

MORE THAN A FEELING

Anna wanted nothing more than to be left alone, so when the flight attendant guided a man over to sit beside her, she couldn't help but feel rather put out. She had been hoping that the seat beside hers would remain empty. She wasn't the most sociable person at the best of times, and this wasn't one of them. For some reason she always seemed to be seated beside the chattiest person in the entire plane, with her luck, this time wouldn't be any different.

She'd been devastated to learn that her beloved Aunt Joyce had passed away, the sad news forming the cherry on top of the crap pile that seemed to have rained down on her life in a shit storm of epic proportions. So right now all she wanted to do was wallow in self pity for the duration of the flight. Maybe her new companion would keep to himself, she could but dream.

Anna's arm was bashed by a stray elbow as the man settled himself in the seat next to her. She bit her lip to hold in her yelp of pain, but he obviously noticed.

"Sorry," he muttered in apology as he continued to fiddle and shift, grunting in frustration before he finally succeeded in clipping together his seat belt and settling back in his seat. She nodded in acceptance of his apology, leaning her head back against her headrest, closing her eyes in the hope of shutting off all future conversation.

"I'm Matt," he continued. She felt something hovering in front of her face and opened her eyes to be greeted with the sight of his hand about six inches from her nose, waiting for her own. She bit back a sigh as she sat up and took his hand in hers, giving it a brief shake. "Anna," she supplied out of politeness more than the desire for him to know her name.

He appeared pleased with this round of introductions and sat back again, blissfully silent for a few precious minutes. The flight attendants began their exaggerated pantomime routine of gesturing to the exits, showing how to pull down the oxygen mask to activate air flow and place it over your face in the event of an emergency and how to blow on a whistle.

Anna barely listened, she had been on so many flights that she could practically recite the spiel like children chant the alphabet and everything else was just common sense really. She picked up her book, meaning to settle down and read away the hours of the flight, she needed to be calm before she took on her family.

She hadn't been home in a few years, and truth be told, she rarely contacted them voluntarily, having parted on bad terms with all but her loving aunt. They had all warned her, told her there was something about Carl that warned he couldn't be trusted, but she had refused to listen. She had been in love and thought it was reciprocated, moving with Carl when he had gotten a new job, leaving her old life and the naysayers behind. That had been the beginning of the end.

Before she could let her mind wander back fully to the day she'd gone to surprise Carl at work with a nice lunch, only to be surprised herself when she found him having a very intimate meeting with his personal assistant, the man beside her shifted in his seat. She watched him out of the corner of her eye as he fidgeted and twitched. His fingers flexed on the arm rest as if ready to grab on for dear life at a moment's notice.

She didn't want to talk to him, didn't want to engage him in conversation but as the engines rumbled into life he practically jumped out of his skin. She wanted to sit back, read and ignore the rest of the world until the flight attendants brought the rubbery microwave meal she had paid extra

for, but she wasn't that much of a bitch, the poor man was obviously not enjoying himself. Against her better judgement she leaned her head a little closer to his. "Are you OK?"

He nodded, not speaking as he continued to concentrate on his breathing, a very obvious in through the nose out through the mouth, relaxing technique that is promised to work wonders but in reality is as useful as a chocolate teapot.

He didn't look OK but she didn't want to push him, it wasn't her place and anyway, she had enough troubles of her own without taking on those of a stranger, even if it was just for a few hours.

She sat back as the plane began to taxi along the runway, her stomach giving that little lurch as they left the ground and began to climb. She didn't even bother looking out of the window, that would feel too much like saying goodbye, watching the country that had been her home for the past five years vanishing before her eyes, growing smaller and smaller. Her eyes grew moist and she squeezed them shut, leaning her head back in the pathetic hope that the tears would be reabsorbed without falling. She had done enough crying over that idiot.

Anna could feel the sadness settling over her like a blanket and she knew she should try to shake it off, but you know when you have those days where you just want to wallow? When you feel you have earned the right to have a self pity day or even week? She was at that point. Needing to plummet in a downward spiral into a full on pity party complete with red puffy eyes and a stuffy nose. She pulled the letter out of her pocket, even though she knew it almost by heart she had read it so many times.

Her Aunt Joyce had known she was dying but no one else had. Anna received the letter the day after she had gotten the phone call informing her that her closest confidant had left her all alone. Aunt Joyce had been her favourite person when she was a little girl and she had remained that way throughout her life. She had spent many school holidays with her aunt because her parents were always working. Aunt Joyce was her father's older sister but she had been more like Anna's. She was her friend, her career adviser, her heartbreak mender, fashion consultant and everything in between. She may have been pushing seventy, but she had never acted that way, sometimes even Anna had trouble keeping up with her.

She unfolded the letter and stared at it, running her thumb lovingly over the words written in that familiar hand. She already missed her so much. They had spoken daily before she left with Carl, but slowly that had dwindled down to weekly calls and then if they were lucky, once a month. She deeply regretted that now. She kept telling herself that if she had spoken to her more, showed more of an interest, her aunt might have told her about the cancer. Now here it was, in her round, bold handwriting.

In the letter Joyce told her she regretted nothing, she had loved her life and since she had found out about her cancer she had made moves to correct the things she thought of as mistakes, not wanting to leave the world with unfinished business. She told Anna silly things, like giving back all the items she had borrowed over the years and forgotten to return, tracking down old friends and making contact again, going on a day out to the races, and writing poetry.

She told her in a "well I never, It's a small world," way that her best friend from her school years had actually moved to the US too and that if Anna saw her, she should say hello. She had rolled her eyes at that, she suspected that her aunt didn't quite get just how large the country actually was and expected Anna to bump into her old friend as she strolled down the street.

Her aunt went on to give her what they had always called one of her loving lectures. Her aunt spoke about how she had never regretted staying single and never having children of her own, she had just never met the right man. But that it didn't mean she had given up looking, being a prolific dater and connoisseur of the male species, and that neither should Anna. Now she reminded her that the perfect person for her was out there, just waiting for the right moment to come into her life and to lighten the dark with a smile so bright it would bring all her joy flooding back. And, she promised, he would come along when she least expected it, hand picked by her from heaven.

Anna scoffed at that and folded the letter, slipping it back into her pocket, picking up her book again, trying to concentrate on the words in front of her. Yet she was restless, she just wanted to get there, get the funeral out of the way and get on with the rest of her life. She couldn't stand the thought of all the sympathetic faces and comments that would accompany the fact that Carl wasn't with her. She hadn't told anyone but Aunt Joyce that her fiancée had cheated on her and left her in a strange country over six months ago, didn't want to face the superior knowing looks on their faces and to be reminded that they had told her so.

The annoying man beside her had fallen into what appeared to be a light doze, his eyes flickering behind his lids, his mouth slightly open, he actually looked kind of cute. Anna found a small smile trying to sneak its way onto her lips and she instantly scowled. She should not be finding him cute, even if he did have that slightly nerdish look that she had always secretly liked, he looked the complete opposite to Carl who was all about the male grooming. Carl would spend longer in the bathroom getting ready than she did and more on beauty products.

This man, Matt she recalled his name was, had thin rimmed glasses perched slightly askew on his nose, his chin was dusted with a light sprinkling of stubble and he was wearing a t-shirt that sported the overly large face of Sheldon Cooper from the Big Bang Theory.

She looked over him to peer through the window, noticing that the sky outside was pitch black now and the sounds of gentle snores rang out from various areas of the plane. She groped in the pocket of the seat in front of her for her bottle of water and was just taking a sip when the world fell out from beneath her. At least that's what it felt like when the plane gave a lurch and seemed to drop a few thousand feet in a matter of seconds. Water spewed out of her mouth as she choked in shock, hacking and gasping, the front of her shirt completely soaked.

The man beside her bolted upright like he'd been shot, letting out a very unmanly squawk of terror. "What happened?" he yelled, his hand shooting out to grab hers in a death grip a boa constrictor would be proud of. She looked down pointedly at their joined hands just as the plane began another trampolining session, bouncing up and down on pockets of air, seeming to give a little butt shimmy now and then that had passengers near the rear of the aircraft vocalising their discomfort with a few juicy swear words.

"Holy shit we're gonna die," her seat mate whimpered, his eyes frantic, darting here and there while his fingers crushed hers in the palm of his hand.

Needing to calm him down, and not require reconstructive surgery on her right hand she spoke in as soothing a manner as she could manage. "It's OK, nothing's going to happen. We've just hit a little turbulence that's all, it's perfectly normal."

"I can't calm down," he gasped, his breath sawing in and out of his lungs so fast she worried he would hyperventilate. "I hate flying, I hate it."

"I don't like it either, really, but the trick is to try and forget you're even here."

"I don't think I can do this," he whispered, tipping his head back and closing his eyes. She placed her free hand on top of his that was still gripping hers tight and gave a little squeeze though she doubted he felt it.

"I'm right here," she soothed, feeling the undeniable urge to make it all better for him. "I'll help you through."

Not knowing what else to do she went with distraction, ignoring the way her stomach still lurched with every judder.

"Why are you flying if you hate it?" she asked.

He took a deep breath, obviously visibly trying to calm himself, his eyes still closed. "I'm flying over to attend a funeral."

His words hit just a little too close to home and she gulped for a second, swallowing the lump that had formed in her throat. "Yeah," she responded. "Me too."

He opened his eyes to look at her and she was startled to see that they were a very vivid green, deeper than any she had seen before.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Any one close?" He seemed to be responding to her questions, his grip on her hand loosening as the planes shuddering eased a bit, they both ignored the cabin crew reminding everyone to stay calm and seated with their belts secured.

"My aunt," she answered, and even though the pain made her words come out as barely more than a whisper, she knew he heard them. Clearing her throat she tried to pull herself together. "What about you? With the accent I can tell you're a Boston native so you must have family in England?"

He shook his head. "No, just an old friend of the family, I've never met any of them but I was still drafted into coming, too nice for my own good. I've never even been there before."

They chatted about random things for a few more minutes, his grip loosening by the second though he didn't let her hand go completely. He seemed calmer now, his eyes having lost their panicked look so that when the Captain made his announcement apologizing for the disturbance, Matt was leaning back in his seat looking quite normal. Or what Anna assumed was normal for him, though he did look rather red in the face when he realised he was still holding her hand. He dropped it like a hot stone. Anna smiled, her mood having lifted too.

"Thank you for talking to me, you really helped, I couldn't have done that without you," he muttered as if waiting for the ground to open up and swallow him whole.

Before Anna could answer they were interrupted by the crew handing out hot drinks and the meals and their conversation lulled into chatter about jobs, family and the like, which made the rest of the flight go by quite quickly. Anna was actually rather disappointed when the plane made a smooth landing, even though Matt gripped her hand for that too, and they disembarked, heading for the luggage collection point.

They said their goodbyes, making a joke about maybe seeing each other on the return flight and went their separate ways, her to the waiting arms of her parents and him to the taxi rank outside.

In the days that led to Aunt Joyce's funeral, Anna found herself pulling out the letter over and over again, reading her aunts promise that she would find someone worthy of her. Anna didn't believe it one bit, she never went anywhere to meet nice, normal men. She worked, she maybe had the odd drink with her friends and she went home again, back to her small apartment, alone.

Her mind flittered back to Matt, he had been nice and normal, apart from his fear of flying obviously. She wished she could meet someone like him that she could relax with. She didn't want to stay in Boston anymore she had no reason to and she made up her mind to return after the funeral, pack up her stuff and have it shipped back to return home at the soonest opportunity.

The day of the funeral dawned crisp and fresh, just the kind of weather that her aunt had loved. The dew glistened on the grass and clinging from spider's webs fluttering in the breeze, the birds hopping around the garden in search of food. She had been putting on a brave face as she dressed herself in her smart black suit, coiled her hair up into a bun at the nape of her neck and followed her parents to her aunt's house where they had arranged for her body to leave from on her final journey.

Anna and her mother had taken half a day to look through Joyce's things and Anna had made a list of the items she would like as keep sakes, little things that reminded her of her happy holidays spent there and her mother had promised to keep them safe for her.

Now they were standing at the doors of the church, watching the undertakers remove the coffin that contained her beloved, vibrant, full of life aunt. Anna just couldn't believe it was happening, that that box held her. It all seemed like a bad dream. Tears began to trickle from her eyes as the first song started and they followed the pallbearers down the aisle. She sat down on the end of a row of pews as her parents sat with the rest of her aunts and uncles.

The tears had really begun now, wetting her cheeks and she frantically scabbled in her pockets looking for a tissue but found none.

"Who the hell forgets to bring a tissue to a funeral, stupid girl?" she grumbled to herself. She was debating whipping her eyes on the sleeve of her suit when a blue hanky appeared under her nose.

"Thank you," she murmured gratefully, taking it and dabbing at her eyes.

"You're welcome," a voice whispered back and her head shot up in surprise to be greed by two vivid green eyes, hiding behind thin framed glasses.

"Matt?" she gasped, unable to believe he was there.

"I guess your aunt and my Nana's friend are one and the same person. What are the odds?" he smiled, opening his mouth to say something else but stopped himself as the vicar stood up to begin his welcoming address. More tears gathered as emotions of loss, grief, hopelessness flooded Anna. How would she cope without her aunt? Who would she talk to when no one else would understand? Who would be there for her no matter what?

"I don't think I can do this," she whispered to herself, feeling her heart begin to race, but instantly she felt her fingers being entwined with Matt's, his hand feeling perfect in hers.

"I'm here," he whispered. "We'll get through this together." Her jacket pocket rustled as he leaned closer, brushing the letter in her pocket that she hadn't been without since the day she received it.

A small smile broke through her tears as she thought of her aunt looking down on them and smiling, with a look of pure, smug satisfaction on her face.

Anna had a feeling that she might have a reason to stay in Boston after all as Matt squeezed her hand and gave her a comforting smile. In fact, Anna would actually go as far to say that it was more than a feeling.