

FOUR STEPS

THE KEY TO SURVIVAL IS FACING YOUR PAST



WENDY HUDSON

PROLOGUE

The edge of the verge collapsed under the old man's weight. He stumbled sideways and grabbed at the barbed wire fence that ran alongside the drainage ditch as he fell in. Snagging the palm of his hand on a barb, he cursed aloud at the deep gash that opened up and the stinking water that filled his boots. He pulled a greasy handkerchief from his hunting jacket and wrapped his hand to stem the blood flow. Digging in a metal-capped toe and grunting, he took two attempts to hoist his weight out again. As he tightened the rag with his teeth, his breath puffed out with the pain, inducing an alcoholic cloud into the calm night around them.

He cursed again and glared ahead at the back of his son, who continued moving on without him, oblivious. The stony track that ran parallel was too noisy underfoot so they trudged through the mud, maintaining a silent approach.

As they cut the final corner through a copse of trees, the dark outline of the farmhouse came into view. A bulb shining low on the front porch was the only sign someone was home.

His son held up a hand, signalling them to stop. Their eyes, already well adjusted, scanned the house for security lights and sensors. Convinced there weren't any, his son signalled again, directing him to follow on.

They pressed themselves against the wall of the barn, then skirted along in its shadow until, after a short sprint across the drive, they were crouched next to the side door of the house.

His son raised a hand again. They held still and listened.

The only noise louder than the trickle of water from the nearby burn was the gentle snorts of sleeping horses and an owl purring in the distance. No cars on the track, no barking dogs, only silence from the house and their heartbeats in their ears.

The old man watched as a smile spread widely across his son's face. So far, so good. This wasn't just revenge, stealing a bit of jewellery and giving a fright to some stuck-up bitch who thought she was too good for him. No matter what his son said, he was relishing every second of this.

His son stifled a whoop when the small rabbit statue by the side door gave up its hidden key; his eyes widened in triumph, and he mouthed, "Too easy." Laying down his gun, he took a breath and steadied shaking hands before slowly inserting the key, turning the lock, and pulling down the handle.

By the light of a pen torch in his mouth, they moved through the house a few steady steps at a time, keeping low and stopping periodically to listen for movement. The living area led them to a long corridor lined with doors. They turned each handle painfully slowly, both holding their breath, expecting a squeaky hinge as they inched the doors open, looking for their prize. There were only empty beds in the first two rooms; it was third time lucky. The master suite.

Thick carpet muffled their heavy boots as they crossed to the bed. The old man edged around to the side farthest from the door and on a silent count of three clamped his injured hand over the sleeping woman's mouth. The blood-sodden handkerchief muffled her cry as he grabbed her tightly around the neck with his other hand, pinning her back into the pillow.

His son pulled a double-edged knife from the sheath on his belt and followed suit on her sleeping husband. He pressed a heavy knee into his chest and held the serrated edge of the knife to the man's neck, stilling him instantly. The whites of his eyes glowed in the dark, and he held them until satisfied he wasn't going to be a problem. He propped his gun against the nightstand, the butt resting on the floor, then flicked on the bedside lamp.

The couple blinked rapidly at the sudden brightness, eyes flicking between the two masked men and to each other before fear took their features and the woman began to cry.

The old man watched his son draw blood from the husband's cheek and growl low in the man's ear, "Not a fucking sound", making clear his intentions should they try to fight back.

Shock and their weapons easily won the couples' silence, and neither attempted to struggle as they were bound and gagged where they lay.

Taking out his own knife, he stood sentry over them as his son began ransacking drawers and cupboards. Despite wearing a balaclava, he took care not to look either one of them in the eye, knowing they weren't stupid and would recognise him from their earlier confrontation in the village bar.

The plan was only to scare them shitless and leave them a few quid lighter. If he was to believe his son, no one was going to get hurt and the couple would have the good sense to call it even and let it go.

As he watched his son searching through their belongings, a young girl edged into his peripheral vision. She quickly crossed the room and picked up the shotgun standing on the other side of the bed to him. Her eyes never left his. He hadn't even noticed the gun there until she reached it.

She had picked it up and cocked it before his son, with his back to the door, noticed her in the room.

Her mother tried to sit, furiously shaking her head at her daughter. She only stopped when his knife forced her back onto the pillow.

Her father pleaded through the gag that she put the gun down and do as the men say, his cries muffled and almost unintelligible. Eventually, he simply shouted for her to run.

Undeterred, she pointed the gun at him even though he was holding a knife at her mother's throat.

He held her stare and watched as her nose wrinkled. Through the balaclava he could smell his own sweat and the sour fumes of alcohol coming heavy with his breath and felt the grimy layer they seemed to have cast over the room.

She stole a glance at his son frozen still to her left, but the gun remained pointing his way.

He'd fired a twelve-gauge weapon plenty of times and wondered just how well she could handle it. Her slender arms trembled along with her voice, a mixture of fear and the weight of the weapon.

"Put the knife down, or I'll shoot."

The old man glared at his son, determined not to panic and maintain his authority. She was just a girl and they could deal with her.

"Now what?" he barked.

His son ignored him, didn't even glance his way, fixating on the girl. Sizing her up in the same way he had. He glanced between the two of them and tried to calculate how many steps and how long it would take for his son to reach her. The bed prevented any element of surprise from him.

Or maybe it wasn't the threat that had his attention. He gritted his teeth and watched as his son's gaze travelled up and down the young girl. The tilt of his head as he admired her lean legs before lingering on small, pert breasts covered with only a thin vest made him cringe.

Bile rose in his throat. She was young enough to be his granddaughter, and he knew she was in trouble if he didn't intervene.

"Beth is it?" He spoke softly and slowly drew the knife away from her mother as an act of good faith. "We don't want any more trouble here. Lower the gun and let us leave quietly. This doesn't have to go any further." Slowly, he lifted his hands into the air, refusing to look away as her wide eyes changed to slits, suspicious of his movements.

"What the fuck are you doing, old man?" His son started to move, but she had already swung the gun towards his gruff words.

"Put the knife down, or I'll shoot." She repeated her earlier instruction, only this time it wasn't aimed at him. She was speaking to his son.

He licked his lips and tasted the saltiness of his own sweat. Even without seeing his son's face, he knew he was smiling under the balaclava, relishing the challenge, sure this was a fight he would win.

Keeping his hands in the air, he glanced between the two of them. Her parents remained still, their breaths coming fast and panicked through their gags.

His son's roar broke the silence as he charged with his knife still drawn.

Her father lunged toward them, falling from the bed.

Her mother squeezed her eyes shut and screamed through her gag.

The old man shouted to stop, reaching out over her mother. Futile.

Four. That's how many steps it took to reach the girl.
Then the gunshot deafened them all.

CHAPTER 1

Aging hinges groaned as Lori Hunter pulled open the thin wooden door of the bothy. She'd hoped to find it empty, and the intricate cobweb woven across the threshold told her no one had been there in at least a few months. She swiped them away with one of her hiking poles before ducking under the low door frame into the chill of the musty hut that promised her shelter for the night.

Her hike through the glen had taken almost an hour longer than the online guide had suggested – her fault, not the guide's. Caught up in her surroundings, she'd dragged her heels, unable to put her camera away.

Now, conscious of time, she hurriedly dug unnecessary items out from her rucksack, aware that if she wanted to summit the mountain and make it back to the bothy before dark, every minute of daylight counted.

Wiping what dust she could from the wafer-thin mattress, she laid a sleeping mat on the top bunk, followed by her goose-down sleeping bag. This, she hoped, would reserve the bed for the night. It was always a bonus to find an empty bothy, particularly one with a cot or bunk, because no matter how thin the mattress was, it still beat lying on the floor of a tent.

After unloading her cooking items, she stuffed spare clothes inside her sleeping bag before folding down the hood to keep out spiders. She looked around the small hut and smiled.

At five feet ten inches, she could reach a hand above her head to easily touch the ceiling. Apart from the metal-framed bunk beds, the only other furniture was a small, square table in one corner and an old fashioned three-legged milking stool. She chuckled at the absurdity of the door mat considering three steps covered the space from one end to the other.

A previous occupant had strung a line of green garden string along one wall and hammered some chunky nails next to the door for hanging wet socks and coats to dry. It was back to basics Scottish style. Compared to her hectic, noisy lifestyle in London, Lori loved every minute of it.

When she used the cuff of her bright red jacket to wipe the filthy window at the end of the bunks, it revealed uninterrupted views of the stunning Maoile Lunndaigh, the Scottish Munro she was about to climb.

Lori surveyed the mountain, a patchwork quilt of lush greens, browns, burnt orange, and yellows. Her eyes quickly found the faint line of a path already cut through the grass and heather by previous climbers. She traced it to the bottom, pinpointing where her ascent would begin.

She pulled her favourite hat down over long, wavy, chestnut hair and made a final check of her gear before heading out and securing the bothy door behind her.

Following the dirt track from the bothy door as it zigzagged marshy land, she eventually reached the river that stood between her and the mountain, in hopes of finding a passable shallow section to save her feet from the frigid water. She should have known better. After surveying up and down for a few minutes, she sighed and resigned herself to the only remaining option.

She squatted on a rock to remove her boots and gators, tied the laces together, and used their weight as momentum to swing them across to the other side. Then rolling up her trouser legs, she braced herself, took a few short breaths for courage, and took her first step.

“No going back now,” she muttered as she plotted her course and slowly waded into the river. As the icy mountain water rose to her knees, she gasped and couldn’t stop herself shrieking. She paused a moment until the tingling sensation passed, then gritted her teeth, used her hiking poles for balance, and carefully picked her way across the slick rocks. “Do not rush. Do not. The last thing I need is to slip and end up soaked on my arse.”

Once she was safely across, she rubbed her feet furiously with the outside of her thick socks. “Merde, il fait froid!” She shook her head at the memory of her aunt telling her that swearing in another language wouldn’t stop her getting in trouble for it.

She tugged her boots and gators back on, picked up her pack and the faint dirt track again, and finally began her ascent.

The terrain was boggy, making the going tough, but the adrenaline soon started to pump, powering her legs to keep a steady pace. The first hour flew by and brought her to a natural rest point at the edge of a steep crevasse. When she found a suitable rock, Lori dumped her pack and sat down to take in the awe-inspiring views before her.

Below, the bothy had disappeared, easily blending in to the brown heather-covered hills behind it. She could just make out the faint path of the old railway line that the guide said ran through to Achnashellach Station. Lori loved how

small and insignificant everything became at this height, but by far her favourite thing about climbing mountains was the absolute quiet.

As an interpreter constantly and repetitively conversing, she craved the quiet while lying in bed at night. Unfortunately, the constant buzz of a city always awake surrounded her, every noise manufactured and fake. Today the only sound was a waterfall roaring into the crevasse she perched alongside. It filled her from the inside out with a sense of calm relief.

She ate a banana and sipped lukewarm tea from a small flask, holding it close enough to allow the steam to tickle her nose. A square of Kendal Mint Cake slowly dissolved on her tongue. Instantly, she felt the much-needed energy boost. Revitalised, but still conscious of the time, she set off again with purpose, attacking the steep, muscle-busting climb.

After a couple of hours, she stopped to survey what looked like a minefield of rocks and boulders. The last thing she needed while alone on a mountain was a turned ankle or a stuck foot. She steadied herself again with the hiking poles, concentrated on her balance, and carefully wove her way through the last obstacle between her and the mountain's peak.

Half an hour later, she closed her eyes and blew out a long breath, feeling the welcome rush of pleasure and adrenaline that came with touching the cairn at the summit. Another mountain conquered and scored from the list. The cairn underneath her palm felt reassuring, sturdy in the vast space that surrounded her.

Hot from exertion despite the drop in temperature, she ditched her hat, poles, and rucksack against the cairn and

unzipped her jacket. Next, she grabbed her camera and circled the peak, taking in the stunning views. To the northwest, the iconic Torridon Mountains were instantly recognisable, including the imposing Beinn Eighe and Beinn Alligin. One day she hoped to take them on; maybe her brother would be persuaded to join her. To the southwest, she found the unmistakable sharp summit of Bidean a Choire Sheasgach watching over the beautiful Loch Monar in the South. If the weather held, as well as her muscles, her plan was to climb it, along with the adjoining Lurg Mhor, the following day.

She tried the names aloud, remembering her dad making her repeat them on their occasional climb together and his frustration that, despite all the languages she could speak, Gaelic seemingly wasn't for her. The distant memory made her sigh.

A familiar feeling of peace settled over her as she took picture after picture, even knowing she would never quite capture the scale and beauty of her surroundings. It was cathartic. It was her therapy.

The light began to fade fast, and ominous clouds building in the west were her cue to get moving again. Deciding the descent would be easy enough to take pictures along the way, she stuffed the camera in her jacket pocket, threw on her hat and rucksack, and set off back toward home for the night.

CHAPTER 2

Lori picked up the pace, crossed the rock mine without incident, and watched as the clouds drifted closer. From her altitude, she had the surreal visual of watching the rain fall in the distance whilst the sun still shone low behind her. She took out her camera, snapping photos of a rainbow spanning the glen that the rain had left in its wake.

It wasn't long before she reached the crevasse, stopping briefly to rest her thighs from the downward impact. Drinking the rest of the her already doctored tea to take on some sugar, she continued to zigzag down the narrow dirt track until she was low enough to eventually pick out the bothy from its vast backdrop. She aimed her camera in an effort to capture its insignificance and squinted as her eyes picked up movement. Given the royal blue colour, it couldn't be any animal she knew of.

Human.

“Verdammt,” she swore aloud in the direction of her fellow hiker, watching the bright dot close in on the bothy as it stood out so easily against the dull hillside. It was exactly what she didn't want.

Company.

She quickly threw on her waterproof trousers in case the rain caught up with her, and continued the descent. It was relatively quick and, in less than half an hour, all that stood between her and the bothy track was one last careful river crossing.

Safely on the other side, it was then the heavens chose to open, raining the only way it knew how to in Scotland.

Hard.

She knew the bothy was only another quarter mile away, and the thought of hot food and a warm sleeping bag motivated her into a light jog despite the burn in her thighs.

Hood up and head down against rain, she didn't spot the dog until it was under her feet barking. He jumped up and around her with such excitement, she couldn't help but laugh when the rucksack on her back coupled with the springer spaniel at her front, toppled her back onto the sodden track. Her reward for a muddy arse was an enthusiastic face licking that had Lori shrieking worse than at the river crossing. She couldn't move and was relieved when she heard a female voice in the distance shouting, "Frank!"

Lori freed her face long enough to shout back, "Over here!" before "Frank" resumed his assault on her face.

Two blue arms suddenly wrapped around his body, lifted and unceremoniously plonked him aside. "The blue dot in the distance" now hovered above her, peering down at her through mischievous eyes. They shone against her flushed cheeks and the way she bit on her lower lip, Lori could tell she was torn between guilt and laughter.

The stranger's gaze was so enthralling that it took a moment before she realised she was still lying in the mud getting rained on. "So are you here to lick my face too or are you going to help me up?" she said, and laughed.

Relief flooded the woman's face. She stepped back, and offered Lori a hand. Lori was pulled to her feet and couldn't help but notice how soft and warm the young woman's skin was.

“Oh no.” The woman surveyed the damage Frank had done. A panicked look slid across her lovely features and darkened a pair of stunning green eyes. “I’m so sorry. Let me see what he’s done to you. Oh God, your rucksack is covered and your arse...” She made a swipe at the mud with her jacket sleeves. “Do you have spare clothes? That flipping dog, honestly I’m really sorry—”

Lori raised a filthy hand to stop her. She wiped it on her trousers then held it out in front of her. “Lori Hunter, nice to meet you.”

The woman smiled again, visibly relieved, revealing a ridiculously cute dimple in her left cheek. She wrinkled her nose and held up her own filthy hands.

Lori shrugged, grabbed hold, and shook one anyway. “Alex Ryan, same here.”

She was half a head shorter than Lori and, although petite, the ease with which she had pulled Lori to her feet showed she was strong. After a moment Lori realised she was still holding her hand and staring. She quickly dropped it and looked toward Frank, who was now chasing something unseen near the river.

She nodded in his direction. “Frank, I presume?”

“The one and only,” replied Alex with a grimace. “I’m so sorry again for what he did. He’s good as gold at home, but once he’s released into the mountains, all manners go out of the window and he’s unstoppable. Not that he would hurt anyone, or anything for that matter, he just likes the chase and meeting new people. It’s so remote out here I let him have his fun.”

Lori waved her apology away. “It’s the mountain air. It can get to the best of us.”

As they both turned to head in the bothy's direction, it seemed Lori's initial thought had been right. She wasn't going to be alone in the bothy tonight. "So I take it you're my bothy buddy for the night then?"

"Oh!" It had obviously just dawned on Alex. "Aye, I hope that's okay? I hope you don't mind sharing with Frank too? He is an outdoor dog but normally has a barn and the company of other animals, and with the rain and..."

Lori placed a hand on her arm for reassurance and stopped her mid-flow. "So long as he doesn't want to share my bed, I think I'll cope."

Alex offered her a cheeky smile and turned toward the river. "Why not? I thought you'd already fallen for him?" Alex glanced back over her shoulder, a grin covering her face.

Lori returned her smile. "He certainly has a way with the ladies." She looked across the water and the last known location of Frank.

Alex craned her neck clearly looking for her pooch.

The rain had let up so Lori freed herself from the restrictive hood and took the opportunity to properly survey the woman she would be sharing her evening with.

She couldn't have been more than five feet five and clearly took care of herself. Alex was obviously comfortable in outdoor clothes and boots. Wisps of black hair had escaped the hood of her jacket, sticking to her rain-soaked face. Only a few small freckles high on a cheek bone seemed to interrupt a perfect complexion, now tinged from the wind with a pinkness to match her lips. Her left cheek maintained the slight indent of the dimple Lori had already seen.

Lori saw Alex's lips moving, but it wasn't until those shining eyes caught hers again that she realised she was

staring. “Uh, sorry, in my own little world there,” she said, quickly dropping her gaze before looking across the river, scanning the area for Frank. A tingle crept up her spine and she shivered involuntarily. Suddenly aware that she was soaked and covered in mud, she gave Alex a nudge and nodded toward the bothy. “C’mon. Let’s go get warmed up.”

“Aye, you must be freezing! He knows better than to stray too far and I’m sure will come back when he’s hungry. He always does.”

CHAPTER 3

Lori stepped into the bothy with a sigh of relief just as the rain picked up again. Alex looked around some more for Frank but soon closed the door, blocking the wind out along with him when there appeared to be no sign.

“Look at the state of us.” Alex yanked down her own hood and pulled her hair back. The tendrils sticking to her face earlier, too short to be caught in her ponytail, were quickly drying, going wispy around her face. She took her outer jacket off, followed by waterproof trousers and a thick outer fleece, and hung them on the nails by the door.

Lori found herself suddenly conscious of her own appearance. She pulled off her hat and quickly ran her fingers through her hair in a vain attempt to make it look respectable. Next she stripped off her own muddy jacket and waterproof trousers, but, kept the warm fleece on as she was feeling chilly.

“Dinner?” asked Alex.

Lori was already digging in her bag when her stomach rumbled. “You read my mind.”

“Okay, what have you got? Mine is boil-in-the-bag mince and tatties. Sorry, minced beef and potatoes,” she corrected herself.

It was a nod to Lori’s soft English accent that told Alex she wasn’t even northern, never mind Scottish. “Don’t worry. I’ve spent enough time in Scotland to know what tatties are. I even know what neeps are too,” she said, referring to the common name for turnip.

“Phew,” said Alex, dramatically wiping a brow, “I don’t need to translate myself then?”

“No, don’t worry,” said Lori, laughing as she talked, “I’ll tell you if I don’t understand. If you were from Aberdeen we might have a problem, but your accent isn’t too strong, so I think we’ll be fine.”

Alex chuckled. “Aye, even I struggle with the Aberdonian folk. I spent the first year of University sitting next to a girl from Mintlaw. Let’s just say I spent a lot of time nodding and smiling when she spoke. I only started understanding her when we became pub buddies. I find beer is a great language leveller.”

Lori waggled two miniature bottles she pulled from a side pocket in Alex’s direction. “As is red wine.”

Alex’s eyes widened in obvious delight. “I think you’re my new best friend. I can practically taste it already.”

“Well my bag has a questionable version of chicken tikka masala so I find the wine necessary to wash it down.”

Alex crinkled her nose as she caught the silver pack Lori threw towards her, eyeing it suspiciously. “I personally don’t need a reason for wine but that’s as good as any.”

They busied themselves gathering pots, gas canisters, water, and sporks, until all that was left was to wait for the water to boil their dubious dinner packs.

Lori broke the silence as Alex added another layer of clothing. “So is this your first time here?”

“No it’s a bit of a favourite spot of mine that I discovered quite a few years ago with my ex. It’s my first time here on my own though.” Her head popped through the top of her fleece. “It’s been a while.”

“Oh right.” Lori was mildly surprised to get such a candid answer. “Trying to get rid of the ghosts by making some memories of your own?”

“Aye, something like that.” Distracted, she poked at the bags in the pot. “I decided I gave up enough for that relationship and places like this are far too special to forget.” Alex went quiet at that, her eyes darkening like rain soaked moss. She blew on to her chilled hands, her eyes still on the bags bobbing in the boiling water.

“We kind of made it our place. We came back loads of times. But what started out as a great adventure to be shared together, huddled on one bunk, talking and kissing the night away, soon became more of a chore. Our last time here was also the last few days of our relationship.”

Lori raised her eyebrows as Alex took a breath. The words had seemed to tumble out of her in a rush. “Wow. I’m not sure what to say apart from I’m really glad to be sharing with only you and not some giggly, smooching couple.” She stifled a smile, hoping her humour wasn’t misplaced.

Alex seemed taken aback for a moment, but then threw a smile her way to Lori’s relief. “Don’t worry, you’re safe. It was long enough ago that I can laugh about it now.”

Lori watched her continue to absentmindedly poke at their dinner bags and hoped it was true. “So it just didn’t work out then or did something happen?”

Alex seemed to size her up before speaking again. “Okay, let’s get the morbid talk out of the way before our delicious dinner is served. Something did happen and that something was somebody else. For my ex, not me.”

Lori drew out a long “Oh,” leaving it open for Alex to carry on if she wanted. She studied Alex’s face, her eyes had glazed,

and she stood still with her hands over the steam from the boiling water. Clearly, Alex had drifted away, slipped into her memories. She wanted to bring her back, ask what had happened or say something reassuring. But she didn't think Alex would appreciate a stranger prying any further into her business, particularly out here where there weren't many distractions if things got uncomfortable between them.

Suddenly Alex blew out a long breath and blinked at Lori. It was clear she had forgotten someone else was there with her. "Oh is right." She sheepishly rubbed her hands together. "Sorry, not sure where I went there."

Lori smiled reassuringly and joined her at the stove. "Funny how an ex can do that to you, eh?"

Alex nodded. "Aye. I was just thinking I'd come a long way since we split up. It's taken me a while to feel as if I could spend a night here alone without getting scared, sobbing into my whisky, and becoming a snotty mess. It would have been a terrible time for Frank."

Lori gave her a wry smile, appreciating her attempt at humour despite the hurt she could see written all over Alex's face. She reached past her and turned off the gas, satisfied the food was heated well enough. "So I should be bracing myself for a potentially snotty time then?" She opened the packs and started spooning the mushy food into mess tins.

Alex shrugged. "Listen at this point I can't promise anything but good intentions. I'll admit it helps having someone else here so you're probably safe. Frank will be most grateful."

Lori took her opportunity to find out more. "You don't seem the type to scare easily and need someone around for protection, well apart from Frank obviously."

Alex settled on the bottom bunk. “Ah, well you would have me pegged right, then. Her name was Rachel and she was a bigger scaredy cat than me. Scared of spiders, scared of the dark, and as it turned out, scared of commitment.”

Lori’s hands stilled at Alex’s words, unsure why her stomach had just done a small flip-flop. She was glad she had her back to Alex. She poured the wine into their tin cups and finished serving, and then turned with the steaming mess tins and a smile. “Dinner is served,” she announced and handed one to Alex before setting the wine at her feet.

She was about to sit on the wobbly milking stool when Alex patted the space on the bottom bunk next to her. Her legs engaged before her mind and, suddenly, she was sitting next to her, close enough to feel the warmth radiating from Alex’s thigh.

She felt Alex glance sideways at her, obviously waiting for a response about Rachel. She picked up her drink and held it out in a toast. “To sharing wine and secrets with strangers.”

Alex’s shoulders seemed to drop in relief. “Cheers to that.” She toasted and took a large gulp. “I should say I’m not normally so quick to out myself, but I figured sharing with a lesbian surely can’t be worse than getting dripped on in a soggy tent on your own?” She winked at Lori with a half-smile.

Lori returned the smile. “Hey, I’m a big city girl, Alex, you’re not the first lesbian I’ve ever met. Besides, Frank seems like a good judge of character, I mean he likes me, so I’ll trust him on this.”

Alex held her eye. “You have one of those faces.”

“Those faces? I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not?”

“It is. It’s the kind that makes someone want to spill all their secrets.”

Lori peered at Alex over the top of her cup and watched her take another sip of wine. “Well after tonight, you never have to see me again so what’s the harm? Spill.”

Alex shuffled back in the bunk. “You better get comfy if we’re doing this.”

Lori hesitated a moment, conscious already of their proximity, but joined her leaning back against the side of the bothy. “So why would being alone out here have you worried if spiders aren’t a problem?” she asked, turning slightly to face her.

Alex stared at her wine before giving her what was obviously the short answer. “Because being alone meant time to think about how unhappy I was.”

The sadness written all over Alex’s face made Lori want to pull her in to a hug. She had even started to reach out an arm when a loud bang on the door made them both jump. Wide eyed, they looked at each other in panic until frantic scratching indicated that it was just Frank trying to get in.

Alex got up to let the dripping wet and muddy mad dog in. His tail wagged uncontrollably, but he obviously knew better than to jump at them in his current state. He instead waited for Alex to unroll a thin, padded mattress from her rucksack that turned out to be a makeshift dog bed. He circled twice in the middle of it and then collapsed in an exhausted heap.

Alex pulled a small towel from a pocket and then gave him a rough rub all over to help warm him up. Pouring water into another mess tin for him, she returned to the bunk promising to feed him just as soon as her own now lukewarm mush was finished.

The moment now passed, Lori decided it was best to leave the 'ex' subject, not wanting to see Alex upset again and not really wanting the tables turned. She'd come up here to get away from the ex-not-ex question after all. She finished her dinner and decided to play it safe instead. "So what are your plans for tomorrow?"

"My, my, aren't you forward. I haven't even finished this delicious dinner you made me and you're already planning our second date," she said, smirking, "I mean, I was planning on climbing a mountain, but, you know, if you want to take me out, I could be persuaded," she winked.

Lori couldn't help the heat that crept up her cheeks at the flirty words and the deep dimple that creased Alex's cheek. To hide her embarrassment, she picked up her mess tin and started tidying up after their dinner. Her mind whirled. One wink from a girl she'd known an hour, half a cup of wine, and she was acting like a bloody fool. In her mind she chastised herself, *it's just because she's a she, and you're not used to girls flirting with you that's all. She's just having fun with you. Get over yourself and have a laugh.*

Her back to Alex, she laughed and decided to play along. "Wow, well who knew a solo trip to a bothy in the middle of nowhere would get me a date with a hot local." She turned and returned the wink. "If I'd known, I'd have done something with my hair."

Lori calling her hot was obviously not what Alex had expected, evident by her own blush. "So it's a date then? Seafood is my favourite, in case you're wondering."

Lori smiled at the comment, pleased at her ability to make Alex shift uncomfortably just as easily as she had. "As tempting as that is, I'm not sure my boyfriend would

approve. But maybe we could go climb a mountain together? That's if you're up for the company?"

"Ah, there's always a boyfriend." Feigning disappointment, Alex shook her head sadly. "I guess I should have known someone as gorgeous as you wouldn't be single. What's his name?"

Lori was determined not to let Alex see the effect being called gorgeous was having on her and also not really wanting to get into boyfriend territory, she began to organise her bed and sleeping clothes on the bunk above where Alex was sitting.

"Andrew. He's back in London, not really the roughing it type, which works out well because I like the time away by myself..." she trailed away hoping the subject would be dropped.

Jumping at a prod to her side, Lori looked down to see Alex peering up at her mischievously "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable, teasing you like that about a date. I'm told I'm a massive flirt when the notion takes me and you straight girls don't always appreciate it."

Lori sat on the stool opposite the bunk. "Trust me, it's not that at all, although you do seem to have a knack for making me blush. I just hadn't thought about him all day. I've been distracted by the climb and the view, and then meeting you and Frank." She sighed and rested an elbow on her knee, chin in hand. She guessed talking to a stranger had to be more productive than to her best friend. Stella would just profess what a bore Andrew was and pour her more wine. To be fair, she was right. "I kind of came here under a bit of a cloud. Andrew and I argued about yet another weekend spent apart. It's getting boring and I'm tired of it."

“The arguing is getting boring or he’s getting boring?”

She could have played along when she heard the humour in Alex’s voice, instead she gave the honest answer. “Both, I guess. When we first started seeing each other, having walking in common was a big plus. Turns out my walking and his walking are two very different things. But, anyway, we have much bigger problems than that and I guess I’ve just finally taken my head out of the sand and seen them.” It wasn’t just an argument. It was a full-blown shouting match that had ended with Lori declaring it was over between them. Again. “I guess I just can’t take his selfishness anymore. Or his complete disregard for my career and my hobbies. In fact, the more I think about it, his disregard for anything that makes me happy. Andrew wants a housewife, and a housewife I most certainly am not.”

Alex blew out a breath. “Well high five for the sand-free head. It took me three years to do the same and realise the only thing Rachel cared about was Rachel. How long has it taken you?”

Lori’s shoulders slumped. “Don’t be so quick with that high five. I’ve wasted the best part of seven years on Andrew.”

“Wow,” Alex said, eyebrows raised. “It surely can’t have been all bad if you’ve stuck around that long?”

“No, you’re right. That’s not fair. We had our moments. I suppose these days I’m struggling to remember what they were.”

When they first dated he had understood her work would involve travel. As an interpreter, she would sometimes be out of the country to work freelance at the European Parliament or to personally accompany an MP or diplomat to a summit or meeting.

It was normally only for a couple of days at a time but sometimes longer, depending on the event. He was happy that her interest in politics and international issues had swayed her away from signing on with one of the many businesses that had courted her, avoiding a potential permanent move out of the country. He also said it was perfect because it afforded them plenty of freedom to do as they pleased, particularly with the hours he would have to put in as a junior broker in the city.

At twenty-three, they were still young and, although committed, they wanted to retain some independence, including keeping separate homes and their own group of friends.

On paper, they were a good match and Andrew ticked all the boxes she thought a good future husband was meant to tick. He was handsome and career driven, he came from a similar wealthy background to her, and was headed for big things. They could have the picture postcard life. House, kids, cars, pets. They could give their kids all the traditional, stable things she never had.

After five years together he started to change. In the last two years, he'd become possessive and demanding, deriding her for staying away and 'deserting' him despite it being necessary for her job. Suddenly her handsome and easy-going boyfriend had turned ugly and emotionally manipulative.

Despite the fact that they didn't live together, he expected her to be waiting for him at his place, with dinner on the table and an open ear ready to listen to him drone on about his day when he got home. Whether it was after work or a day on the golf course, he didn't care.

If she wasn't there when he expected her to be, she was grilled about her whereabouts. Who was she with? What did she do? What did they talk about? She had even caught him once checking her phone messages although he had denied it, making up some lame excuse about wanting to check a date in her calendar. She was sure it hadn't been the first time.

He made her feel guilty for wanting to spend time with other people without him, to the point where even a drink after work with her best friend came with a barrage of questions. It had taken a while for her to realise part of the problem was Andrew didn't have friends. He had colleagues and golf buddies, but any real friends he had kept through University and his first few years at the bank he had let drift away or they'd moved on. He made no attempt to find new ones and had become more and more reliant on her for a social life, for attention, for everything, and she couldn't be everything for him. It was exhausting.

His solution? Get married, have kids, move to a soulless commuter town and plan dinner parties.

She had spent years studying languages and politics, gaining her postgraduate degree in conference interpreting. She'd worked long and hard, freelancing in order to build relationships and a solid reputation. It had enabled her to secure a permanent position in the Westminster Parliament and a place high up the list of people willing to travel. She couldn't believe Andrew expected her to give it all up. Just so he could play out some old fashioned fantasy that the old boys at the bank seemed to encourage. He'd been watching too many episodes of *Mad Men*.

Seven years was a long time though, and it would be hard to make the break, despite everything, she missed him.

However, she was resolved to end it and wasn't going to feel guilty for taking control of her own life and living it her way.

"Let me guess," said Alex, breaking into her thoughts, "his walking involves a golf course?"

Lori burst out laughing. "And four of the most tiresome men you've ever met in your life. Andrew included."

Alex licked her finger and scored one for herself in the air. "I remember when I was younger, my granddad was a mad golfer and my grandma could never understand him spending four hours walking around a course when he could be at the top of a mountain in that time."

"Well, no more," Lori declared, jumping to her feet. "I hope he and his golf clubs are very happy together. May they keep him warm in the night."

"Wow, so it's actually over?" Alex asked, clearly confused. "A minute ago he was your boyfriend."

"Yes. It's over." The realisation that she truly meant it this time suddenly hit her. So many times these past two years had she uttered those words, knowing Andrew would talk her around. But this time felt different. She grabbed her rucksack and dug around, hoping she'd remembered to pack what she needed right now.

"A wee nip to keep the cold away?" she asked, attempting a Scottish accent, triumphantly holding up a miniature flask.

Alex's eyes lit up. "Ah, wine and whisky. I knew you were a girl after my own heart. I'll take that as an apology for fobbing me off with what is actually an ex-boyfriend."

Lori smiled and sat on the bottom bunk again, unclipping the top of the flask to release two small silver cups, she handed one to Alex and poured.

Alex looked impressed. "Very sophisticated." She sniffed it and closed her eyes in obvious delight. "Glenlivet?"

Now it was Lori's turn to be impressed. "Right again, a favourite of my dad's." She touched her cup to Alex's, looked her in the eye, and raised it in another toast "To exes and to ridding ourselves of their crap once and for all."

"To exes," Alex echoed before they both swallowed the amber liquid down in one.

Lori felt it burn a satisfying trail down to her stomach and, with a smile at both their empty cups, she topped them up again.

Alex shivered and sat back against the wooden bothy wall, pulling her sleeping bag across her legs, before tossing the other side of it over Lori's. Lori followed, sitting close for extra warmth. She took another sip of whisky, its calming effect immediate as she sunk down lower under the sleeping bag. They were both quiet and lost in their own thoughts. The only sound was Frank softly snoring.

"What are you thinking about?" Lori asked. "Rachel?"

"Nah, this trip was about forgetting her. Wiping her memory from this place by making new ones of my own. I was actually thinking Frank obviously isn't interested in his dinner and so far, I've never enjoyed sharing a bothy with a stranger so much as I have with you."

Lori glanced across at Alex, smiling at her honesty. "I think you might have been right about me and you being good friends, you know. We have mountains, whisky, and a hatred of golf in common. What more do we need?"

"Well, right now, I need more whisky." Alex held out her cup for a third time. "And while you top that up, I have something else to finish this impromptu little dinner date of ours."

Lori cocked her head and raised an eyebrow. "Why am I worried?"

“Relax.” Alex smirked, handed Lori her cup, and then shuffled to the end of the bed to rummage in her rucksack. “I’m over you already.” She grinned over her shoulder. “Ah ha! Dessert.” She pulled out a zip lock food bag with what looked like Frank’s dinner in it “Jess’s homemade brownies. I promise looks are deceiving, they got a bit mashed in my bag.”

She got up and retrieved their sporks before crawling back next to Lori on the bunk and pulling the sleeping bag back over them. She opened the food bag and offered it to Lori first. “Go on, I swear they’re amazing.”

Lori dug in, never one to turn down chocolate. “Oh my goodness, that’s delicious.” She groaned. “Okay, you win with dessert. Well, Jess wins, whoever she may be.”

“Best friend,” Alex mumbled through a mouthful.

The brownies didn’t last long and one more refill each finished the whisky.

“Yep, I was definitely right about us being friends,” Alex murmured, leaning in to rest her head on Lori’s shoulder, the whisky seemingly making her sleepy. “I think I was meant to meet you.”

Lori tensed a little, surprised at the familiar gesture, then relaxed into it. A few minutes later, she realised Alex’s breathing was matching Frank’s and that she was out for the count.

Rousing Alex long enough to take the cup from her hand and lie her down, Lori laid the sleeping bag over the top of her. She figured Alex would soon crawl inside when the cold started biting.

The temperature had dropped dramatically and Lori could see her breath cloud in the small space. Stealing

herself for the chill outside, she manoeuvred around Frank and left the bothy for nature's bathroom.

The sky was clear and the sheer number and brightness of the stars never failed to hypnotise her. She always took a moment to stand and stare, letting her mind clear before bed. Only tonight it wasn't working and, for a change, it wasn't because of Andrew.

She thought about the 'hot local' sleeping inside and smiled. Why was that? Yes, she was funny and cheeky and easy to talk to but there was something more. She couldn't put her finger on it. Suddenly exhausted, Lori headed back inside.

Alex's walking trousers on the stool told her she had taken the time to change before climbing into her sleeping bag. The hood was pulled tight around her head against the cold and Lori stood a moment studying the serene looking face lit softly by the lantern on the table. She couldn't help but admit Alex was beautiful.

Lori moved around quietly so as to not disturb the sleeping woman while she changed into thick thermals. The ladder groaned under her weight as she climbed up to the top bunk and slid down deep inside her own sleeping bag. Closing her eyes, she let the whisky do its work.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

FOUR STEPS

BY WENDY HUDSON

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