

"Let's check this place out first," Olivia said, stepping off the pavement and into a small clothing store. An air conditioning unit blasted them from overhead as they stepped inside. "They have a sale on."

"You do love your sales," Paige said.

Olivia gave a dramatic sigh. "You know I do," she agreed, walking over to a rack of clothes labelled 30% off, her sandals clicking against the shiny white linoleum.

The rest of the store was almost empty, except for the clerk behind the counter, and a young woman looking at dresses on the other side of the room, and every little noise seemed to echo.

Paige hovered by Olivia's shoulder as she began to rummage through the fabrics, tugging on sleeves before dismissing them with a shake of her head. "That's nice," Paige said as Olivia pulled out a grey and blue skater dress with frilled sleeves.

"For you," Olivia clarified, holding the dress up to Paige and casting an appraising glance over her.

"Me? Oh, I don't think so. Dresses don't really suit me," Paige said quickly, but Olivia ignored her.

"I think it should fit, but why not try it on, just in case?"

Paige sighed. "Alright."

"Perfect. I'll find something too, and we can try them on together." She thrust the dress into Paige's arms before turning back, humming softly to herself.

Paige glanced down at the dress in her hand, wondering if it really would suit her.

She was more of a pants kind of girl, and even wearing shorts was a stretch out of her comfort zone, preferring jeans or sweatpants on most days. But if Olivia thought it would look nice on her, why not give it a try?

"What do you think of this one?" Olivia said, pulling out a strappy black sundress with a sunflower print on it. "Too much?"

Paige shook her head. "No. I like it!"

Olivia grinned. "Alright then, let's go see what they look like."

There were some changing rooms at the back of the shop, so they both slid into a separate cubicle and drew the curtains across.

Paige kept her shorts on but took off her shirt before slipping the skater dress over her head. She smoothed down the flared skirt at her waist and tugged out some of the creases before studying herself in the full-length mirror.

The dress stopped just above her knee, the material breezy and light. The neckline was a comfortable height, not too close to her throat but not revealing anything either, and the puffy sleeves were a cute added touch.

Surprisingly, she didn't hate it. Olivia always did have a knack for this kind of thing.

"Are you ready yet?" Olivia asked, her voice muffled through the curtain.

Instead of answering, Paige pulled aside the fabric and stepped out.

Olivia was wearing the black sunflower dress, and she looked stunning. It was shorter than Paige's, with a V-shaped neckline that just started to dip between Olivia's cleavage. Paige's throat went dry, and she had to swallow several times before she

could even bring herself to speak.

"Paige, I love it! It suits you perfectly," Olivia said, pressing her hands to her cheeks.

Paige glanced down at herself, holding her hands shyly behind her back. "It does?" she muttered, shuffling her feet. "You look amazing too." More than amazing, you look incredible.

Olivia grinned, doing a little twirl so that the edge of the dress grazed the top of her thighs. Blood rushed to Paige's cheeks as she tried not to stare at all of the exposed skin. It wasn't any more than when she'd been wearing her shorts and t-shirt, but this felt different somehow. More intimate.

"You should definitely buy it. You look seriously stunning."

Paige was sure she was just being nice—Olivia had always hyped her up in the past—

but her chest still swelled. "Thank you," she said. "You too."

She turned back to the changing room and Olivia stopped her. "Wait, we need to take a picture, for the scrapbook," she said, grabbing her phone from her cubicle. "We both look so good."

Paige uttered a half-hearted protest, but Olivia had already grabbed her hand, pulling her in close. She could hardly catch her breath as Olivia pressed her cheek against Paige's, the air trembling between them.

"Smile," Olivia said, and Paige lifted her lips into a faint smile, the pinkness in her cheeks accentuated beneath the bright fluorescents. Olivia snapped a couple of photos, then pulled away just as quickly, leaving Paige scrambling to draw in a

breath.

They changed back into their regular outfits, and Paige had to take a moment to herself in the quiet of the cubicle to stop her mind from spinning. What was wrong with her? Why was she acting like this around Olivia—her best friend for the last ten years. Had something changed between them that she wasn't aware of? She didn't understand anything that was going on in her head—or her heart—right now.

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She heard Olivia's curtain shuffle open and composed herself before stepping out too. "Let's go see if we can snag another bargain," Olivia said, grinning as she swung the dress around in her hand.

Paige nodded, following her back to the storefront.

They spent another half hour looking around and pulling out clothes to try on, and by the time they had stepped back out onto the high street, they were both bright-eyed and laughing, carrying two pink paper bags between them.

"I don't remember the last time we had a shopping spree like this," Olivia said as they paused by a bench to sip from a bottle of cold water. "I had so much fun."

Paige bit her lip. She had managed to push aside her thoughts long enough to enjoy their little spending spree, but it wasn't long before they came flooding back as she watched Olivia gulp down the water, leaving a glossy sheen on her lips.

"Is there anywhere else you want to go?" Olivia asked as she stretched her arms over her head.

Paige glanced down the street, a signboard catching her attention. Books by the Beach.

"I wouldn't mind popping into that bookshop," she said, nodding towards the small, white-cobblestone building at the end of the street. "If that's okay with you." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, Olivia's eyes tracing the movement before landing on her face.

"Why wouldn't it be? I love bookshops," Olivia said as they gathered up their bags and headed over towards Books by the Beach.

The air con was either faulty or non-existent inside the store, because the air was just as stifling inside as it was out, and a bead of sweat dripped down Paige's neck as she walked deeper into the rows of bookshelves, Olivia on her heels. The smell of dust and old paper was heavy in the air, reminding Paige of the library at college.

"I'm going over here to look," Olivia said, jabbing a thumb over her shoulder, towards a shelf labelled 'Classics'.

Paige nodded, then padded over to Fiction. She tended to dabble in most genres, depending on her mood, and the season. Right now, summer called for long fantasy books or sweet contemporary reads.

She browsed along the shelves, tugging on spines that caught her eye, until she almost walked right into a rickety old table half-hidden in the shadows. She glanced down, pursing her lips. The stack of books perched on the table wobbled for a moment before righting themselves, the pink and blue spines contrasting sharply against the dusty brown shelves behind them.

Curious, Paige crouched closer and read the laminated sign stuck to the table: Signed by local author, Avery Cole.

A local author? Interesting. She picked up the book at the top of the stack, turning it over to study the cover. It was an illustrated depiction of two teenage girls holding hands, a beautiful pink and orange sunset behind them.

She turned back to the blurb, her heart thumping in her chest.

Amy and Steph have been best friends for years, but now their friendship is starting

to feel like it isn't enough, like they want more…

Paige felt a strange tightness in her stomach as she read it. Two female friends who realise they're in love with each other? She'd never read a story like that before—a sapphic romance—but something was drawing her to this one. Something about it almost seemed to mirror the confusion in Paige's own heart.

Their friendship is starting to feel like it isn't enough, like they want more…

Paige swallowed, her throat dry with all the dust. Was that the reason she was feeling like this around Olivia? Because she wanted more than just a friendship?

No. No way. She wasn't in love with her best friend.

Paige didn't even know what love felt like. It wasn't something she had ever experienced before. Surely this—the butterflies, the sweaty palms, the weird thoughts—was something else. Something she didn't yet understand.

She ran her gaze over the cover again, at those two girls holding hands.

Did she want to hold Olivia's hand like that? Olivia was always hooking their arms together, but that wasn't the same, was it? There was something more intimate about threading one's fingers through another's, something close and touching. Her fingers curled around the book, and she shot a glance back over her shoulder, finding Olivia still perusing the classics.

Keeping the Avery Cole book clutched to her chest, she continued searching the shelves until she found another book that caught her interest—a paranormal fantasy that seemed fun—and brought both books to the counter to pay.

Olivia walked over just as Paige finished putting the books away in her bag.

"What did you buy?" she asked, trying to sneak a glance before Paige zipped them away.

"Just a fantasy book," she said dismissively.

"Cool. All finished here?"

Paige nodded, thanking the cashier again before they headed back out.

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"So, there's something that I want to do," Olivia said as they walked down the street.

Paige looked at her, sensing something unspoken in her tone. "Okay. What is it?"

"Well, it's kind of a surprise," Olivia said, twisting her hands together. "I want to go alone."

Paige felt her stomach pull. She wanted to do something without her?

"Don't give me that look," Olivia said, slumping her shoulders. Paige blinked, not realising her emotions had been so evident on her face; had they been this whole time? "You'll see what it is later. I don't know how long I'll be—maybe an hour or more—so I figured you could maybe camp out in a cafe somewhere and read. Only if you're okay with that? I know it's not exactly ideal."

Paige schooled her expression. "No, that's fine," she said. "But you really can't tell me what it is?"

Olivia gave her a playful smile. "Nope. I want it to be a surprise."

Paige shrugged. "Alright then. I'll head to the cafe we sat in yesterday." She paused, peering up at Olivia between her lashes. "Promise me you will come back though? Don't leave me sitting there like an idiot."

Olivia's expression softened. "I promise I'll come back, don't worry," she said. "Now shoo. I'll meet you back at the cafe in a bit."

Wondering what surprise Olivia had in mind, Paige parted from her friend and headed back down the avenue to the small cafe they had visited yesterday. By the time she threw a glance over her shoulder, Olivia had already disappeared.

The cafe was fairly quiet, since it wasn't quite yet lunchtime, so Paige ordered an iced tea and sat on one of the plush sofa-chairs in the corner of the room, where she could keep an eye on the door. Perhaps the timing had worked out well after all, since she now had the chance to check out the book she'd just bought. She didn't want to show Olivia it just yet, didn't want to risk betraying her own feelings.

Sipping on her iced tea, Paige pulled the book out of her bag and flipped it open to the first page.

This is the story of the summer I fell in love with my best friend…

Paige lost track of time while she read, falling straight into Amy and Steph's chemistry as they turned from friends to lovers. Experiencing Amy's racing heart and sweaty palms and the glances she kept sneaking towards Steph was like reliving all of her own reactions around Olivia.

But when had she started seeing Olivia as anything more than a friend?

She barely managed to stuff the book back into her bag when she noticed Olivia coming into the cafe, the bell tinkling above the door.

Lifting her gaze, she froze.

"So… what do you think?" Olivia said, turning full-circle in front of her.

Paige's lips opened and closed, searching for the right words. "You… I… I love it," she finally blurted, raking her gaze over Olivia's newly-short hair. She'd had it cut to

rest just above her shoulders, the layers at the front curling up to her chin. Subtle pink highlights had been added to the ends, making her hair shimmer like a blushing sky. "Seriously, you look amazing."

Olivia grinned, running her fingers through her hair and fluffing it up around her face. "Thank you, Paige. That means a lot, especially coming from you." She plopped down into the seat opposite Paige. "It feels so much lighter now."

"You even got highlights," Paige said, because she was so caught off guard by Olivia's transformation that she didn't know what else to say. Olivia looked even more gorgeous with short hair than Paige had imagined. It suited her perfectly.

"I did," Olivia said, smoothing her fingers through the dyed-pink ends. "I always wanted to have pink hair, but I thought it might look silly."

"Definitely not. You look beautiful," she said before she could stop herself, the word almost causing her to bite her tongue.

Olivia cocked her head slightly, her smile gentle as she stared across the table at Paige.

Paige hardly knew where to look; she felt too nervous to meet Olivia's gaze, but she felt herself being drawn back to it, again and again.

The air between them almost seemed to tremble with their held breaths, making Paige's hairs stand on end.

What is this…

"S-shall I order you a drink?" Paige blurted, shaking them both out of their daze. "The iced teas here are really good." She reached for her drink and took a shaky sip,

trying to distract herself from the thudding pulse of her heart.

"Sure. That sounds good," Olivia said, her smile never fading. She pulled out her phone as Paige got up to order something, wiping her sweaty palms down her shorts.

The last thing she'd been expecting was Olivia to come back with her hair cut off—and to look stunning because of it.

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Way to make things even more complicated…

She carried Olivia's drink back to the table, almost spilling it into Olivia's lap as she set it down with a shaky thud.

"What made you decide to do it?" she asked, cradling her own tea in her hands, soaking up the condensation. "Cut your hair."

"What you said in the car," Olivia answered, putting her phone away and trying her drink. "Oh, this is good. I'm not usually a fan of cold tea." She took another long sip, tucking her hair back behind her ear. "You told me to focus on what I wanted, nobody else. And I realised that this is what I wanted. So I went for it." There was a giddiness in her voice that made Paige smile. It was nice to see her so happy. She'd almost forgotten what it was like to be around people with such an infectious mood. Her mother was hardly the best role model.

"I mean it when I say you look great," Paige said, lifting her gaze slowly to meet Olivia's. "I'm glad you went for it."

"Thanks, Paige," Olivia said. "So am I."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Paige struggled to sleep that night with all the thoughts swirling around in her mind. Thoughts about the girl snuggled beneath the covers beside her, the edges of her pink-and-blonde hair almost touching Paige's brown curls.

What did it all mean?

Those looks they had shared after Olivia had cut off her hair. The book about friends turning into lovers. All these weird thoughts and feelings.

She felt like everything around her was changing, and she could hardly keep up with it all. This was supposed to be a fun holiday, a break from her depressing mother, a chance to reconnect with her best friend after drifting over the last few weeks.

Friendship isn't enough...

Was that the case for Paige? Was her friendship with Olivia no longer enough? Did she want something more? She didn't know. She couldn't tell. Her thoughts were as tremulous and billowy as the wind outside, rattling the windchimes on the porch.

She'd never felt like this before, about anyone. Romance, attraction, dating... none of it had interested her in the slightest over the last seventeen years of her life, so why now? And why Olivia?

She turned her head so that she was looking at Olivia. Her lips were parted, her breaths fluttering the edge of the sheet. Even in the semi-darkness, they looked so pink, so soft.

Paige wondered what it would be like to kiss them.

She'd never kissed anyone before. The desire to do so had never even crossed her mind.

Until now.

Oh god. Now she was thinking about kissing her best friend?

Even if she did like Olivia in that way—in a way that was something more than simply being friends—it wasn't as though she could come out and admit it. What if it ruined their friendship completely? Olivia couldn't feel the same way. She'd never even shown any interest in dating girls before, and she'd told Paige herself that relationships were out of the window for a while after the last boyfriend disaster.

She thought agreeing to join Olivia on holiday would help sew up the frayed edges of their friendship, but now she was thinking things that had the power to rip it apart at the seams. She didn't want that. She didn't want to lose Olivia. Not when she was the only person who really understood her—and liked her—for who she was.

She wasn't going to ruin everything they had just because of some silly little feelings that she didn't even understand.

"We have a busy day ahead of us," Olivia said the following morning as she sat in front of the mirror, curling her newly-cut hair with tongs. "I want to do all the beachy stuff. Walk on the sand, look for shells, eat chips and ice cream and, finally, visit the amusements."

Paige flopped back onto the bed, covering her face with her hands. "Sounds… exhausting."

"You didn't come on holiday expecting to lounge around in the cottage all day, did you?" Olivia said, setting the tongs down.

Paige peeked between her splayed fingers. "No…"

Olivia laughed, walking over to Paige and pulling her hands away from her face. Paige squirmed, trying not to focus on the way Olivia was looking down at her, her short hair falling over her cheeks, her green eyes twinkling. "Come on, it'll be fun." She pulled Paige to her feet. "You'll feel better once we have some breakfast."

"Your hair's only half curled," Paige pointed out as she shuffled into the kitchen behind Olivia.

"Food before beauty," she replied flippantly.

They had managed to grab some groceries from a local corner shop on the way home from town yesterday, so the cupboards were no longer empty. Olivia had insisted on more pastry for breakfast, grabbing a bag of pain-au-chocolate and some butter croissants to have in the mornings.

"You seriously need to watch your sugar," Paige said as she ripped some of the flaky pastry off the croissant and shoved it into her mouth.

"I don't think a little pain-au-chocolat ever killed anyone," Olivia said, exaggerating her French accent.

"There's always a first."

Olivia's eyes widened slightly. "I don't think I like that tone," she said, then laughed. "So, after breakfast, do you want to go to the arcades or go beachcombing first?"

Paige munched on her croissant before answering. "It might be a bit early for arcades," she said. "I'm not sure I can deal with loud music right now."

"Shell collecting it is, then," Olivia decided.

They finished up their breakfast, and Paige cast an appraising glance at the overcast sky. "Is it forecast to rain today?"

Olivia joined her at the open window, pressing her palms against the pane and leaning forward to sniff the air. "Doesn't smell like rain."

"I didn't know you were a meteorologist."

"There's a lot of things you don't know about me," Olivia said with a sly wink that made Paige's skin heat up. What was that supposed to mean?

"I'm going to pack an umbrella anyway," Paige decided, "just in case your nose is wrong."

Olivia tutted, throwing her hair back from her face. "You underestimate me."

She went to curl the rest of her hair while Paige finished packing her bag for their outing. Once they were ready, they locked the cottage behind them and went down to the beach.

The tide was well out, exposing a belly of pale sand and rock. In the distance, the white cliffs glinted like marble beneath the sun.

"So, what are we looking for?" Paige asked as they reached the bottom of the slope. The sand had yet to warm up beneath the sun, so they kept their shoes on, treading footprints behind them.

Olivia shrugged. "Shells, sea glass, rocks… anything that looks pretty."

"Maybe we're best walking down there, then," Paige suggested, pointing to the pebbled strip between the sand and the sea. "If we're looking for things that the ocean washed up."

They headed closer to the shore, the sand turning hard with rocks and stones that had been smoothed over by the constant erosion of the waves.

"Oh, I can see some blue glass," Olivia said, crouching down to excavate the small, rounded piece of glass that was half-hidden in the sand. "It's so clear." She held it up for Paige to see, the sun refracting off its glistening surface.

"I should have brought a bag or something to carry them in," Paige said, turning out the tiny pockets of her shorts.

"Do you really think I came unprepared?" Olivia said, reaching into her shoulder bag and pulling out the brown paper bag from Isla's shop. "I was thinking, if we find a lot, we could share some of our haul with Isla. You know, for her jewellery."

Paige smiled thoughtfully. "That sounds like a nice idea. I might pick up one of her necklaces while we're there."

"And some more pastries from the bakery downstairs," Olivia added, licking her lips.

Paige laughed. "That too." She continued along the shoreline, using the toe of her shoes to brush aside sand until at last she found a pearly-white scallop shell she almost mistook for a rock. "I found one!" she shouted excitedly, dusting off the wet particles of sand and showing Olivia.

"That's pretty," she said as Paige smoothed her fingers over the ridges. "You have a good eye for this kind of thing."

Paige smiled. "Just lucky," she said, then pressed it into Olivia's hand. "You can keep it."

Olivia blinked, looking down at it nestled in her palm. "Are you sure? You might not find another as nice as this one," she said.

Paige rolled her eyes, her voice gentle. "Exactly why you should keep it."

Olivia glanced up, her eyes catching Paige's, and for a second, Paige forgot how to breathe, drowning in those sea-green depths. "Thank you," Olivia finally said. "I'll treasure it."

Paige looked away, her cheeks warm. "Yeah."

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They continued along the stretch of beach until the tide started to come in, and the air turned balmy beneath the sun.

"Told you it wasn't going to rain," Olivia said smugly.

Paige waved her off. "Sorry for doubting you, Miss Meteorologist."

Olivia dropped into a crouch, and Paige peered down over her shoulder, shielding her gaze from the sun. "Find something?"

"I thought it was some glass, but it's just a very shiny rock," she answered, fishing something out of the damp sand.

"That is a very shiny rock," Paige said. "It's still pretty though. Why don't you keep it?"

Olivia considered it for a moment, before slipping it into the bag. "You're right." She got back to her feet, dusting the sand off her hands, and shot Paige a grin. "This is fun."

Paige looked at her, her lips parting with a soft laugh. "Yeah, it is."

They spent another hour combing the beach for glass and shells and more shiny rocks, until the brown paper bag was almost full.

"I think Isla will be very happy with our finds," Olivia said with an air of accomplishment. "Just make sure to pick out your favourites before we give them to

her."

Paige nodded, grumbling as she tried to scrub the dried sand off her hands, sticking to her skin in grainy clumps.

"Dip them in the sea," Olivia suggested, so Paige walked up to the edge of the shore—careful not to get her shoes wet—and washed them in the salt water.

A towel appeared on her left, and she took it from Olivia's hands with a grateful smile. "Thanks." She finished towelling off her hands, then waited while Olivia did the same, before tying her hair back from her face. "I think I'm ready for the arcades now."

"Arcades, then ice cream?" Olivia amended, and Paige flashed her an unabashed grin.

The amusements were a short walk from the seafront; a row of bright buildings characterised by their glistening neon lights and thumping speakers.

They ducked into the first arcade. It was dim inside, the air heavy with the smell of copper and dust. There weren't too many people walking around, but the sound of coins clinking and machines pinging created a constant dissonance in the background that was already starting to get under Paige's skin. She figured she would adjust to the noise soon enough and tried not to focus on it.

"This is one thing I did prepare for," Paige said, digging into her backpack and retrieving a plastic bag full of two-pence pieces. "My dad always used to keep a penny pot in the cupboard, and he didn't take it with him when he moved out, so I found these hidden in there."

"What a star," Olivia said, grabbing one of the plastic coin pots and holding it out so that Paige could tip out some of the copper pennies.

They did a full circuit of the first amusement, but most of the prizes were too hard to get, or geared towards children, so they went into the next one. Pirate Cove Amusements was a more nautical-themed arcade, decked out with plastic parrots and fake palms with some kind of sea shanty crackling over the speakers.

"This is fun," Paige said, looking around. Fake vines draped over the penny pusher machines, and a morose-looking pirate complete with a gold tooth and eyepatch brooded in the corner.

"Let's go take a picture with Blackbeard over there," Olivia said, dragging Paige after her before she could protest.

They snapped some goofy photos with the plastic pirate, before browsing the machines for something to win.

"Look at these," Olivia said, tapping her finger against the glass. A small metal keyring of a starfish was almost near the edge, half-buried beneath the pennies. "Do you think it'll be easy to get?"

"Worth a try," Paige said, already sliding a row of coins into the penny slot and releasing them rapidly with her finger. Olivia did the same on the other side, inserting the pennies one at a time.

They had almost emptied out their pot of pennies by the time the keyring dropped down into the slot with a heavy thunk, along with a dozen or so two-pence pieces.

"Bingo!" Olivia said, her lips kicking up into a smile as she retrieved the starfish and attached it to her bag. "Now we have to try and win you something."

They exchanged a couple of pounds for more pennies, then went mooching around looking for something to win for Paige.

"Aw, these are cute." Paige waved Olivia over to a machine toting little plushie dinosaurs.

"He looks pretty close to the end," Olivia observed, pointing to the orange triceratops laying on its side.

"I hope he's not too heavy," Paige muttered, nibbling her lip as she pushed a coin into the slot.

"I have plenty of change if we need more. I got my starfish, so you're getting your dinosaur."

Paige's stomach fluttered at Olivia's enthusiasm, and she nodded. "Alright then."

The dinosaur proved trickier to shift than the keyring, but after exchanging another couple of pounds, the plushie finally dropped down.

"Yes, we got him!" Olivia beamed as Paige fished him out, smoothing her fingers over the soft material. "Aw, he's cute."

"We spent way too much money trying to win him," Paige said, shaking her head.

"What are you going to call him?" Olivia asked, resting her chin on Paige's shoulder and looking down at the toy in her hands.

Her heart thumping, Paige tried not to focus on the smell of Olivia's shampoo, or the way her breath tickled her cheek. "Uhh… Timothy."

Olivia laughed. "Timothy the Triceratops. It has a ring to it."

Tucking Timothy into her bag, Paige suggested having a go on some of the other arcade games. She ended up winning in air hockey, even after sending the puck flying off the table, but Olivia scored a win in skee-ball. Then they spent the rest of their twenties on the claw-machine trying to win plushies with little luck, to nobody's surprise.

"I swear, these things are rigged," Olivia groaned as she watched the claw release the pink octopus with barely any effort.

"Yup," Paige said, raking her hair back from her face. They'd already spent a couple of hours in the amusements, and she was starting to get hungry. She hadn't checked the time in a while, but it must have been midday already, and the arcades were starting to get busier. And louder.

"Oh, my god," Olivia blurted, making Paige jump. "They have a Dance Dance Revolution machine here. Do you remember these things?"

Paige audibly groaned as Olivia headed towards the arcade dance machine, the pink and blue panels glowing with neon lights. "Yes, I remember. And I used to hate them," she muttered, cringing in horror at the memories of her seven-year-old self having a go at them. "I have a rubbish sense of beat."

Olivia laughed. "Oh, come on, it'll be fun. Please will you go on one with me?"

Paige took one look at Olivia's doe eyes and knew she didn't have it in her to refuse, as much as she wanted to. "People will see us," she said, trying to discreetly work her way out of agreeing.

Olivia shrugged. "So? They're not gonna care."

"But I will," Paige said, twisting her hands together. "Fine, fine. I'll do one round with you."

"I promise I'll make it up to you," Olivia said, slotting a couple of pound coins into the machine and starting it up.

"Are you ready for Dance Dance Revolution?" a masculine voice said as an early-

2000s pop song blasted through the speakers, making Paige cringe even harder than before. "Get into place and choose your jam."

"What shall we go for?" Olivia said as they climbed up onto the stage, positioning themselves in the middle of the panels. Paige gripped the bar behind her while Olivia stood freestyle, knowing that she would probably lose her balance as soon as she started to dance. Olivia browsed through the music choices and then selected one, a wicked grin on her face. "You can't say no to a bit of Steps."

Paige groaned as "5, 6, 7, 8" started to spill out of the speakers. "You really do owe me," she said, stomping her foot down on the left arrow as the first note hit, and "Perfect" flashed up on the split screen.

Olivia merely laughed, swinging her hips as she stood to the right, then went backwards, following the steps on screen.

Paige's movements were stiff and awkward at first, hyper focused on the other amusement-goers watching them from the rest of the room. But after a while of watching Olivia sway to the music and stomp around, Paige gave in and allowed herself to have some fun without worrying about anyone else, and soon enough they were both giggling, trying to sabotage each other's dance steps.

"Player 2 is the winner!" the machine announced as the song finished, and Paige half-collapsed against the bar behind her, breathless but grinning. Olivia was the kind of friend who always brought Paige out of her comfort zone, but in a good way, making her try things she normally wouldn't on her own.

Panting from the exertion, they both stepped down from the dance stage and took a swig of the lukewarm water in Paige's bag.

"Admit it, you had fun," Olivia teased.

Paige looked away. "Fun is exaggerating it."

Olivia poked her arm. "Don't lie. I saw you laughing."

"Only because I felt so ridiculous."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "I swear, you looked perfectly fine," she said sincerely. "And it really doesn't matter what other people think, as long as you enjoyed it."

Paige blew out a sigh. "I know. Sometimes I don't know why I find it so hard to let myself have fun," she admitted, surprising herself with her own honesty.

A strand of hair drifted over her almond eyes, and Paige gave a soft start when Olivia tucked it behind her ear for her, her touch gentle, intimate. She couldn't quite bring herself to meet her friend's gaze, her cheek burning where Olivia's fingertips had grazed her skin. "That's why I'm here. To make sure you do."

Paige swallowed, her throat going dry. She nodded mutely, hardly able to bring herself to speak.

Olivia cleared her throat and stepped back, a dusting of pink on her cheeks that hadn't been there before. "So, are you ready for that ice cream now? My treat."

CHAPTER EIGHT

That night, Paige awoke to darkness, and someone tugging on her arm.

"Paige. Paige, are you awake?" a voice whispered close to her ear, gradually rousing her from her sleep.

"Hmm?" she murmured, blinking open a sleepy eye.

Someone was leaning over her, soft blonde hair tickling her cheek. "Paige, wake up," Olivia said again, shaking her shoulder.

Drowsiness almost pulled her back under until Olivia switched a light on, and Paige

threw up a hand to cover her eyes. "What the hell, Olivia. What time is it?" she muttered, squinting between her fingers as her eyes adjusted to the light.

Olivia was sitting up in bed beside her, her hair all mussed around her face. Cute. "Are you awake?" she said, her voice gentle against the stillness of the night.

"I am now," Paige mumbled, rubbing her eyes with her fingers and raking her hair back out of her face. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing like that," Olivia said, biting her lower lip and playing with the edge of the duvet cover.

Paige stared at her, trying to figure out if she was missing something. "So… why did you wake me?"

"So, I just had a kind of crazy idea," she finally said, her gaze flicking up to meet Paige's before darting away again.

"I don't think I like the sound of that," Paige said, still trying to shake the dredges of sleep away. She was not a morning person, and she liked being woken up in the middle of the night even less.

"Just hear me out, okay?" Olivia said, reaching forward to touch Paige's wrist, her gaze imploring.

If she wasn't already awake, the soft flutter of Olivia's fingers brushing her skin was enough to banish all drowsiness from Paige's mind.

"Alright, I'm listening," she said, covering up a yawn and trying not to focus on Olivia's hand still resting against her wrist.

"I know you don't like swimming in the sea when there's other people there," Olivia started, "so I figured that maybe it would be fun to go for a late-night swim. You know, since nobody will see us."

"Absolutely not," Paige said without hesitation, tugging her wrist away from Olivia's hand as she shook her head.

"Paige, please at least think about it," Olivia said. "Don't you think it would be fun? Something a little rebellious."

Paige groaned. "You know I don't do rebellious," she said. "And anyway, the water's going to be freezing, and who knows what kind of creatures might be swimming in the sea at this time of night. Jellyfish, crabs." She shuddered. "I'd rather not risk it, thanks."

Olivia pouted. "Do you really not think it'll be fun?"

"Not at all," Paige said bluntly, then regretted it the moment Olivia's face fell.

"Oh, okay then. Sorry to wake you."

She went to switch off the light, but Paige held her back, resting a hand on her arm. "Wait," she whispered with a soft sigh. "Do you really want to go out there in the middle of the night?"

Olivia twisted a strand of hair around her finger, shrugging. "I know it's not exactly recommended to swim in the dark, but just think of the moon reflecting on the waves and having the whole beach to ourselves…"

Paige bit her lower lip. It did sound rather romantic, but she doubted that's what Olivia had in mind. "Okay," she said. "I don't know if I'll go into the water, but I'm

awake now, and a late-night walk on the sand does sound kind of nice."

Olivia reached over and wrapped her arms around Paige with a soft squeal. "Thank you," she said, but Paige was too focused on their bare skin pressing together, Olivia's coconut shampoo filling her senses.

She wanted to return the hug, to wrap her arms around Olivia and pull her closer, but she was too scared to move, so she left her hands resting in her lap until Olivia pulled away.

"Put your costume on just in case, but wear something warm on top because it's probably going to be chilly out there," Olivia rambled as she threw back the covers and climbed out of bed with a stretch.

Already regretting her decision, Paige did the same, the cool air hitting her legs and spreading goosebumps along her skin.

Olivia had already disappeared into the bathroom, so Paige rummaged through her travel case for her swim shorts and tank-top and quickly got changed before Olivia came out.

Pulling a long-sleeved shirt over the top, she wrapped a cardigan around her waist and slipped past Olivia into the bathroom to splash her face and scrub the last of the drowsiness away.

"This is so exciting," Olivia half-whispered, already wearing a zipped-up hoodie and shorts over her swimsuit.

"This is exactly like the time I slept over at yours, and you woke me up in the middle of the night to watch that meteor shower," Paige said as she slipped into her canvas shoes.

Olivia laughed. "I haven't changed, have I?"

"Not at all," Paige said, a fondness in her voice.

Leaving the porch light switched on, they locked the beach house behind them and headed down onto the sand in the darkness.

The moon was full and bright, bouncing off the ocean like stardust. Olivia used her phone's torch to illuminate their way across the sand, her beach bag thumping against her hip as she picked her way over the pebbles towards the sea.

"Thanks for agreeing to this," Olivia said, a pleasant breeze rolling off the water. There was a briny scent in the air that Paige had quickly grown used to over the last few days, and she already knew she would miss it when they headed back to the city. "I know I come up with some strange ideas sometimes."

Paige shrugged, almost slipping on a piece of wet seaweed, until Olivia caught her by the arm, steadying her again. "Sometimes the strangest ideas are the best ones."

Olivia laughed, her cheeks glowing beneath the moonlight. "I just figured, we're on holiday, right? It's fun to try new things when you're on holiday. And I don't know about you, but I've never gone late-night swimming before."

Paige scoffed. "Actually, I do this every weekend," she joked, making Olivia laugh.

"You're hilarious."

Paige gave her a lopsided grin. "I know."

They reached the edge of the shore and stared out across the moonlit waves. The tide was relatively far out, and when Paige glanced back, she could only just see the roof of the cottage, the porch light creating a beacon in the dark.

"Are you going into the water?" Olivia asked as she slipped out of her sandals and unzipped her hoodie.

Paige swallowed. "I guess so," she said, pulling her top over her head.

The moment the moonlight hit Olivia's bare skin, Paige forgot how to breathe. Although it was difficult to see completely in the dusk, the pale pink bikini looked stunning on her, exposing enough skin to make Paige's stomach flip. Wow.

She forced herself to look away before Olivia caught on, feeling less than enthused in her swim shorts and tank.

"You ready?" Olivia asked once they'd folded up their clothes and left them on the sand a little way back so that the tide wouldn't claim them.

"Not really."

Olivia gave her a soft, tentative smile and held out her hand towards Paige. "Together, then?"

Heart fluttering, Paige slid her fingers against Olivia's, and they both dipped forward into the water, toes curling against the sand.

"Oh god, it's freezing," Olivia blurted.

"I told you!" Paige gasped, the coldness running through all of her nerve endings. "This was definitely a bad idea."

Olivia laughed through her chattering teeth. "We'll warm up once we start swimming," she said, and they waded deeper into the water, shivering together.

"Just think, we can have a hot cup of tea when we get back to the cottage," Olivia said. "And a warm croissant."

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Paige said nothing. Tiny electric shocks were still running up and down her wrist that had nothing to do with the cold, and everything to do with the girl holding her hand.

Being careful not to stray too far from the shore, their bodies finally started to warm up as they kicked out their legs, churning up the sandbed below.

"Um, do you want me to let go of your hand now?" Paige asked, staring down at their fingers, laced together.

Olivia cocked her head, her expression neutral. "No, I'm good like this," she said nonchalantly, making Paige's pulse race even more.

"Okay," Paige whispered as the waves lapped at her waist and carried her on its tide. As long as Olivia kept holding her hand, she didn't think it would matter even if the sea swept them away.

"This is nice," Olivia said, her voice almost lost beneath the crash of waves against the rocks.

"Yeah. It is."

Paige lifted her gaze to the moon, feeling an overwhelming sense of calmness wash over her. Everything about this felt right. Being here with Olivia and nobody else. When they were together, Paige didn't have to worry about her mother, or college, or anything else. It was just them, and it was familiar, and it was enough.

She felt Olivia's gaze on her, and turned to meet it, her eyes bright in the darkness.

With the moonlight basking her skin, and the waves casting glistening reflections on her cheeks, she looked almost otherworldly in her beauty. Paige's gaze flicked involuntarily down to Olivia's lips, full and pink, before she wrenched her eyes away.

"I don't want this to end," Olivia said, her voice so soft Paige almost didn't hear it.

She seemed closer than before, her body brushing against Paige's, making all the hairs on her arm and neck stand on end.

Paige could hardly breathe. In her head, all she could think was what it would be like to kiss her. To kiss her best friend, right here beneath the moonlight.

And for a moment—for just a brief flutter of time—she thought that they might. Olivia seemed to lean forward slightly, drawing Paige closer, Olivia's breath almost brushing her cheek, her lashes silver with moonglow.

"Oh my god," Olivia gasped, shattering the moment.

"W-what?" Paige blinked rapidly, trying to shake herself out of her daze.

"I think I just felt something brush past my leg." Olivia's eyes were wide.

"Like what? Like, something alive?"

"I don't know," Olivia said, her tone tight with panic as she glanced down into the water. Paige did the same, but it was too dark and murky to see anything.

"Are you sure it wasn't just some seaweed?" Paige asked, nibbling on her lip.

"I don't know," she repeated.

This time, it was Paige who grabbed onto Olivia and started pulling her back towards the shore, trying to ignore the horrible sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Maybe we've overstayed our welcome," she muttered.

By the time they hit the sand, they were shivering in the cool night air, droplets of saltwater glistening on their bodies.

Olivia handed Paige a towel before wrapping her own around her body, her legs trembling.

"It was probably just some seaweed," Paige said, rubbing her arms with the towel.

"Yeah," Olivia said, clenching the towel close with a shudder. "Let's get dry and head back to the cottage. I don't know about you, but I'm ready for that cup of tea now."

CHAPTER NINE

The two of them awoke later than usual the morning after their midnight swim.

Olivia was up first, and already dressed by the time Paige blinked open an eye, groaning as the bright sunlight filtered through her sleepy haze.

"Morning, sunshine," Olivia said cheerfully, opening the curtains wider and making Paige want to bury her head back beneath the pillow. "I would let you sleep longer, but I made a reservation today that we can't miss."

Paige sat up, squinting at her. "Reservation?" she repeated, her voice still groggy. "Oh dear, what have you got planned?"

Olivia wiggled her fingers. "It's a surprise. You'll have to wait and see."

"Somehow, that doesn't reassure me," Paige muttered, raking a hand through her short curls. They flopped over her eyes in a tangle, and she caught Olivia staring at her, an unreadable expression on her face. "What?"

"Nothing," Olivia said, collecting herself. "Did you sleep well?"

"No, actually. I had a nightmare about going swimming in the ocean in the middle of the night and getting attacked by a giant octopus."

Olivia chuckled, fixing the strap of her shirt as it slid down her shoulder. "Are you sure it was a dream?"

Paige sucked in her cheeks. "I'm starting to wonder."

She got up and took a quick shower, wrapping one of the cottage's soft microfibre towels around her body to ward off the chill that rose from the bathroom tiles. She had brought a pair of denim shorts and a striped crew-neck t-shirt to change into, but her mind went back to the look Olivia had given her earlier that morning, and she decided to try something different.

"Olivia?" she called through the door, rapping her knuckles softly against the wood. When she received no response, she inched open the bathroom door, clutching the

towel tighter against her chest as steam flooded around her legs.

The bedroom was empty, so Paige tiptoed over to the wardrobe and pulled out the blue-and-white skater dress that Olivia had convinced her to buy. She hadn't had the chance to wear it yet, and she wanted to surprise Olivia by putting it on.

She took it back to the bathroom and got changed. The material of the dress was soft and flexible, swishing around her legs. She smoothed her fingers through her curls, letting them fall freely around her face instead of tying them back, and stepped out.

Olivia was in the kitchen, humming to herself as she buttered a croissant.

"No Nutella this time?" Paige asked, arching a brow.

Olivia turned round, the knife still in her hand, and froze when she saw Paige.

"You're wearing your dress," she said as Paige fiddled with the hem of one of the sleeves, her fingers tugging anxiously at the material. She felt shy all of a sudden beneath Olivia's gaze, and hardly knew where to look. "You look... really lovely."

Paige felt her cheeks flush. "Thank you. I figured I probably wouldn't wear it back home, and it seemed a waste since I went and bought it and everything," she rambled, still picking at the fabric.

Olivia simply nodded, and Paige wondered if she was imagining the pink colouring on Olivia's cheeks.

"So, are you going to tell me where we're going yet?" Paige asked, taking a seat at the island and drumming her fingers against the marble surface.

"Nope," Olivia said, buttering the rest of her pastry before dumping the knife in the

sink and sitting opposite Paige. "I told you, it's a surprise."

Paige sighed softly, bridging her hands beneath her chin and leaning her elbows against the table. "Last time you said that, you came back with your hair chopped off."

Olivia smiled around a mouthful of croissant. "You're going to love it. I promise."

Paige bounced on the balls of her feet as she waited for Olivia to finish locking the door, the sun hot on her neck. "Which direction are we heading?"

Olivia slid the key into her bag before turning to face her. "That way," she said, pointing vaguely towards the amusements.

"That doesn't tell me anything."

Olivia grinned. "Exactly."

"Alright, lead the way, I guess," Paige said, wondering what kind of 'reservation' her friend had booked. As long as it wasn't some kind of spa treatment, she should be fine. The thought of strangers massaging her body made her all sorts of uncomfortable.

The tide was high that morning, and only a small strip of the beach was uncovered, the sand crisscrossed with fresh footprints. Paige wondered if any of them belonged to her and Olivia from last night, or if the traces of their midnight adventure had already been swept away.

Loud music poured out of the amusements as they headed up a set of steps half-hidden behind them, onto a street of old-fashioned brick buildings. A fish and chip shop called 'Catch of the Day' sat on the corner, the smell of grease and vinegar

wafting from the outside vents.

Paige cast a curious glance towards Olivia, but she either didn't notice, or purposely ignored it, smiling to herself. Paige wasn't usually the biggest fan of surprises—she hated being kept out of the loop—but she trusted Olivia, and she was almost excited to see what she had planned.

Olivia finally stopped walking as they reached the middle of the street and stood facing a building with a white pebbledash exterior. Orange paw prints were painted along the side of the wall, circling around a logo that spelled out SANDY PAWS CAT CAFE.

Paige's lips parted with a short breath. "A cat cafe?" she blurted.

Olivia squealed, clasping her hands together. "Isn't it adorable? A cat cafe so close to the beach!"

Paige nodded, trying to find the words to express her excitement. "I've always wanted to go to a cat cafe," she said dazedly.

"I know. That's why I had to book us a slot as soon as I found out about it," Olivia said. "I know you love cats, so I thought it would be a perfect addition to the trip."

Paige had always loved cats, but her mum was unsurprisingly strict about having pets in the house and had never even entertained the possibility of getting one. "Olivia," she said softly, facing her best friend. Her gaze was round and bright with wonder. "You really are amazing. You know that right?"

Olivia's cheeks turned pink. "Oh, I know," she said, clearing her throat. "Anyway, we have the ten o'clock booking. We're a few minutes early, but they might let us wait inside."

Paige nodded, excitement curling in her chest as she spotted one of the cats in the window, lounging in the sun belly-up. "Oh my god," she whispered, clutching her hands to her chest. Her dress swished around her legs as the morning breeze picked up. "This is literally paradise."

Olivia laughed, her eyes twinkling. "Let's get inside."

They stepped into the cool, air-conditioned entryway and pressed the buzzer.

"I'll be with you in a second," a voice said through the intercom. Through the small window in front of them, Paige saw the silhouette of a large cat tower. "Do you have a reservation?" the voice came again, crackling through the speaker.

"Yeah. 10 o'clock. Should be under Olivia Bennett."

"Alright, got you."

A figure appeared on the other side of the door, unlatching it to let them inside.

"Fudge, stop trying to trip me up," the girl muttered as an orange and brown tabby rubbed around her legs, tail swishing. She looked up at them, her frown easing. "Sorry, right this way."

The girl couldn't have been much older than Paige and Olivia, with short blue hair and slender features. The name tag on her uniform read 'Skye'.

"Your slot is ten to eleven. Help yourself to a drink and something to eat from the kitchen. It's laid out sort of like a buffet, so you can just grab what you want," she explained, moving her hands around as she spoke. "We ask that you don't feed the cats, even though they might try and beg for it." She rolled her eyes at that, making Paige assume it was a common occurrence. "You're free to pet the cats, but please don't pick them up or force them to do anything they don't want to do. Most of them are pretty friendly and will come up to you, but there are a few—like Bear over there—who do prefer to keep to themselves."

"Gotcha," Olivia said as Paige shot heart-eyes towards all the cats currently roaming the spacious room.

"If you need anything, myself and the other staff will be wandering around, so feel free to give us a shout."

With that, the girl named Skye walked off, her blue hair swaying just above her shoulders.

"Shall we go grab a drink first?" Olivia suggested, but Paige's attention was already captured completely by the cats, and as soon as one came rubbing around her ankles—a small white and grey bundle of fluff with a missing eye—she melted into a puddle of affection and ignored everything else around her.

Paige fussed the cat at her feet until she remembered Olivia was there, and glanced up to find the other girl watching her, an absent smile on her face. "Sorry," she said, scratching her cheek in embarrassment. "It's been a while since I've had the opportunity for fluffy cuddles."

Olivia waved away her apology. "You get all the fluffy cuddles you need," she said. "I'll go and grab us a drink. Want anything in particular?"

"Something cold and fizzy," was all she said, before the cat at her feet began leading her over to the table with little encouraging meows, and Paige obligingly followed.

She sat down on one of the round pink pouffe seats and tickled the cat beneath its chin, purrs vibrating through its body. The collar around its neck read 'Lola'.

"Lola," Paige said, scratching her behind the ears. "That's a cute name."

Something brushed past her other leg, and she glanced down into a pair of glistening amber eyes. The black cat swished its tail affectionately, rubbing its cheek against her thigh with a soft mewl. "Hi there," she cooed, dividing her attention between the two cats. "What's your name?" His tag read 'Soot', and she chuckled. "Lola and Soot,

huh?”

Olivia returned a few minutes later, balancing a tray in her hands. “Here we go,” she said, setting two glasses of fresh lemonade on the table, and a plate full of dainty-looking cakes.

“Those look familiar,” Paige said, eyeing the cakes.

“Yeah, they’re probably from that bakery. Delilah’s or something,” Olivia said, sitting down beside her. “Aw, hello there,” she said to the kitten that had just wandered up to her, its expression shy and curious. She gently stroked the kitty’s head, then looked at Paige, now surrounded by three cats. “Looks like someone’s popular.”

Paige bit her lip. “Maybe they can sense my excitement,” she joked, her eyes going wide as Lola flopped over onto her back, letting Paige rub her fluffy grey belly. “If I’m not mistaken, this is a good sign.”

Olivia laughed, taking a sip of her ice-cold lemonade and sighing contentedly.

Paige dragged her gaze away long enough to look at Olivia, her expression strangely sober. "Thank you, Olivia, for arranging this."

Olivia shuffled on her chair, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Don't thank me. It's completely worth it just to see you happy."

Paige's cheeks went pink. "Yeah." She reached for one of the cakes—a bite-sized éclair—and took a bite.

Soot wasted no time in jumping up onto her lap and trying to lick the cream from her fingers, rubbing his cheek against her wrist. "You're not getting any," she teased, shoving the rest of the cake into her mouth and scratching Soot's chin. "Sorry."

Soot jumped off again, sulking, and Lola took his place, curling into a ball on Paige's lap.

Paige gave her immediate heart-eyes. "I'm in heaven right now."

"I'm glad you're enjoying it," Olivia said, nibbling on a piece of Battenberg. "Even though I'm not the biggest fan of cat hair."

Paige pouted. "Thank you for your sacrifice."

Olivia stuck out her tongue at Paige's teasing tone.

"So, what are we doing once our hour's up? Not that I want it to end," Paige added with a soft sigh, stroking her fingers through Lola's fur.

"I hadn't thought that far, to be honest. I suppose we could spend some more time on the beach."

"I think I'd like that."

"We'll get you tanned yet," Olivia said with a sly wink.

Paige glanced down at her pale, freckled arms and stuck up her nose. "There is a fine line between getting tanned and getting burnt," she reminded Olivia, making her laugh.

"Yeah, yeah, so you keep telling me."

"I figured we'd probably have a chill day, regardless of what we do, since we're driving home tomorrow."

The reminder sent Paige's chest clenching. "I don't want to go back," she said softly.

"Neither do I," Olivia said, looking down into her lap. "It's been nice to just spend time together like this. Like we used to."

"It has. We should… try and do things like this more often," Paige said, almost tentatively.

Olivia looked up, meeting Paige's gaze with a surprising fierceness. "Definitely. I adore spending time with you, Paige."

Her words made Paige's stomach flutter. Before she could figure out how to respond,

the cat in her lap woke up, stretching out her paws and licking them with a satisfied purr.

"I think you have a new best friend from the looks of it."

Paige nuzzled her hand against Lola's belly. "Yeah, I think I do."

After leaving the cat cafe, they had a slow meander along the beach and back up to the cottage. The tide had moved further out now, and the sand was covered in strips of slimy seaweed and driftwood.

"Thank you, again, for arranging that," Paige said, peering down at the sand churning beneath her shoes. She held her hands against her thighs to stop her dress from riding up in the wind.

"You don't have to keep thanking me," Olivia said, rolling her eyes playfully. "I'm just glad you had a good time."

Paige gave her a dreamy smile. "I'm such a sucker for kitties and their tiny adorable fluffy little paws."

Olivia laughed. "I figured."

"So, shall we go grab some towels and set up on the beach?" Paige said, her head tilting to face Olivia.

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"Sounds perfect."

They went back to the cottage for a quick breather, then trudged back down to the sand with their beach-bags in tow. They found a spot not too close to the shore and began unfolding their beach towels, setting them down side-by-side.

Paige kicked off her shoes and stretched out her legs, her dress fluttering in the breeze, and Olivia sat down beside her, pulling her sunglasses down onto her nose.

"I don't mind if you want to grab your bikini and go for a swim," Paige said, but Olivia shook her head.

"I'd rather stay here with you."

Paige's heart fluttered. "Okay."

The waves crashed gently against the white cliffs, seagulls shrieking as they scavenged for leftover chip grease and fish batter near the rubbish bins. There were a couple of yachts dotting the horizon, their sails forming white silhouettes against the burning azure sky.

"We really need to do this again," Olivia said as she lounged with her hands behind her head, her long golden legs stretched out on the towel, toes dipping in the sand. "Maybe next year. We could make a thing out of it, you know. Rent out the same cottage every summer."

Paige's heart blossomed, and she fought to hold back a breathless smile. "I'd like

that."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Good, then we'll do it." Olivia rolled over so that she was facing Paige, shifting her sunglasses back on top of her head. Paige met her shimmering green eyes, but neither of them spoke, and for a moment, the two of them just looked at each other, their gazes exploring, open, honest.

"I…"

Paige's lashes fluttered as Olivia seemed to decide against whatever she was about to say, pressing her lips together. "What is it?"

"Nothing."

Paige gave her a slight frown, wondering what was on her mind. Before she had the chance to ask, a beach ball came flying towards them out of nowhere, smacking Paige on the side of her head.

"Ow!" Paige blurted, her vision swimming for a moment.

Olivia bolted upright, her eyes wide. "Are you alright?" She touched her fingers to Paige's head, where the ball had hit her, and her scalp tingled.

"Yeah, I'm okay. It just scared me."

"Sorry about that, ladies," a male voice said, and they turned to see a boy not much older than them jogging across the sand, a carefree smile on his face.

"Watch where you're throwing that thing," Olivia snapped, her expression hard as she tossed the ball back to him with more force than needed, sending him stumbling.

Taken aback by her response, he raked a hand through his sandy-blonde hair, balancing the ball in the crook of his arm. "Yeah, sorry, I didn't mean to." With a frown, he turned and ran off.

Paige blinked at Olivia in surprise. "I'm sure it was just an accident," she said placatingly, but Olivia shook her head.

"Even if it was, they should be more careful. I hate guys who think they can get away with stuff like that."

Paige's expression relaxed, and she flopped back onto the towel. "I'm so lucky to have a friend like you," she said, her tone absent, but she didn't miss the way Olivia's brows creased slightly.

"I'll always be here for you, Paige," Olivia said, her voice retaining some of that fierceness from earlier.

Paige cocked her head to face her, her lips parting with a soft breath.

"Well, I think I'm going to sunbathe for a bit," Olivia decided, the moment entirely forgotten. "Make sure I don't fall asleep please. I'd rather not get swept away by the tide if I can help it."

CHAPTER TEN

"Since it's our last night here, I thought we might eat out," Olivia said as they packed up later that evening, shaking the sand out of their towels and rolling them up.

"I'm down for that," Paige said, hauling the bag onto her shoulder and checking to make sure they hadn't left anything buried in the sand. "Have something in mind?"

Olivia anchored a hand on her hip and gave Paige a hard look. "Do you even know me, Paige?"

Paige chuckled. "Sorry, sorry. Of course, you want pizza, right?"

Olivia's expression melted into a grin. "Let's head back to the cottage and see if there are any pizza restaurants in town."

Once they were back at Breezehome, they searched up places to eat in Whiterock and decided on a small Italian restaurant in town. Paige decided to stay in her dress, and Olivia disappeared into the bedroom to get changed into something else.

When she emerged, she was wearing her black sunflower dress, her hair styled in loose beachy waves. She'd paired the look with some smoky black eyeliner that looked stunning on her.

"You look… wow," Paige said, the words getting caught in her throat as Olivia smoothed the creases out of the black satin material.

"Thank you," Olivia said, looking down at her feet as a blush crept along her cheeks. Paige was used to seeing her take everything in her stride, never once losing her composure, and the blush seemed almost out of place.

Paige looked down at her own dress, covered with cat hair, her hair tousled with wind

and sand, and wondered how she could ever compare. How could Olivia ever see her as anything more than a friend?

"Shall we get going?" Olivia said, and Paige hesitated.

"Um, maybe I should do something with my hair first," she said, tugging self-consciously at her short curls.

Olivia pouted. "If you want," she said softly. "But you look lovely just as you are."

Paige looked down, biting back a smile. "I can at least get some of this cat hair off me," she finally said.

After combing over her dress with the lint roller Olivia had brought, they left the beach cottage and caught the bus into town. It was just after six o'clock, and the sea glittered beneath the blushing sky.

The Italian restaurant was tucked away in a small cobbled side street near the fish market, the outside illuminated by flickering orange fairy lights. "This looks cute," Olivia said as she held the door open for Paige, and they shuffled into the narrow entryway.

"Table for two?" a young woman said as she came to greet them, dressed in a white blouse and form-fitting black slacks. Grabbing a couple of menus, she led them deeper into the dimly-lit restaurant, to a table at the back.

"I'm glad we got in without a reservation," Olivia said as she shrugged off her jacket and draped it over the chair, leaning her bare arms against the table.

Paige's stomach rumbled, and she bit her lip. "Guess I'm hungry."

"Good," Olivia said, nodding. "Because you didn't expect me to share a pizza, did you?"

"Definitely not."

"What are you getting to drink?"

Paige tapped her fingers against the menu. "I feel like I've had too many carbonated drinks recently. Maybe I should stick with water."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "We're on vacation. Which means you can drink and eat whatever you want." She threw a glance down the menu. "How about the sparkling apple?"

Paige nodded. "That sounds good."

"Now, the main event… what type of pizza shall I get?"

It was Paige's turn to roll her eyes. "Oh please, don't pretend like you hadn't already made your decision this morning."

"I didn't know we'd be coming here this morning."

"I don't believe you're not always thinking about pizza," Paige teased, and Olivia laughed.

"You got me there. I knew from the start I'd be getting the Fungi," she said, licking her lips. "What about you?"

"I was thinking of having pasta, but now you've got pizza on my mind," Paige said.

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Olivia laced her fingers together, bridging them beneath her chin. "Pizza is best," she said with an air of self-assuredness. "We all know that."

"Right, right."

They made their orders, and Paige leaned back in her chair, gazing around the room. Between the dim, smoky lighting and soft music playing in the background, this almost felt like a date.

It wasn't.

But Paige wished it was.

By the time they had left the restaurant, the sun was starting to set. "Is it too late for ice cream?" Olivia asked as they walked through town. Most of the smaller businesses were starting to close, but there were still a few ice cream and gelato shops open, their soothing pink and yellow lights cutting through the growing shadows.

Paige bit her lip, resting a hand against her stomach as if trying to figure out if she had room for dessert. "I think I can manage it," she said.

They stopped by a little ice cream stall called Sweet Scoops. Next door to it was a wooden building dubbed The Waffle Shack.

"Ice cream or waffles?" Olivia said, since both windows were open, flooding light out onto the pavement.

"I don't know if I can manage a waffle. Just ice cream for me."

Olivia nodded, digging out her purse, but Paige pressed a note into her hand before she could. "My treat this time," she said, her voice soft.

Olivia blinked at her, and a slow smile spread across her lips. "Thanks."

They stepped up to the window, where a girl was busy wiping down the surfaces, scooping sprinkles and pieces of waffle cone into a bin. She noticed them and dropped the rag, wiping her hands down her pink-striped apron. She looked a few years older than them, with candyfloss-pink hair and a soft smile and dimpled cheeks that somehow matched the pastel aura of the ice cream shop perfectly.

"Hey there," she said, her voice bright and bubbly. "What can I get you both?"

Olivia drummed her fingers against her chin as she looked over the menu. "A strawberry and vanilla cone for me, please," she said, casting an expectant look at Paige.

"Um, I'll have the bubblegum," Paige decided, and the girl booted up the ice cream machines, filling the space with a low hum.

"Feeling adventurous?" Olivia said with a wink that made Paige blush.

"Maybe a little."

Olivia paid while Paige grabbed the cones, the ice cream already starting to drip down onto her fingers.

"Enjoy your evening," the girl said with another candy-sweet smile, and Paige passed Olivia her strawberry-and-vanilla whippy.

"Sorry, it's already melting," Paige said, licking the bubblegum off her fingers with a shy smile.

They ate in silence as they walked through town, heading back towards the bus stop. "This is really good ice cream," Olivia finally said.

Paige nodded. "Yeah. We'll have to try the waffles next–" she said, catching herself before she finished, her heart fluttering.

Olivia looked at her. "There will be a next time, Paige, don't worry," she said, as if reading the doubts on her face.

Paige hid a smile, finishing off her cone and dusting the crumbs from her fingers.

They caught the bus back to the cottage, but neither of them seemed to want to end the night just yet, so they ambled down onto the sand to watch the sun as it set over the ocean.

"It's gorgeous," Olivia said as they walked along the beach. The tide was low but slowly coming in, and the sand felt cool and damp beneath Paige's feet as she dangled her shoes from her fingers.

The sea was lit in shades of fiery amber as the sun reflected on the water, the waves washing meekly against the shore.

Despite its beauty, Paige could barely take her eyes off Olivia in the moment. Basked in the golden light, she looked beautiful, and Paige felt drawn to Olivia in a way she simply could not deny.

She blinked, and pulled her gaze away before she did anything she might regret. After all, it was impossible that Olivia felt the same way. They were friends, and Olivia had

never expressed any interest in her that way before. Why would anything change now?

They sat down on the sand, and Paige tucked the skirt of her dress beneath her legs to stop it riding up in the breeze. The wind played with her hair, and she tried to imagine it was Olivia running her fingers through it instead.

"I can't believe we're already going home tomorrow," Olivia said, a soft sigh settling between them.

Paige looked down. What would happen once they got home? Would anything be different? This vacation was the first time Paige had been able to detach from anything and just enjoy each day as they came. Back home, she had to worry about tiptoeing around her mum during her moods, and trying to figure out what to do after college, and wondering if there was something wrong with her brain or her heart because she was attracted to Olivia in a way she'd never been attracted to anyone before. Here in Whiterock, with Olivia beside her and the waves at her feet, everything made sense. Everything slotted into place, like the way it was supposed to be.

The only thing missing was the truth.

Did she really want to leave things unspoken between them? But if she did tell Olivia, what if it drove a rift between them that could never be repaired?

Paige glanced across at the girl beside her, a tightness in her chest that she didn't know how to get rid of.

As if sensing her gaze, Olivia turned to meet it. Her expression was almost curious, before it relaxed into something else, something more… intimate.

Paige swallowed, her heart quickening in her chest. Her gaze flitted down to Olivia's lips, pink and full in the sunset, and her stomach twinged.

She wanted to kiss her. For the first time in her life, she wanted to kiss someone.

As if she could read the desire on Paige's face, Olivia leaned closer, her warm, vanilla-sweet breath dancing against Paige's cheek. Her green eyes were wide, searching, looking for an answer that only the depth of Paige's heart could answer.

Then they were kissing.

Olivia's lips were soft and warm against Paige's, tasting like strawberry ice-cream and sea salt. Her fingertips fluttered over Paige's cheek, as gentle as a moth's wing.

The kiss was short and sweet, and they pulled away just as quickly, their breaths lingering in the air between them, warm and trembling.

Paige felt heat spread through her cheeks, her head spinning, still trying to recover from the taste of Olivia's lips.

"I…" she fumbled, but she couldn't quite figure out what to say. Part of her wished the sand would open up beneath her and swallow her whole, so that she wouldn't have to deal with the aftermath of what had just happened.

"I don't…" Olivia started, then stopped, her voice softer than the breeze dancing on Paige's neck. "I don't know where that came from."

Paige felt her stomach plummet. Had she not meant to do that? Unlike Paige, it probably wasn't something she'd been dreaming of doing over the past few days.

"I'm sorry," Paige finally muttered, because she didn't know what else to say.

Olivia shook her head, not quite able to meet Paige's gaze. "Don't say that."

Paige looked down at her hands, her cheeks still burning. "Maybe we should head back," she said, climbing to her feet and dusting the sand off her dress.

All of a sudden, she felt silly. Silly for thinking she looked cute in this dress. Silly for thinking that Olivia would ever see her as more than a friend. Silly for thinking that the kiss would change anything between them.

Olivia said nothing as she stood up, and the two of them walked in silence back to the beach cottage, the air cold between them.

Was this it? Had this one little kiss ruined their friendship?

"You have the keys," Paige said as they reached the top of the slope, shaking the sand off their shoes.

"Yeah." Olivia dug them out of her bag and opened up the door, letting Paige go inside first.

How am I supposed to share a bed with the girl I just kissed?

"I can… sleep on the couch," Paige offered, but Olivia scoffed.

"No need for that, jeez," Olivia muttered, as if Paige had said the silliest thing in the world.

Paige would rather sleep on the settee, but now she couldn't.

"I enjoyed tonight," Olivia said once she'd changed into her pyjamas, wiping the make-up off her face with a wipe.

Paige tried not to frown. Was she just saying that to be nice? Paige couldn't quite get a read on things, so she played along.

"Yeah, me too. I'm pretty tired though," she said, pretending to yawn. "I'm probably gonna head to sleep now. Don't worry about making noise."

Olivia's expression twinged, but she nodded. "Alright. Sleep well."

Paige climbed into bed after changing out of her dress and washing her face, feeling completely drained. Everything had been going perfect until that kiss. Now Paige didn't know what to think, what to feel. Olivia didn't seem like she wanted to talk about it, and neither did Paige. What was she even supposed to say?

She switched off the lamp and closed her eyes, but despite her exhaustion, her mind was wide awake. How was she supposed to sleep with Olivia only inches away? Was she supposed to ignore her, act like being so close to her didn't make her feel things. Things she wasn't supposed to feel about her best friend?

Olivia climbed into bed beside her, and Paige tried to drown out the memory of their kiss on the sand, the touch of Olivia's fingertips against her skin, the taste of strawberry on her lips.

Somehow, eventually, she managed to fall into a cold, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Paige was awake before dawn the next morning.

Olivia was still asleep, snoring quietly beneath the covers, so Paige slipped out of bed and padded barefoot into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. She flipped on the light and winced at her reflection in the cabinet mirror. Her eyes were rimmed with dark circles, and her cheeks were colourless, telling her she probably hadn't slept as well as she'd thought. She splashed some ice-cold water over her face to coax some colour back into her cheeks and tried to comb out some of the tangles in her hair. She wanted to shower, but she didn't want to wake Olivia, so it would suffice for now.

After changing into a pair of shorts and a white hoodie, she stepped out of the bedroom without a noise. Dawn had yet to break, and the air inside the cottage was very still. She wasn't normally such an early riser, but she needed some time alone to think and clear her head before Olivia woke up.

Grabbing one of the croissants Olivia had left out on the counter, she pulled on her shoes and headed out into the breezy morning, munching on her breakfast.

The beach was empty. Clumps of dark seaweed had washed up in the night, strewn across the sand and making the air smell briny. The sea looked grey and glistening beneath the hazy sky, and Paige gazed at it between the strands of dark hair whipping around her face as she climbed down onto the sand.

She walked along the shore until she reached the pier. The boats docked in the water bumped against each rising wave, their sails rustling and fluttering in the wind. Paige took off her shoes and sat down on the edge of the dock, dipping her toes into the cold water. She recoiled at the first touch, hissing sharply between her teeth, but lowered her feet back into the sea until they adjusted to the temperature, swishing them through the water and creating little ripples that broke the surface with a pop.

She couldn't get the kiss out of her head. Or the way Olivia had gone quiet afterwards, like she wasn't sure what to think of it. Paige couldn't even remember if

she was the one who had kissed Olivia first, or if it had just sort of happened, in the way that these things did.

This wasn't the way she wanted the holiday to end. This strange silence between them, like neither of them no longer knew how to talk to the other. This was why she had kept her feelings to herself this whole time—so that she wouldn't ruin what they already did have between them.

At least now she knew that her feelings were one-sided. Olivia didn't like her that way. This wasn't an Avery Cole novel after all, but real life. And romance was as fickle and unpredictable as the tides.

Paige was almost lost completely in her thoughts when she felt the dock dip behind her, a soft whisper of footsteps against the wood.

"You're up early."

Paige didn't lift her head, but she felt Olivia sit down beside her, her hip pressing close.

"Yeah," she murmured. "I thought it would be nice to see the sunrise."

"Without me?" Paige didn't miss the shimmer of hurt in her voice.

"I… didn't want to disturb you," Paige said. She really couldn't do anything right, could she? She looked down at the water, lapping the edge of the dock. Maybe this was one of the consequences of growing up without a stable parental relationship. She didn't know how relationships worked. She didn't know what she was supposed to do, what she was supposed to say.

The only thing she seemed sure of was that the kiss she'd shared with Olivia had been

everything she'd wanted, and everything she knew she shouldn't.

She wasn't made for relationships. And now she'd hurt their friendship too. How was Olivia ever supposed to look at her the same again?

"Paige," Olivia said, and there was something so soft and intimate about the way she'd said her name that Paige had to look up, her eyes finding Olivia's. "Talk to me."

"I… don't know how," Paige admitted, looking away, the water feeling cold on her skin again.

"Is this because of last night?" Olivia asked.

Paige nodded, even though she didn't feel like talking about it. What was she supposed to say? That she'd been thinking about kissing her this entire vacation, and now that they had, she didn't know what to do about it?

"It was just a kiss."

Paige's heart clenched. No, it wasn't. It was so much more than that. "Was it?" she whispered, feeling Olivia shift beside her, her body warm. Even now, Paige couldn't deny the shiver of attraction that made her instinctively press closer to her.

"No," Olivia finally said, and Paige glanced up, a short breath fluttering between her lips.

"Then… what was it?"

"I'm not sure," Oliva said. "But… I think it was a good thing."

Paige's heart fluttered behind her ribs, searching for something to say. Why was this so difficult? Why couldn't she just say it? Friendship isn't enough anymore. "Olivia…"

Olivia reached up and brushed her fingertips over Paige's freckles. "Can I kiss you again?" she said, her voice no louder than a whisper.

Paige nodded mutely, not trusting her own voice.

Olivia leaned forward and pressed her lips against Paige's, her hand resting against her cheek. Paige moved closer, gripping onto the dock to keep her grounded. The kiss lasted longer than before, and Paige let herself melt into it entirely, tasting Olivia's lips on her own.

When they pulled away, Paige felt breathless, dreamy, like she might float away. Her heart was beating hard, and her cheeks were as pink as the dawn sky.

"How can you be so calm about this?" she blurted, flicking a glance over Olivia's composed smile while her own head was spinning.

Olivia only laughed, reaching for Paige's hand and holding it against her chest, where Paige could feel her pulse racing beneath her fingers. "I might seem calm on the outside, but you make my heart do this, Paige. You always have."

Paige stared at her. "I… have?"

Olivia nodded, sighing softly. "I guess it just took me a while to figure out what it meant."

Paige pulled away and folded her hands in her lap, peering down into the water. Even her fingertips felt all tingly. "Me too," she whispered. "I… I was scared that it might ruin our friendship if I told you the truth."

Olivia touched Paige's cheek, drawing her gaze back towards her. "You never have to hide yourself from me, Paige. Ever. I would have tried to understand what you were going through."

Paige said nothing. All this time, she'd thought there was something wrong with her for feeling these things. It was all so new to her. "So… does this mean…"

"Yes," Olivia said, unflinchingly, without waiting for her to finish.

"Friendship isn't enough," Paige clarified, her voice almost tentative.

"Not anymore," Olivia agreed.

"But I don't even know how to be in a relationship," Paige admitted, covering her face with her hands. "It sounds so silly, but I've never experienced anything like this

before."

"It's not silly," Olivia said, gently prying her hands away and holding them within her own. "Nothing has to change, Paige. It's the same as it always was, only now we can do stuff like this," she said, planting another kiss on Paige's lips that almost made her swoon backwards into the water.

"A little warning next time," Paige said, her cheeks blushing furiously.

Olivia only laughed, lacing her fingers through Paige's. "I think we've always been in love, Paige," she said, making Paige's heart jump in her chest. "It just took a while to figure out. I mean, friendship is just another form of love, in a way. It's different for everyone. We'll figure out what works for us."

"I guess I never looked at it like that," Paige said, swirling her toes through the water. "I never even knew you liked girls."

Olivia shook her head, tightening her fingers around Paige's. "Honestly, neither did I. I think it's always been there. Just little sparks of attraction here and there, you know, but it's confusing when I've only ever dated guys my whole life. I'm still trying to figure that out."

"But you're sure about this? About… us."

Olivia pulled Paige closer, a smile dancing along her lips. "I've never been more sure about anything else in my life," she said.

This time, it was Paige who kissed her, running her fingers through Olivia's pink-blonde hair. It was just as soft as she'd imagined. "I still have no idea what I'm doing," she murmured against her lips before pulling away.

"Then let's make this our summer of figuring things out," Olivia said, leaning her head against Paige's shoulder, their fingers still laced together, perfect, familiar. "The summer of us."

EPILOGUE

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"All packed up?" Olivia asked as Paige finished zipping up her luggage case, casting one last glance around the room, awash in the golden light of the morning.

"Yeah, I guess so," she said, her tone despondent.

Olivia walked over and rested her arms on either side of Paige's waist, her grip loose and comfortable. Paige bit her lip, unable to meet Olivia's gaze.

"Don't look like that," Olivia said softly. "It's not like we won't be coming back here again. Next summer, I promise we'll book out the same cottage and everything."

Next summer. Paige wasn't used to making plans like that, so far in advance, and apprehension fluttered behind her ribs. What if things changed by then? What if Olivia decided that she didn't want to be Paige's girlfriend anymore and they had a horrible falling out and—

Paige blinked, realizing Olivia's lips were on hers, completely stealing her breath away.

A few seconds later, Olivia drew back, a teasing smile on her lips at Paige's bewildered gaze. "I can practically see all the anxiety on your face, Paige."

Paige looked away again. "Sorry. I can't help it."

Olivia shook her head. "I know you can't. But I thought the kiss might distract you."

"Oh, it did," Paige said, nodding vigorously. The hint of a smile teased the corner of

her lips.

"Good," Olivia said, and kissed her again, pulling Paige flush against her chest.

Paige's heart trembled, her mind going dizzy as she drank in the taste of Olivia's lips. She reached up and touching her fingers against Olivia's cheek, drawing a soft breath from the other girl.

"I'm still not used to that," she muttered when they finally pulled away, her cheeks hot.

Olivia grinned unabashedly. "Well, you'd better get used to it, because I'm not stopping anytime soon."

Paige bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from grinning. "Alright, alright. We'd better get out of here before the housekeeper catches us," she muttered.

They wheeled their suitcases out to the front porch and double-checked they hadn't left anything behind before locking the door and putting the key back into the safe.

"Well, that's that," Olivia said. "Are you still happy to head into town?"

Paige nodded. "We have to give all that seaglass to Isla, and I know you're desperate for more pastries from the bakery, plus I kind of want to visit Books by the Beach again," she said, ticking off everything she wanted to do on her fingers. When she noticed Olivia watching her, a secretive smile on her lips, she frowned. "What?"

"Nothing, nothing. Just thinking how adorable you are," Olivia said dismissively, and Paige drew in her cheeks to hide her embarrassment.

"I am not adorable," she muttered.

"Oh, but you are."

Once their luggage was loaded into the boot, Paige slid into the passenger seat with a sigh. "Until next time, I guess," she said as Olivia put the Citroen into gear and pulled away from Breezehome.

Paige rolled down the window and gazed at the glistening blue ocean until it disappeared behind the headland, then turned back to face the road, her thoughts drifting on the salt breeze. Part of her still couldn't believe that, all this time, she had been in love with her best friend. Or that Olivia had reciprocated her feelings. And now they were girlfriends.

It almost felt like a dream.

Olivia drove into town and parked in the same off-peak carpark as before.

"I thought you weren't happy about the three-pound-an-hour parking charge," Paige said, arching her brows as Olivia cut the engine.

Olivia shrugged. "I'm not, but I'm too lazy to find somewhere else to park."

Paige rolled her eyes. "Honestly," she muttered. "I'd offer you some change, but I spent it all in the amusements."

"That's okay. I've got it."

Olivia went to pay the extortionate prices for the parking ticket, then they both headed into town, which had almost become familiar to them in the last four days they'd spent here.

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There was a small queue spilling out of Delilah's Delicacies when they got there, so they headed up to Isla's shop first. It was empty, as usual, and Isla was sitting in the corner with a book in her lap, her thick black hair braided over her shoulder. When she heard them scuffing their feet on the doormat, she glanced up with a small smile. "I remember you two."

Olivia grinned, and Paige brought out the brown paper bag of sea-worn glass and shells. "We brought you some things," she said, setting the bag down on the counter.

Isla put away her book and peered inside, her eyes glimmering in the semi-darkness. "Look at all of these treasures," she said, reaching into the bag and pulling out a handful of shiny sea-debris.

"We thought you might like to use them in your jewellery," Paige added, folding her hands in front of her with a nervous smile.

Isla ran her fingers over the glass, the chains and bangles around her wrist clinking together. "That's very kind of you," she said, a ruminative expression crossing her face. "How long are you staying in town?"

"We were about to make the journey home, but we can stick around for another hour."

Isla nodded. "Perfect. Come back here just before you leave. I might have something for you," she said, an enigmatic smile budding beneath the shadow of her gaze.

Olivia and Paige exchanged a glance. "Okay. We'll come back in an hour then."

Isla scooped the glass and shells back into the bag, her mind seemingly elsewhere, so the two of them left behind the cloud of dust and incense and headed downstairs to the bakery.

"I forgot how good everything looked," Olivia said, breathing in the smell of pastry and icing sugar. "Can we get one of everything? Do you think that's too much?"

Paige chuckled. "Maybe a bit much. But how about we pick a few things out for the journey home?"

"I guess that's more sensible."

"You and your crazy ideas," Paige said fondly.

They joined the queue behind a girl with light blue hair, who Paige recognised from the cat café.

"Skye, good to see you," the woman behind the counter said, smiling warmly.

"You too, Delilah," the blue-haired girl returned, her voice quiet over the humming of the air conditioning unit. "I think I'll have a cinnamon swirl today."

Delilah nodded, bagging up the pastry and setting it on top of the counter, a strand of dark curly hair drifting over her eyes. "There we go."

"Those look yummy," Olivia whispered behind Paige, eyeing the cinnamon bun that Skye had just bought. "I might get one of those."

Skye finished paying and turned around, catching Paige's eye with a faint, barely-perceptible smile before disappearing out onto the cobbled street.

Paige and Olivia took it in turns to make their selections, and Delilah arranged them all neatly into a cardboard box before taping it up. They paid, then went to find somewhere to sit.

"Which one do I eat now, and which one do I save for later?" Olivia mused, opening the box and dusting the air with icing sugar.

Paige nudged her shoulder. "Olivia, just choose before you start attracting wasps."

Olivia grumbled, but decided on the strawberry tart and put the rest away for later.

"Don't ever let me move here," Olivia said around a mouthful of jam, "or I'd be buying out the bakery every morning."

Paige laughed. "There's definitely nothing as good as this back home," she agreed, taking tentative bites of her own cake. "What do you think Isla meant when she said she might have something for us later?"

Olivia rolled her shoulders lazily, reminding Paige of a cat stretching out on a patch of sun-warmed concrete. "I don't know. Maybe she's making something from the stuff we gave her."

"Yeah, that would be nice."

They finished their pastries and soaked up the sun for a little bit longer before Paige suggested visiting the bookshop.

"Sure, let's go." Olivia jumped to her feet and offered a hand for Paige to take. This time, there were no reservations as Paige slid her fingers against Olivia's, her skin still slightly sticky from the jam. Olivia pulled her up, but neither of them let go, and they walked hand-in-hand down the street, smiles blooming between them.

They entered the bookshop, and Paige went straight to the romance section, where she had found Avery Cole's book previously. "Romance, huh?" Olivia said with a sly wink.

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Paige let out a slow breath and nodded. "Actually, the last time we were here I bought a book."

"Yeah, I remember, that fantasy one—"

"No, a different one," Paige corrected. "It was a romance book." She pointed to the table of Avery Cole's newest release, and Olivia picked one up, turning it over to read the blurb. Her lips parted with a soft, "Oh."

"Yeah," Paige said, scratching her cheek. "Things started to make a lot of sense when I read it. But anyway, I really like the author's style, and I've never really read any other lesbian romances before, so I thought I might find more of her books here."

Olivia smiled as she flipped through the pages. "It sounds sweet. Maybe I'll get a copy too," she decided, snapping the book shut and cradling it against her chest. "Let's see if we can find some more."

There was a whole shelf of Avery Cole books, and Paige spent a good thirty minutes reading through the blurbs and trying to decide which one she wanted to try next. "I can't choose between this one or this one," she lamented. "They both sound really good."

"Then get them both," Olivia said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "I don't mind paying for one if that's putting you off."

Paige shook her head. "No, you don't have to pay," she said, biting her lip as she weighed each book in her hand. "Alright, I'll get them both."

Olivia grinned. "And then when you're done reading them, I can borrow them too," she said, and Paige's heart fluttered at the thought of sharing books. Like a real couple.

"Sure."

By the time they left the bookshop, it had been almost an hour since they'd checked in with Isla, so they headed back to the antique store to see if she was done with whatever she had planned.

Isla was nowhere to be seen when they stepped inside, the air hazy and warm.

"Um, Isla?" Olivia called out, and from somewhere at the back of the shop, they heard a soft thump, and an 'ow'.

"Sorry, give me a minute," Isla's voice drifted out from the shadows. She appeared a moment later, pushing through a black velvet curtain that neither of them had noticed before. "Perfect timing. I just got these finished."

The two girls walked over to her as she held out her hand, something blue and silver and delicate glinting against her palm.

"I made matching necklaces for you," she said, her lips dipping into a sly smile, "perfect for a new couple."

Paige stared at her, her cheeks flushing. "How did you know?" she said, a little shyly.

Isla snorted out a laugh, the chains around her neck jingling. "Oh, please. I know two girls in love when I see them," she said with a wink. "Take them. Try them on. They're both made with the bits and pieces you brought me."

Olivia gestured for Paige to turn around, and she lifted the necklace over Paige's neck, fastening the clasp at the back. Paige shivered as Olivia's fingertips ghosted her bare skin.

Paige did the same to Olivia, and they both admired the beautiful wire-wrapped seaglass and shells. "They're gorgeous," Paige said, touching the smooth surface of the polished glass.

"I'm glad you like them."

"You have to let us pay you," Olivia said, but Isla shook her head.

"You did most of the work anyway, finding everything for me."

Paige glanced across at Olivia with a smile, and Olivia reached for her hand, threading their fingers together.

"Thank you, Isla. We'll treasure these."

The woman cocked her head. "Will I be seeing you two again?"

Olivia nodded. "Definitely. We've already decided to come back every summer."

Isla's smile widened, reaching her eyes. "Wonderful. Take care then, yeah?"

They said goodbye and left Isla's shop, still holding hands.

"Everyone around here is so nice. I really don't want to leave," Olivia said as they loitered on the street outside.

"Neither do I, but I'm pretty sure our parking's up soon," Paige said.

"I'd rather not end the holiday with a parking fine," Olivia agreed. "Let's go then."

"Wait," Paige said, and Olivia turned to face her curiously, barely stifling a murmur as Paige pulled her into a kiss, the shells on their necklaces bumping together with a soft click.

"What was that for?" Olivia said as a blush dusted her cheeks.

"One last kiss in Whiterock?" Paige said with a shrug.

Olivia threw back her head and laughed, loud and carefree. "Where has this Paige been all my life?" She said, wrapping her arms around her girlfriend's waist to keep her close.

"Right here," Paige said softly. "Where I'll always be."