

VICTORIA COOKE



The Holiday Cruise



The trip of a lifetime!



Victoria Cooke

The Holiday Cruise: The feel-good heart-warming romance you need to read this year

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The Holiday Cruise: The feel-good heart-warming romance you need to read this year / V. Cooke — «HarperCollins»,

'Buy this book now and read it!' Rachel Gilbey 'A truly fantastic read I couldn't put it down.' Jessica Bell 'This was even better than her debut.' Rachel Burton author of The Many Colours of Us The high seas are calling! As if it weren't enough to be cheated on by her husband of ten years, Yorkshire lass Hannah Davis is losing her beauty salon business too. Luckily, her big sister is there to pick up the pieces, but Hannah is desperate to find some independence. Impulsively, Hannah applies for a spa job...on a cruise ship! Christmas in the Caribbean, springtime in the Mediterranean, what's not to like? But, despite being in her thirties, Hannah has never done anything on her own before, and she's terrified. As the ship sets sail, Hannah has never been further from home...or closer to discovering who she is and who she wants to be. Praise for The Holiday Cruise 'The Holiday Cruise is one of a rare sort of book that spoke to me on so many levels and one I could thoroughly identify with.' Rachel Gilbey 'Highly recommended for a Christmas time read!!' Jolene Mattison 'Highly recommend this book and author. Great read.' Kaye Temonson 'This was a great story.' Tracey Meier 'I loved all the characters on the cruise. I love books like these and this one was right up there with them.' Carley Adair

The high seas are calling!

As if it weren't enough to be cheated on by her husband of ten years, Yorkshire lass Hannah Davis is losing her beauty salon business too. Luckily, her big sister is there to pick up the pieces, but Hannah is desperate to find some independence.

Impulsively, Hannah applies for a spa job...on a cruise ship! Christmas in the Caribbean, springtime in the Mediterranean, what's not to like? But, despite being in her thirties, Hannah has never done anything on her own before, and she's terrified.

As the ship sets sail, Hannah has never been further from home...or closer to discovering who she is and who she wants to be.

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The Secret to Falling in Love

The Holiday Cruise

Victoria Cooke



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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VICTORIA COOKE

grew up in the city of Manchester before crossing the Pennines in pursuit of her career in education. She now lives in Huddersfield with her husband and two young daughters and when she's not at home writing by the fire with a cup of coffee in hand, she loves working out in the gym and travelling. Victoria was first published at the tender age of eight by her classroom teacher who saw potential in a six page story about an invisible man. Since then she's always had a passion for reading and writing, undertaking several writers' courses before completing her first novel in 2016.

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Dedication

For my parents, who gave me a love of travel and ensured we always had an annual holiday.

Chapter One

Nausea churned slowly in my stomach as I stared at the grey metallic shutter for the first time in a while. With trembling fingers, I unlocked it, using my shoulder to force it up. It was stiffer than I remembered and screeched painfully as I pushed it up above my head, as if it hadn't been opened for a while.

My breath caught in my chest and I considered just turning around and going back home. Back to safety. *Come on, Hannah. You need to do this. It's already been too long.* From the corner of my eye, I caught sight of an older couple I recognized walking past on the other side of the road, staring at me sympathetically. Ashamed, I turned away and entered my beauty salon, the business I'd run for the past ten years.

A musty smell hit me as I crossed the threshold. Stepping over the pile of letters on the doormat, I flicked the light switch but nothing happened. I reached into my bag for my phone, turned on the torch, and glanced around; everything looked in order. It was clean and tidy but my staff members, Jess and Amy, who should have been there, were not.

My head spun. I'd neglected the business for the past six weeks – I knew that. I was embarrassed to admit that I hadn't even given it a moment's consideration, but I suppose I'd just assumed that Jess and Amy would be okay holding the fort. As my eyes scanned the room, I spotted a note on the counter, written in Jess's tell-tale bubbly writing.

Hannah,

We've tried to call you a million times – we've been to your house and left a note there too. I know you're going through a tough time, and we've tried to hold the fort here, but we can't afford to continue working at Hollywood Hut. Amy and I took £50 each from the cash takings to cover some of our pay, but most customers paid by card so we couldn't take our full wages. Hopefully, when you get this, you'll be able to sort out what we're owed.

We're really sorry to leave you and do hope you're coping.

Hope you understand.

Jess & Amy

PS: We've posted our keys through your letterbox.

I slumped against the counter, clutching the note in a shaky hand, taking in the business I'd worked so hard to build. Even through the gloom, I could clearly see the comfy chairs where clients waited and the nail bar where Jess and Amy had laughed and joked with customers. I could see the hours I'd spent decorating and planning and dreaming. I could see the life I'd had.

Moments passed as I stared into space, trying to make sense of everything and put a plan together. *I couldn't lose my business too.* I shook my head and, forcing myself into action, I dialled Jess's number.

'Hannah?' she answered cautiously.

'Oh, thank God, Jess, yes, it's me. I'm in the salon and I've just found your note. I completely understand why you left, but I'm okay now and I'm ready to reopen. I just need you and Amy to come back – the three musketeers together once more.' I forced cheer into my tone.

'Oh, Hannah.' She paused, and my stomach sank. I knew what was coming.

'I'm so sorry,' I whispered, holding back tears. I knew I'd been selfish, locking myself away from the world without giving a thought to those who I might have affected. Poor Amy must've been sick with worry wondering how she was going to make ends meet. A wave of guilt mingled with the nausea in my stomach.

'I didn't want to leave. I just really needed to make sure I had a wage coming in and I didn't know when you'd be back. I'd already borrowed money from my parents to cover the shortfall and I couldn't ask them again. You were totally AWOL.' She sighed heavily. 'Cherry at Glam Shack offered me a job a few weeks ago and I had to take it. I'm sorry, I tried my best to get hold of you, H, I really did.'

I could tell from her voice she was devastated; we'd had a great thing going on at Hollywood Hut. Glam Shack was the only other salon in our small village of Tinbury in North Yorkshire and Cherry had invented herself as somewhat of a rival. *She'd be loving this.* I sighed and fell back against the wall.

'I had the electricity turned off so you wouldn't get billed for it,' she added. She was a sweetheart, which made losing her all the more difficult.

'And what about Amy?' I asked, already knowing what the answer would be.

'She's here too, at Glam Shack. She was already late with her rent. H, there's something else...' She pulled in a long breath. 'A lot of your clients have been coming to Glam Shack too. Cherry's got them all on block bookings and packages – she really went to town on cornering the market at your expense.'

My chest tightened. Losing my staff was a devastating blow; but losing my customers? That would ruin me. It was a moment before I could speak.

'Thanks for letting me know,' I muttered before hanging up the phone. My chest heaved and sobs burst out uncontrollably. *How had it come to this?* I'd lost everything, whilst *he* – Daniel – still had his thriving electrical supply shop and a happy new life with whatsherface. Suddenly unable to stop myself, I screamed, swiping everything from the counter. The tip bowl crashed against the wall, smashing into a million tiny fragments. It was a perfect symbolic representation of my life. I didn't deserve it. I didn't deserve any of it.

After a good five minutes, I calmed myself down and began to sweep up the shards and arrange the other items neatly back on the desk. I was too proud of the business I'd built to see it a mess, but it'd served its purpose in those few moments of despair. I dried my eyes and wiped away the smudged mascara from underneath my eyes. Dark circles remained and it was hard to tell if they were etched in from the sleepless nights or just stubborn stains from the mascara. When I looked vaguely human again, I stood in the middle of the salon, trying to get my thoughts into some kind of order. I was going to need coffee.

The outside air was calm and still, contrasting with my earlier outburst. A cold snap had brought some autumnal frost to the village, which had decorated the high street beautifully. The cobbles were glistening silver, bringing an air of magic to the place, which normally would have excited me, serving

to foreshadow Christmas perfectly. I'd have enjoyed snuggling up by the window in the café, gazing out down the pretty village high street with a hot chocolate warming my hands. Now, it felt so wrong: a juxtaposition of heartbreak amidst beauty. Smashed windows, graffiti, and litter would have served as a more appropriate backdrop. It was still a way off but the thought of spending Christmas alone made me shudder.

I popped into Jean's coffee shop and ordered a large cappuccino to take away. 'How are you coping, love?' she asked solemnly as she handed me my five pence change, which I chucked in the tip jar. *The whole village must know about me and Daniel.* I plastered on a smile.

'I'm holding up, thanks, Jean,' I replied before scuttling off and heading back home to try and work out how to save my business.

I spent a quarter of an hour enjoying my coffee in silence, plucking up the courage to win back my customers. If they returned, Amy and Jess could return, and I could at least salvage something from the dire situation I was in. I booted up my laptop whilst my plan was forming. Manager's specials, welcome-back discounts, bring-a-friend Fridays – Cherry at Glam Shack wouldn't know what had hit her. As the adrenaline pumped around my body, the ideas kept coming. *Balloons.* Balloons outside would really draw the eye. Free product demos would help with upselling. It wouldn't be so hard, and once I was back working again, I'd be too busy to think about *him*.

I looked at the screen, and my heart stopped. The wallpaper had loaded, and I was hit with the painful image of a happy couple. It was taken on holiday in Cancun back in April. Daniel and I were cuddled up on the beach, sipping cocktails at sunset. My usually straight, chin-length dark hair had caught natural highlights in the sun, and the saltwater had worked its magic, creating loose waves. I had on a simple yellow sleeveless shirtdress that set my tan off perfectly.

Daniel was tanned and wore a Hawaiian-style shirt that we'd giggled about. His arm was thrown lazily around my shoulder and I could still feel the warmth of it. We'd gone to celebrate Daniel's fortieth birthday and it was the perfect setting – such a romantic place. We'd been so happy that now, thinking back, it was hard to believe he'd already met *her*. Nobody would've guessed.

The image threw me back six weeks to that awful day: 'Hannah, I'm leaving you,' he'd said, so matter-of-fact.

I was confused – leaving me what? His Twix? His car keys? 'You're going to work?' I'd asked, without thinking. It was evening but it wasn't unheard of for him to have to go back at night.

He moved around to face me. 'No, Hannah, I'm leaving you for...' Her name hadn't even registered, but I remember it sounding cheap, the name of a woman only a weak man would choose over his dedicated and loving wife.

The rest of that day was a blur. I recalled clinging to him, begging him not to go, and the physical pain I felt when he shrugged me off. When my efforts failed, I'd walked around the house in a daze, silently following him in shock as he packed his things into the large holdall we'd shared just a few weeks before when we'd had a weekend away in The Lake District. He'd stalked around the house, gathering his things with occasional mutterings of 'I'll leave that for you' or 'I can't find my charger; I'll pick it up another time' but he didn't offer me any reason for leaving other than he'd fallen in love.

After he'd left, I'd spent the first few weeks wandering vacantly around a black hole, occasionally bursting into emotion, whether it was anger or floods of tears. I'd ignored everything and everyone, surviving on whatever foods required the minimum effort to prepare and eat: a yoghurt here, a bag of crisps there, or confectionary I was too sad to taste. All washed down with wine, and when that ran out I'd raided the old Christmas stock. Mulled wine I didn't bother to heat, out-of-date Baileys, and whatever else I could lay my hands on.

I'd spent hours dissecting our relationship, looking for clues, but there weren't any. We were financially secure, living in a lovely modern, four-bed detached house, which was complemented by a pair of nice cars on the driveway. We didn't argue about anything of consequence. It wasn't always

easy, juggling the businesses, and the late nights were stressful from time to time, but we helped each other out. We were a team, or so I'd thought.

At some point during those dark weeks, he'd moved out the rest of his belongings. I don't even remember it happening. I'd simply noticed his old running machine had gone from the spare room one day, leaving only an imprint in the carpet just like the one he'd left on my chest.

I imagine I'd been sitting, drunk, in a dark corner when he came, and he'd ignored me as he collected his things. Shirts I'd laundered, the fancy watch I'd bought him, and other possessions that I wished I'd broken out of my haze and vandalized in some way to try and inflict just an ounce of my pain upon him.

So it should have come as no surprise that, after six weeks of wallowing in self-pity, my life lay in tatters around me. But I needed to try and pick myself up, and that's what I was doing. I slapped my coffee cup on the table and stretched out my fingers. Loading up my client database, I struck 'A' to filter the clients by surname, excited to have some focus again. There were fifteen clients whose surnames started with A. *That's a great start.*

I went to dial the first client: Samantha Ackbury. Just before it connected, I hit the red button and slammed the phone down. I didn't know what to say. What if she was angry because the business had just closed? I'd left her in the lurch. I bashed the phone against my forehead. I hated phoning people at the best of times, never mind when it was to beg for business. *But I needed to do this.* Pulling myself together, I straightened my face, raised my eyebrows, and pursed my lips, creating what in my mind, seemed like a confident face. Taking a deep breath, I dialled again.

It rang and rang before going to voicemail. I left a polite message, apologizing for any inconvenience caused by my family emergency and explaining the salon offers I'd decided upon. *That wasn't so bad.* I forced myself to carry on but the rest of the As had similar results, so I moved on to the Bs and then the Cs.

I was beginning to despair, until, finally, a customer answered the phone. A wave of relief washed over me. Kate Davidson was a regular – she came in for microdermabrasion every six weeks without fail. Her account showed she had been in to have the treatment with Amy just over five weeks ago. *Perfect.*

'Mrs Davidson, it's Hannah calling from The Hollywood Hut. I want to apologize for any inconvenience you may have encountered during our recent temporary closure. It was a one-off family emergency and won't happen again. Anyway, I've noticed you're due your usual in the coming week and wondered if you'd like me to get that booked in for you?' I was surprised and glad at how natural it felt to slip back into 'salon Hannah' mode.

'Oh hi, Hannah. Thank you for the reminder but I've already made a booking elsewhere. I'm sorry, I wasn't sure if or when you'd be reopening, and my skin was looking so dull,' she replied. I tried a last-ditch attempt to reel her back.

'That's not a problem. I understand. Just in case you change your mind, I wanted to let you know that microdermabrasion is half price.' I blurted out the last part. It wasn't my planned offer, nor was it a feasible price in the long run, but it was a bloody good deal for a customer at thirty quid. If she declined an offer like that, I had no hope.

'Thanks for letting me know, but I've booked a course of four at Glam Shack – it was only a hundred pounds. Your offer is a great one too, though. I'll definitely consider The Hollywood Hut again in the future.' It was official – I had no hope. I closed the call politely before banging the phone against my forehead once again. It had confirmed what Amy had said: she'd be at Glam Shack a good six months before she'd even consider returning. I couldn't afford to lose my customers for half a year. Jess was right: they'd all gone.

I was alone.

By the end of the week I'd managed to recoup three of my old clients, and the small amount of optimism that generated gave me the courage to let my older sister, Jen, come over. I had an underlying niggles of guilt because after Daniel left, I'd shut her out and I knew she'd be desperate to get in. Jen had been like a parent to me, ever since our real parents were killed in a car accident back when I was eighteen. I still lived at home at the time and Jen, who was only twenty-four herself, did everything she could to make sure I was okay.

Even after I got married, she didn't let go. I was like the child she'd never had. Sometimes she could be suffocating, and the emotion I was feeling had already left me little room to breathe.

She looked nervous when I opened the door, and I forced a small smile of reassurance.

'Hi,' I said. Seeing her familiar face made me want to burst into tears.

She must have noticed my tears start to well. 'Oh, Hannah. Come here.' She gathered me into a hug and I sobbed with relief, comforted by the smell of her familiar Jo Malone perfume.

'Why didn't you let me help you? I've been sick with worry,' she said.

'I just couldn't,' I whispered through sobs. 'I needed time.'

'We can fix this,' she whispered back. 'Whatever you want to do.'

I calmed myself down. It was just so overwhelming, seeing her there. 'Right now, I just want a drink.' I wiped my tears on my sleeve.

Jen rubbed my arm and went into the kitchen. I followed her in and sat on a bar-stool at the island.

'Look at you. You look tired. Are you sleeping properly?' she asked whilst pouring us each a glass of wine.

'Not well,' I admitted.

'And what are you eating?' she said, putting the wine back in the fridge. 'There's nothing in here.'

'I'm managing, Jen. Please, don't fuss.'

She let out a deep sigh and something told me that dropping the subject would be a temporary arrangement. 'So what've you done with yourself this week? I heard you've been out and about.' She pushed my wine towards me.

Oh, the good old village gossip. 'Well, trying to rescue my floundering business has taken up most of my time.' Jen opened her mouth to speak so I continued quickly before she could tell me patronizingly that everything would be okay. 'Amy and Jess left to work at Glam Shack, taking all my customers with them – not on purpose.' I added the last part to prevent the tirade of abuse they'd otherwise receive in their absence.

'Oh, Han, that's the last thing you need. Fancy them ditching you in your hour of need. How long was the shop shut?' She knew full well since she'd have passed it practically every day and I didn't doubt for a second that was the motive behind her daily calls. I was glad I'd ignored her. In my fragile state there was a high chance she'd have reverted to 'mother mode' and I couldn't have coped with that smothering feeling.

'I'm not sure. Three, maybe four weeks. It wasn't their fault. I didn't pay them, and they needed money to live. They have responsibilities. All my regulars needed appointments that I wasn't providing, and that bloody Cherry at Glam Shack used it to her advantage, offering them all deals for multiple treatments. Most of them have paid in advance for treatments that take them right up to the end of spring next year. I don't know what to do. I've lost my share in the market, and the town isn't big enough for two large salons.' I took a long, much-needed drink of wine.

'That's terrible! What a scheming cow Cherry is.' She shook her head for effect.

'If something doesn't drastically change, I'll have to close.' Saying the words out loud shocked me. I wasn't sure what I'd do without the salon.

'Don't say that. We'll think of something.' She drummed her fingers on the table, a look of concentration on her face. Jen couldn't help being a 'fixer'. She was always trying to fix things, to fix me.

‘I know!’ she said suddenly. ‘Tom’s.’

‘What about Tom’s?’ I said, puzzled. Tom owned a fairly large B&B in the village, which often got quite busy with tourists who came to shop on the picturesque cobbled high street or take a stroll down by the river.

‘He’ll be starting to get busy with Christmas stay-over shoppers soon. You could offer treatments to his guests.’

I thought about it. It wasn’t a bad idea. ‘Well, I suppose it’s worth a try.’

We made it to ten-thirty before I called it a night. The warm fuzzy feeling from the alcohol was walking the fine line between tipsy and drunk, and I didn’t want to tip over to the other side. Besides, if Jen felt drunk too, she’d feel brave enough to start on about Daniel and I wasn’t ready to hear her say what an arse he is, was, or whatever. I already knew.

The next morning, I wrapped up in warm clothing and dragged myself down to the B&B at the bottom end of town, to see Tom. Tom was in his early fifties, a tall, skinny fellow with greying black hair. He was a little eccentric but harmless enough.

‘Hello?’ He wagged his finger at me and his eyebrow twitched as if it were connected. ‘Hannah, isn’t it?’

‘It is. Well remembered.’ I took a breath and tried to organize my words. ‘I just popped down because I’ve a business proposition for you, if you’re interested.’

He raised his left eyebrow quickly before narrowing his eyes at me. ‘A business proposition? I’m listening.’

‘I was wondering if it might be mutually beneficial to offer a spa service to your guests. You know, massages, nails, and things like that, at my salon: The Hollywood Hut. I thought it might be a nice option for them and something for you to advertise to attract them.’ I rambled uncomfortably whilst Tom stared at me, holding his chin between his thumb and forefinger. The pause was uncomfortable, and I had to force myself not to carry on talking.

‘It sounds like it could be interesting. Would there be any cost to me?’ I felt a flutter of hope in my chest. He definitely looked as though he was considering it.

‘Not at all. I’ve already got some leaflets printed – just generic ones I had anyway – and the guests will pay for their own treatments. If you just sign or stamp them, I’ll offer a ten per cent discount to anyone staying in the B&B.’

He pursed his lips in consideration. ‘Okay, we can trial it. Guests always get a bit fed up by day two here. People may well extend their stay for a spa thingy.’ He wagged his finger at the bag of leaflets. ‘We’ll trial it through to spring and assess it from there.’

‘Excellent.’ I bent down to take the leaflets out of my shopping bag. ‘Here you go,’ I said, handing them over. ‘You could put them in your guest rooms, even send them out with booking confirmation letters.’

‘Will do. Thanks for stopping by ... Hannah?’

‘Yes. Hannah. Goodbye, Tom.’ With, that he gave a polite smile and closed the door. My body sagged in relief. I doubted the plan would bring much custom, but it was something.

I turned to leave Tom’s, feeling hopeful, when a sight stopped me dead in my tracks. I scurried around the corner, only daring to look when I was safely out of sight.

Daniel.

He wasn’t alone. There was a woman on his arm – *her*. I couldn’t bring myself to look past the flash of long, blonde hair, the complete opposite to my own, which fell shapelessly around my shoulders. I couldn’t bring myself to look any closer at the woman he’d traded me in for. Nausea spread through my body at the thought. I felt humiliated at the memory of happy Hannah, in-love Hannah, gullible Hannah. Carrying on in her own bubble whilst the two of them carried on behind her back Hannah. Everyone pitied me.

He was brazenly parading her around for all to see. How did he have the nerve? The whole village knew what they'd done, and there they were without a care in the world. To the oblivious, they looked like any other couple, wrapped warmly in new woollen scarves and smart coats, smiling and chatting away.

'I still can't get used to the sight of them.' A woman's voice cut into my thoughts. I turned round to see who it was.

'Jean. I was ...'

'Don't explain yourself to me, love.' She patted me on the back. 'It's been what, just four or five weeks since it happened, and he's already flaunting that woman about?'

'Six,' I replied sullenly.

'Six weeks.' She tutted. 'Come and have a cuppa in the café. They won't dare come in there. I've already said my piece.' She patted my shoulder.

'Thanks, Jean. I have a few errands to run but maybe later.' I forced a smile and watched her walk off in the direction of the café. When I was alone again, I allowed myself to slump against the wall, forcing back the tears from my eyes.

When I was sure Daniel had gone, I geared myself up for the walk home, but as I did, my phone shrilled in my pocket. It was a local number, but not one I recognized. I answered it anyway.

'Mrs Davis?'

'Yes?' I asked warily.

'It's Wilfred.' Wilfred worked at the village bank but also served as mine and Daniel's financial adviser. My heart beat a little faster. *Why was he calling me?* 'It's about your mortgage. Now it's probably just an oversight but I wanted to make you aware that you've missed two payments.' Thoughts jumbled around in my head as my cheeks flushed. We'd never missed a mortgage payment before.

'I ... I'm sorry Wilfred, I didn't know. We've had a lot on recently. I can assure you it is just an oversight. We'll get it sorted soon.'

'No problem, Mrs Davis, that's what I thought. You take care now. Goodbye.' He hung up and I slumped against the wall again, my fingers keying frantically at the phone to log in to our joint account. Sure enough, no mortgage payments had gone out because no money had gone in, not since August. It was now October. Daniel had stopped paying in.

I stared at the screen in shock. How could he do this? He must have known I couldn't afford to pay for the house on my own. I jabbed my trembling finger at the screen of my phone, attempting to ring Daniel. When it finally rang, my hand shook as I clenched the phone. For what felt like an eternity, I held my breath. I hadn't picked up the phone to Daniel since he'd left.

After three rings it went to voicemail and I let out a sigh of relief, allowing my whole body to relax. I was able to compose myself enough to leave a message.

'Daniel, it's Hannah. I have some urgent things to go through with you regarding the house. Can you call me back as soon as you can, please.' I hung up and let out a long breath.

I set off for home, keeping my head down as I walked; one sympathetic glance from a well-meaning villager would have been enough to set me back weeks. I dared not think about what a full-on encounter with Daniel and his blonde might do. I scurried across the stone bridge to the other side of the river. The frost had disappeared, leaving the once-crisp autumn leaves at the roadside soggy and limp.

When I neared home my breath caught in my throat. Daniel's car was on the driveway parked next to mine. *That was quick.*

[Chapter Two](#)

The familiar sight taunted me and pounded at my stomach. Apprehensively, I knocked on the window, startling him as he read something on his phone. He held a finger up to indicate he'd be a minute, and for a lingering second, I looked at it – the finger that belonged to a hand that used to

enclose my hand. A hand I'd felt was as much my own as it was his. A hand that now held another hand. A stranger's hand. A hand I had no right to touch any more.

Forcing myself away, I went inside, leaving the door ajar. My forehead started to throb as I held back hot, prickly tears. As I passed the mirror in the hallway, I quickly ran my fingers through my hair, tidying it as much as possible. Something I would never have felt the urge to do in the past, but I wasn't under scrutiny before. I wasn't to be compared to another woman as if I were a card in a game of Top Trumps, and not a particularly great one either. As I reached the kitchen, I sensed him come in behind me, and I turned. My heart stopped as I saw him.

'Daniel.' He looked as handsome as ever. His chestnut hair with the sprinkle of grey that I loved was cut short, the way I liked it. The shock of confusion stung – such familiarity, such homeliness in this man who was now a stranger to me. I wanted to hug him. I wanted to feel him take me in his arms and remember how I was his number one and that he was mine. I stood there, frozen.

'What did you want to go through?' he said coldly, piercing my thoughts. None of the emotion I was experiencing imprinted on him. *How could he not feel it?*

Pulling myself together, I forced out the words with as little feeling as I could manage. 'It's the house, Daniel; we've defaulted on the mortgage.' Even though I wanted to curl up in a ball and sob or beg him to come back to me, I wouldn't allow myself to crumble before him. Not again.

'We?' He raised an eyebrow in surprise. 'Hannah, I moved out. The house is your responsibility. *You* wanted to keep it,' he added, as if it were some kind of favour. It was true. I loved the house and couldn't lose that too.

'Daniel, I can't afford it alone. You must have known that.' I managed to stop a pleading tone from creeping into my voice.

He threw up his arms in exasperation. 'I don't know what you want from me. I gave you the house. I'm paying rent on another place now.' My chest tightened as he spoke, and out of habit, I moved around the breakfast bar towards him. If I could just touch him, maybe I could remind him of what we had. He moved away – the gesture stabbed at my chest.

I couldn't keep it in any longer. I had to get it off my chest, 'Daniel, I've lost my customers because of you. I have no business, because *you* left *me* for another woman and I had to deal with that. I couldn't just carry on like nothing had happened.' My body shook as I fought back the flood of tears. It took the strength of the Hoover Dam, but somehow I managed.

The closer I got, the more he backed away. 'You can't keep blaming me. You need to get a job or whatever. The house is your responsibility if you want to keep it.' *Keep blaming him?* I hadn't even spoken to him. How could he accuse me of that and just disregard our past? Why didn't he care about the house, where all our memories, love, and laughter had absorbed so deeply into the walls that I could feel it as I walked in?

'I ... I need time,' I stuttered, defeated. 'I can't just build my business back up like that – my customers have all gone to Glam Shack and I can't keep afloat waiting for if and when they return,' I pleaded. 'Can't you just help me out for a month or two?'

He checked his watch. 'No, I can't. I'm sorry.' There it was: the apology I'd longed for, only there was no empathy, heart, or sincerity in it. Instead, it reeked of an attempt to shut me up and end the conversation. Like a big, fat full stop. *When did he become so cold?* 'Also, Hannah,' he said, moving towards the door, 'just a heads-up. I've started divorce proceedings. Judging by the pile of post on the worktop over there, you probably aren't aware.' I glanced over to several weeks' worth of unopened mail and spotted a large, thick, cream envelope.

'Right,' was all I could manage, clamping my jaw tightly to suppress its tremor.

The door closed behind him. My body sagged against the kitchen counter, and my tears fell. It was his coldness towards me that had hurt the most, and I couldn't shake the pain. My shoulders bounced uncontrollably as my body synced up with the tears.

By the time I composed myself, the daylight had faded, leaving me wrapped in a murky twilight. It felt comforting – the silence, the darkness, and the solitude – and so I sat for a while. The salty tear residue stung my face and I let it; it was what I deserved for being so worthless.

Eventually, I made it to the cupboard and pulled out an oversized red-wine glass, perfect for breathing ‘they’ say, which was ironic since I could barely manage to. I filled it to the brim with white wine from the fridge and trudged up to the bathroom. When I turned on the light, the stark brightness seared my eyes, momentarily blinding me. The pain brought me back and forced me to run the bath. I added bubbles and lit some candles before turning the light back out. Slowly, I peeled off my clothes, letting them slump to the floor, and slid into the hot soapy water, keeping my glass close by.

I took a long, cold gulp of wine and closed my eyes, letting my head rest on the edge of the bath. I’d suffered a setback. I’d thought I might be ready to start to build my life back up, but that was before I’d seen Daniel. It had been as though he’d just been working away or something. Deep down, I think I’d expected he’d come back with his tail between his legs, begging for my forgiveness. I probably would have forgiven him too, after making him work for it, at least. I wasn’t prepared to see him move on. I wasn’t prepared for him treating me like a nobody.

I woke the next morning in bed, naked under my dressing gown, with an empty wine bottle by my side and no recollection of finishing it or going to bed. Feeling groggy, I contemplated going back to sleep, but as I snuggled back under the duvet the doorbell rang. *Daniel?* I dashed over to the window for a look, but of course it wasn’t him. It was my sister. I thought about ignoring her and going back to bed, but she started hammering on the door and there was a good chance she’d call the emergency services if I didn’t answer.

‘Hannah, open the door. It’s bloody freezing out here,’ she yelled through the letterbox. I groaned and dragged myself downstairs.

‘Morning, Jen,’ I grumbled as I opened the door.

‘Well that’s not a nice way to speak to your sister, especially one who’s just arrived with coffee and pastries.’ She looked me up and down. ‘You look like shit.’

‘Thanks. Listen, Jen, I’m not really in the mood for visitors. I’m probably just going to have a quiet day today,’ I said, barely able to lift my gaze from the floor. I noticed a new pile of mail on the mat so bent down to scoop it up before she had chance to comment.

‘Hannah, what’s happened? You were doing okay the other night.’

‘I can’t talk about it.’ The nausea began its ascent, re-emerging up through my body. Jen lifted a hand to my chin and gently raised it, forcing my eyes to meet hers.

‘Hannah, what’s going on? Come on.’ She took my hand, led me into my immaculate cream lounge, and sat me down on the sofa before placing a hot polystyrene cup in my hand. ‘Drink this,’ she said softly.

I dropped the mail onto the sofa beside me, trying to organize the words in my head and string together a sentence that summed up those few minutes I’d had with Daniel the previous day, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t come up with anything that didn’t sound trivial. I considered the options:

Daniel came round.

Daniel said I should get a job if I can’t afford the house.

Daniel doesn’t care about me any more.

She knew all of that. How could I articulate those few minutes in a way that meant Jen could somehow feel a fraction of the pain I felt, so she’d really understand why I looked like shit, why I didn’t even feel like I had a reason to get out of bed, and why I didn’t want to talk about it?

‘Thanks.’ I lifted the polystyrene cup and took a sip of the hot, bitter liquid. ‘Daniel came over yesterday to talk about the house and stuff,’ I finally managed. I was right – it didn’t sound anywhere near as bad as it felt.

‘Oh, Hannah,’ she soothed. Her brow furrowed in a recognizable attempt at sympathy. ‘How did it go?’

How did it go? Shit, painful, torturous. His words went off like a cluster bomb exploding through my chest, tearing apart my very being, but somehow the glue of utter worthlessness kept me in one piece.

‘Not great,’ I replied. Tears welled in my only-just-dried eyes. She didn’t speak; she just perched on the arm of the sofa next to me and rubbed my back.

‘It will get easier, you know?’ she said gently. I wasn’t sure if I wanted it to get easier, because that would be like committing myself to being alone. I’d be accepting it. I couldn’t do that.

‘How is that any better?’ I snapped.

‘Because you’re young enough to forge another life. Work, relationships – they can be replaced if you want them to be. You don’t have to accept misery and loneliness. You can be happy again.’ *Could I?* Jen’s tone remained calm. If she ever wanted to get a job she’d be brilliant in customer services.

‘It doesn’t feel that way.’

‘Hold on.’ She gave me a small smile and left the room. I took the opportunity to scan the latest pile of letters beside me. Most looked formal, as if they were from banks or solicitors, so I tossed them aside. At the bottom of the pile was a thick brochure of some sort. Curious, I pulled it out, and my eyes fell on a picture of a mammoth white ship in sparkling turquoise waters, next to what looked like a Mediterranean fishing village.

I felt a stab of sadness. I’d always fancied a cruise but Daniel wasn’t keen. I’d requested a brochure hoping it would persuade him to consider one – they had sent them randomly ever since. I stared at the picture. It was beautiful, the colours so bright it looked surreal.

Jen came back into the room with two pains au chocolat on a plate. Instinctively, I slung the brochure onto the coffee table; it was irrelevant anyway. ‘Here.’ She thrust the plate at me. ‘Comfort food.’ I stared down at the plate of stodge, which on any other occasion I’d devour, allowing happy endorphins to dance around my body.

‘I can’t eat,’ I said, shoving the plate away.

‘You have to. It’ll make you feel better. Just take a bite.’ She folded her arms like she wouldn’t take no for an answer. So to please her, I did. I chewed and chewed, but struggled to compact the dough enough to fit around the lump in my throat. When it eventually passed, it hurt. Slowly, it travelled down my oesophagus before landing in the pit of my stomach. I hadn’t even tasted it.

‘I can’t. I just can’t eat right now.’ I handed her the plate and this time she took it.

I knew Jen was only trying to help, but the only thing that would make me feel better would be another bottle or two of wine.

‘I’m going back to bed,’ I snapped. Not waiting for a reply, I stomped up the stairs. ‘You can let yourself out,’ I yelled back down when I reached the top.

As I flung myself face down on the bed, I heard tentative steps approach me. ‘Leave me alone.’

‘No. You’ve been wallowing for long enough; it’s time you got up, got dressed, and got out there. Come on!’

‘You have such an easy life, Jen: a loaded husband, a nice house, and you don’t even have a job. You’ve never experienced pain like I have and just because *you* can’t have kids, doesn’t mean you can mother me, so get out, get out of my house. Now.’ It wasn’t until I stopped, that I realized I was screaming. I looked up quickly enough to see Jen’s eyes fill up and a look on her face I hadn’t seen since ... that fateful day. It was haunting.

‘I haven’t felt pain,’ she repeated, her voice trembling.

‘I didn’t mean ...’ She ran off before I could finish. I flung my face back into the bed as the front door slammed.

I lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling and before I knew it, it was dark. The house was still and quiet once again. My bladder was full, so I dragged myself to the bathroom before heading downstairs

to look for something to drink. I was out of alcohol. I checked the time – it was eight-thirty p.m. If I threw on some clothes I'd make the off-licence before it closed at nine.

I pulled on some tracksuit bottoms and old UGG boots, a sweater, and puffa jacket, not caring what I looked like, before grabbing my purse and heading out the door. I walked quickly towards the high street. The off-licence was the only shop open, lit up like a beacon of hope. Once inside, I grabbed a couple of bottles of red wine, looking only at the price and colour, not caring about the labels.

'Just these please, Judy.' I placed them on the counter, glaring at her, willing her not to ask how I was. The power of telepathy seemed to work, as she smiled and said nothing. I didn't even detect sympathy behind the smile. I almost felt normal.

'That's fifteen ninety-eight,' she said, handing me the wine in a flimsy red and white striped carrier bag.

As I handed her the money, a high-pitched shrill pierced my eardrums.

'Hannah Davis?' I spun to see who the hell would be shrieking my name at this hour, when most villagers would've been snuggled up in front of a fire drinking hot chocolate, if they weren't in the pub. *Cherry*. Her large frame, accentuated by a faux-fur leopard-print coat, almost filled the aisle. I groaned. A conversation with her was the last thing I needed.

'Oh, hello,' I replied shortly.

'Hannah my love, you've been through such a rotten time. I just don't know how you're coping.' She barely took a breath as she swooped over and wrapped her arms around me, embracing me in an unwelcome hug. I coughed, struggling for air as her fuzzy purple hair engulfed my face. I wriggled out of her clutches. 'I see that husband of yours flaunting that tart around and think to myself, what a pig. Us women have to stick together.'

I clenched my jaw. She was utterly unbelievable. It was only then that I realized I'd showcased a super-polite, finely tuned version of myself. Not a façade as such but not my natural state either. I was done with that version. I no longer had any pretence to keep up – the whole damn village knew my business.

'Us women weren't really sticking together when one of us was taking advantage of the other's unfortunate situation by poaching all of her clients, were we?' I ranted, not buying her act for a minute. She feigned a look of horror and clasped her hand to her mouth. It was almost amusing to watch.

'Oh, Hannah, I know you're just snapping like that because you're hurting, love. It's what you've been through.' Judy placed my change on the counter then discreetly left the till area and began tidying shelves that didn't require it.

'Yes, it's funny how losing the business I spent ten years building up turned me into an utter bitch,' I retorted. I forced myself not to gasp at my own reaction. Even Judy looked up because it was so out of character.

'But, sweetheart, nobody knew when you were coming back. Your staff needed paid work; your customers needed maintenance. Some more than others,' she added, with a grimace. 'I just took care of everyone. I can take care of you too. You're a great beautician. Come and work at Glam Shack with us – Amy and Jess would love you to be there. They always talk about you, and with all the growth we've had recently, we could really use a spare pair of hands.'

Is this woman for real? 'Thanks for the generous offer of sacrificing my competitive business for a fraction of the financial reward whilst you reap the benefits, Cherry. It really is big of you, but you know what? You can shove your job up your backside.'

With that, I stormed out. It wasn't until I reached the cold air outside that I realized I was shaking uncontrollably. I was the polite girl everyone loved, not someone who spoke her mind and shouted at someone in the off-licence. The thought of telling Jen made me chuckle until remembered what I'd said to her and a pang of guilt hit me.

I walked briskly on and turned the nearest corner in case Cherry came out and spotted me. When I caught my breath, I found myself outside the small village travel agent's. A poster of a couple embracing on the deck of a ship hung in the window, taunting me. They were dressed elegantly, sipping champagne and laughing. *That should have been me and Daniel.*

I scurried home the long way round, making sure I didn't bump into Cherry again. Once in the sanctuary of my home, I opened the wine as soon as I got into the kitchen, pouring it into the first vessel my hand came across: a decorative wine glass with a glittery '30' emblazoned on it. After a few mouthfuls, I began to calm down.

In a way, I was almost grateful to Cherry – it had felt good to experience rage rather than profound sadness. It reminded me I was a person who mattered. Still, I couldn't believe the cheek of the woman, nor did I know how I'd ever get my life back on track living in the village. Was it too much to ask that things returned to normal? Not that I even knew what 'normal' meant any more, now that I was alone.

I drank some more, and more, and more.

[Chapter Three](#)

'Okay, Tom, slow down.' I couldn't make out a word he was saying; my brain was still foggy from the wine, and my mobile phone reception wasn't brilliant.

'... Some kind of emergency ...' was all I picked up, but there was worry in his tone. Concerned, I went upstairs and perched on the windowsill in order to catch a better signal.

'Sorry, I didn't catch that – what kind of an emergency?' All sorts of thoughts raced through my head: a fire at the B&B, a terrible accident of some sort, some awful feedback about the spa idea ...

'She said nail, a nail emergency. I had no idea how serious these things could be, Hannah. She was waving around your leaflet and said she needed you right away.' Relief washed over me and I chuckled. Poor Tom, he'd been single for as long as I could remember and had no clue about women.

'Ahh, okay. Don't worry; she'll live. I'll be there in half an hour.' It was the first time in a while I'd allowed any humour to penetrate the gloomy fog I'd been living in. It felt almost as good as it did giving Cherry a piece of my mind.

When I arrived at the B&B, Tom led me into the breakfast room with his head bowed and expression grave, seemingly still uncertain as to the severity of the nail injury.

'Oh, thank God!' a thick Geordie accent greeted me as I walked in. A young woman was sitting at a table, waiting for me.

'Hi, I'm Hannah, and you must be ...?' I smiled at the woman, who must have been in her early twenties. She was dressed smartly in a dark suit and had a full face of make-up, with blonde hair scraped back in a neat bun. I wondered if she was an air hostess.

'Cathy. As you can see, my nail has come clean off.' She held out her hand. She had four red talons and a white, rough nail visible on her index finger.

'Acrylic tips. Nothing I can't fix.' I glanced up at Tom, who was hovering nervously with a puzzled look on his face.

'It's a nail extension, Tom, just a false nail that's come off. It's nothing to worry about.' He looked relieved, presumably grateful there wasn't likely to be any claim for damages. He scuttled off and I turned my attention to Cathy.

'So what brings you to Tinbury?' I asked, going into beautician mode.

'Another emergency, like.' I could listen to her accent all day; there was something soothing about it, even though she was clearly in a crisis. 'Me car broke down yesterday. I'm supposed to be in Southampton today for work, and if I don't get there by tomorrow, I'm screwed. Now I've wrecked me manicure, and I'm supposed to look immaculate.'

'What is it you do?' I was curious. Southampton seemed a strange place for an air hostess to be based.

'I'm due to start work on a cruise ship, in guest services; it's my second contract after spending a few months back at home. If I miss that ship, they won't fly me out, and they definitely won't give me another contract.' Her forehead crumpled.

'Where's your car now?' I asked, wondering if there was anything I could do to help.

'It's in the garage. Tom very kindly arranged to have it repaired swiftly. I should have it back in a few hours and then I can get on my way.'

Cathy kept up a steady stream of chatter whilst I buffed and prepped the nail. She told me all about life on board a cruise ship, and despite my despair about my own situation and my red-wine hangover, I found myself smiling. It sounded so exciting.

'Waking up in a different place every morning is just magical. It never gets old either – the itineraries change so much, and so do the staff, including the officers.' She winked animatedly. 'I've been all over the world and got paid to do it!'

'It sounds fantastic. I'd always wanted to go on a cruise holiday but never got around to it. I suppose it's not something single people do,' I added sullenly, placing the acrylic nail over her own and pressing it down.

'Oh, you're way off! Lots of single people do it; with so many staff members looking after you, you'd never feel alone. Or at least that's what the guests say. Last time, I shared a tiny cabin with a snoring dancer and would've killed for some time alone.' She laughed.

'Maybe. I'll need to start earning some money first. I don't exactly have the financial means for luxury travel anymore.' I didn't intend to overshare; she was just so bubbly that I felt I could tell her anything. 'My husband has just left me for another woman so I've been neglecting my business. In fact, you're my first customer of the week.'

Her face fell. 'Oh no, what an arse. I'm sorry to hear that. Do you have kids too?'

'No, we never had any, he ... Daniel never wanted any.' She looked at me with sympathetic doe-like eyes.

After a moment she squealed. 'Oh my God!'

'What?' My eyes shot down to her hands. Had I dripped glue on her skin somewhere?

'You should totally apply to work aboard! They have salons on most ships, you know; most of the big ones have full spa facilities.'

I laughed. She was clearly joking. I couldn't just swan off to work on a cruise ship when I had a business to save. I rummaged in my bag to find a close-matching red nail polish.

'I'm not joking,' she said. 'I'd think about it if I were you. It doesn't sound like you've much to hang around here for. The wages aren't great, but you've got no living costs, and with tips most people manage to save a fair bit. You should at least look into it.'

'Okay, I'll look into it.' I humoured her. Her naivety was sweet. What did she know about running a business, paying a mortgage? She'd barely entered adulthood.

As I walked up the cobbled street towards home, my mind wandered, and soon I was imagining a life at sea, far away from this village and its inhabitants. Because the sensation felt so odd, it took me a minute to realize I was smiling. It was such a silly notion, but pretending to be young and carefree for a few moments wouldn't harm me.

Cathy's cheer was infectious, but once it absorbed into my skin, by contrast, it highlighted something else. Jen's haunted expression the night before. I slid out my phone. There were no missed calls from her, no messages. Nothing. I'd really upset her.

I keyed out a text but it took a few attempts to get it right:

Jen, what I'd said was out of order. Of course I appreciate you. You are everything to me. I love you

Jen, forgive me for my awful outburst. You're all I have.

I love you and I'm sorry

Jen, I'm sorry. My head is in a mess and I shouldn't have taken it out on you.

Hannah

x

Just seconds after I hit send, my phone buzzed to life. Jen.

'Hi,' I answered nervously.

'A text message apology?' she fumed.

'I'm sorry,' I whispered as my breath caught. Jen had been mad at me before, but never mad because of me. My heart felt broken. 'I shouldn't have said those things. I didn't mean them.'

'Words like that don't just come from nowhere. Do you seriously think I see you as the child I never had?' She almost spat the words.

My throat started to ache. 'No.' I swallowed hard.

'You are the one who's always been so naive, Hannah. You've had no life experience and you needed someone looking out for you. If you were some ballsy broad, do you not think I'd have found better things to do?'

I remained silent.

'And as for not feeling any pain, don't you think losing Mum and Dad hurt me? Did you never stop to think how I had to remain strong for you, Hannah, because you fall to pieces if *Emmerdale* is cancelled when the football is on, never mind losing your parents.' She drew a deep breath. 'I was scared of what losing them would do to you.' Her voice trembled as she whispered the last part.

I couldn't speak. The tears burnt my eyes in revenge for being a spoilt, selfish, ungrateful brat. 'I'm sorry,' I whispered eventually.

'Graham and I actually thought about adopting. A while ago now, we wanted a family but I said no, because I didn't know how you'd cope.'

'I didn't know.' My words were barely audible as tears ran down my face. 'You should have; you still could,' I reasoned.

'It's not the point. I'm not blaming you, Hannah. I'm trying to say you are not my substitute, you are my priority.'

I sobbed. I felt so pathetic.

'And I suppose, if I'm honest, I thought I'd be an aunty one day. A cool one – the kind that gives out sweeties when Mummy says no, and buys them their first skateboard.'

I let out a small laugh through the tears. 'I can see how that would make you happy.'

She paused and I'm sure I heard a smile in her tone. 'You have some making up to do, lady.'

'I know – I'll do anything.'

'Okay, then we're going out tonight.'

I groaned inside, but dared not say no. 'Okay, how about that night out we'd always planned in York?' I asked, knowing full well she'd love to.

'You mean the one with the trendy bars and cocktails?'

'The very one.'

'No, it sounds dreadful.' She laughed. 'Of course! I'll book a cab from the Foxglove for half-seven. I'll come to yours at five to.'

As I went into my bedroom to get ready, I almost cancelled. I sat on the bed and took deep breaths, trying to fight the sick, panicky feeling in my throat. What if Daniel and that woman were in the pub? I stomped over to my phone and scrolled to Jen's number. *Stop it.* I forced myself to put the phone back down. I couldn't hide for ever.

I'd never worried about my clothes before. Going out would've required no more deliberation than selecting something that was clean and ironed. Daniel would often suggest a top or dress for me, making it simpler still. Now, staring at myself in the mirrored wardrobe door I wondered why he'd stayed with me for so long. My once-firm figure was a doughy caricature of its former self, dimples

had formed down the sides of my thighs, and my bottom hung a few inches lower than it used to. A squidgy paunch had formed around my belly button, and my breasts drooped, deflated.

How had I not noticed what I'd become? Tears pricked my eyes in response to a pain searing through my chest. The truth was I hadn't needed to notice before because I'd been happy. I'd thought we both were happy.

I dried my puffy eyes and grabbed my faithful navy jeans. *Size twelve*. I couldn't even remember making the transition from size ten to twelve. I wriggled into them, squeezing the zip up. I was glad I'd dared to be trendy by buying a high-waisted style, as it gave me the opportunity to tuck in my love handles, or simply 'handles' as I supposed they'd become. I pulled on a black shoestring vest and picked up a sheer black-and-pink floral shirt to throw on over it.

I felt drab. Normally I'd have colour from a spray tan, which I'd have showcased by wearing something bright, and my hair would usually be styled, but all that maintenance had fallen to the wayside. I ran the straighteners through my hair. The style was outgrown, shapeless, and touching my shoulders, doing nothing to frame my face. I was a sorry excuse for a beautician. I put on some black ankle boots with a small heel and sat on the arm of the sofa in silence, waiting for Jen.

When she arrived she exploded through the door like a firework, all cheery and full of chatter. After the stillness of the house before her arrival, it was a lot to bear.

'Oh my word, Hannah, you look gorgeous!' she shrieked. Okay, that was too OTT to give me even an ounce of confidence, but I was trying to be positive so I smiled.

'Thanks, you look lovely too,' I said, much more calmly.

'So I was thinking, skip the Foxglove and we could head straight into York for some real bars.' She was smiling brightly, her eyes wide. It almost made her look psychotic.

'Jen, relax. It's been six weeks. I have to return to normality at some point, and that involves going in the pub and you being normal. The Foxglove is fine; it'll be nice to see a few familiar faces and besides, it's just for one drink.' My bravery was on the outside only.

'What if *he's* there?' she asked tentatively.

'I have to face him sooner or later. It's a small village and both of our businesses are based here. Neither of us can just up and move away.' I was trying to convince myself as much as Jen.

It was only a five-minute walk to the Foxglove and since it was chilly, we walked as quickly as we could across the newly iced cobbles. It left little room for chatter. The pub was lit up in the dark, cool air, all cosy and welcoming. It almost felt good to be back, almost normal, but with an overwhelming helping of emptiness. Opening the door, I was hit by the cosy warmth, the familiar smell of ale and pub grub. *I can do this*.

It was predictably busy, but there was a small table in the corner, which I pointed out to Jen. 'You go and sit down, and I'll get us a glass of wine,' she said.

I made my way through the crowds, keeping an eye out for the table. That was when my eyes met a familiar homely set. *Daniel*. My heart pounded erratically as I panicked about what to do. I certainly wasn't going to head over to him and provide the villagers with more gossip fodder. I quickly looked away and scurried to the table I'd spotted in the back corner of the pub and sat down, willing Jen to hurry up.

I turned my back to the crowds but after just a few moments, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I knew it wasn't Jen as the bar was two-deep and even she couldn't get served that quickly. I took a deep breath to steady my dizzy head before reluctantly turning around.

My words froze as my dry throat closed up. I stiffened, vaguely aware of my body trembling as adrenaline pumped around it, deafening me as it reached my ears.

'Hannah, hi. There's, erm, someone I think you should probably meet,' he said. I swallowed hard, and it was only then I noticed that *she* was standing beside him. A jolt of pain shot through my chest. I needed a drink – something. Without thinking, I looked down at my bag and started rummaging in it for nothing in particular.

‘Hannah, we’re adults occupying a very small village. We’re going to have to be civil towards one another. Can I ask you to be a little more grown up about this and at least acknowledge us?’ His calm, even tone suggested he was putting on a front for his mistress, making me look like the stereotypical irrational ex. Maybe I did appear irrational, or even childish, but my lack of voice wasn’t for effect. I couldn’t respond. I felt like a rabbit caught between the headlights of Daniel and whatsherface. *Jen, Jen, hurry up, Jen.*

‘Come on, Daniel, let’s go,’ *she* said, placing a well-manicured hand gently on his arm. He turned to her and nodded. I was enraged. He’d started this, and now he was going to go just because *she* told him to? Finally, I managed to pluck up the courage to speak.

‘I’m sorry, Daniel, where are my manners? You took me by surprise, that’s all. Please, take a seat,’ I said in a silvery tone. I gestured to the vacant chairs around the table. *She* glared at Daniel; obviously, she’d expected a less than friendly welcome, and my initial response had played right into her hands. Daniel returned her glare and nervously sat down. I noticed a few of the village eyes had descended upon us but chose to ignore them. ‘To what do I owe the pleasure of this lovely little gathering?’ I said, smiling widely whilst my heart stomped around in my chest like a grounded, moody teenager.

‘I ... I ... er ...’ Finally, Daniel was lost for words and it was a relief to feel like I was gaining the upper hand.

‘Sorry, I didn’t catch that. Why are you here?’ I tried again, almost enjoying watching him squirm.

She spoke. ‘He wanted to introduce me.’

‘Oh, and you are?’ I regarded her for the first time. Of course I knew who she was. I just wanted to make her feel irrelevant. I’d done right to avoid looking at her last time. She was stunning. She was taller than me, and her glossy blonde hair was so long and shiny. Her tight dress showcased an impressively pert chest that looked too large for her small frame. She looked like she came from a Mattel factory. What a weak, shallow fucking bastard he was. He could have at least been original.

‘I’m Kelly.’ She smiled nervously. ‘Daniel’s girlfriend.’ She glanced at him as she spoke.

‘Oh, Kelly, it’s so lovely to meet you,’ I replied with as much cheer as I could summon. ‘I’m Daniel’s wife,’ I added, keeping the smile plastered on my face and holding a hand out across the table, which she shook apprehensively. I struggled to retain my composure, to keep all my pieces from crumbling. I couldn’t let the two of them see what they’d turned me into.

In reality, seeing her, all shiny, polished, and new, made me feel even drabber and frumpier than I had when I was getting ready. I could practically feel the frump grow around my body – each dimple of cellulite popped, my thighs started to bloat and swell, and the heavy saggiess of my breasts wore my chest down. My dull brown hair, which sat at a funny length, my pasty skin underneath the make-up, and my awful drab blouse that didn’t cling to any of the right places suddenly became the only things I could focus on. I wondered what the hell was taking Jen so long.

Finally Daniel spoke, breaking the silence. ‘So, I just thought you two should meet, since we were bound to bump into one another soon.’ He slid his chair back and stood up. Kelly followed.

‘Er, nice to meet you,’ she said hurriedly as they walked off. *At least I managed to unnerve them a bit*, I thought as I let my head slump to the table.

‘Was that...?’ I heard Jen’s voice.

‘Now you arrive.’ I lifted my head. ‘And yes, it was. Kelly she’s called, or bimbo-bitch-face if you prefer. I don’t care.’ I realized I was trembling.

‘Petulance isn’t very becoming, Hannah, definitely not at your age. It’s Daniel who betrayed you, not *her*.’ She cocked her head to the side in sympathy. ‘Although bimbo-bitch-face is probably fairly accurate terminology. What did they want?’

I couldn’t respond.

‘I bet you could do with another. We have time for a shot before the cab arrives,’ she said hopefully.

‘Actually, Jen, can you cancel the cab? I’m not feeling up to it. I’m really sorry but could we just go back to mine? We can watch *Friends* DVDs and eat junk.’ I’d used all of my energy on those two and quite fancied feeling frumpy and drab in private.

‘Of course,’ she said, her eyes filled with sympathy.

We walked back to my house arm in arm, stopping for supplies on the way. I started filling Jen in on my encounter with Cathy the cruise ship worker, to take my mind off Daniel.

‘That sounds amazing. If only I had a skill or talent that would get me a job on board,’ she mused. I wasn’t biting. Jen was the type of person who went on cruises, not worked on them. I knew what she was doing and, since speaking to Cathy, I’d thought about it too.

When we arrived, Jen went off to the kitchen to put everything out whilst I went upstairs to change into my pyjamas. I went into the en suite and sat down on the closed toilet lid, allowing my whole body to sag. Then I cried again. My tears were a cocktail of pain, rage, and humiliation. I wasn’t sure how I could face going out in the village again. My funds were dangerously low, and if work didn’t miraculously pick up soon there was a chance I’d lose everything I had left.

I had to keep going, pick myself up, and move on for the sake of my sanity, but how? I had no idea. I dried my eyes, got changed, and went downstairs to the lounge, where Jen had laid out a spread of Haribo, Doritos, and Heroes.

‘That’s a very sophisticated-looking buffet, Jen,’ I teased, going straight for the chocolate.

We managed to watch a good three episodes of *Friends* before Jen started.

‘So, why not get away from the village for a little while? It doesn’t have to be the cruise ship – just a holiday or something, a break.’

‘Because everything I have is here. I can’t just leave for a holiday whilst my business is in such a state. I can’t afford to anyway and I couldn’t go and work on a cruise ship. My life is here.’ I folded my arms across my body defensively.

‘But is it, really? I think it’s fair to say your life *was* here. There’s not all that much left, aside from your fabulous sister, of course.’ I looked at her for a moment, thinking about what she was saying. Did the rest of the village wonder why I was still hanging around? The embarrassment I already felt stepped up a notch at the thought of everyone pitying me and what was left of my life.

‘Is that what you think I should do? Leave?’ I asked.

‘I just think that you don’t get many opportunities in life where you can just up and leave, especially as you get older. This just seems like you’ve got a VIP pass.’

I paused to think about it.

‘Well at least let’s have a look into it,’ she coaxed.

‘Fine, I’ll humour you.’ I stomped over to grab my laptop. ‘You go and get more wine.’

By the time she returned I’d booted up the laptop and found a few webpages with helpful information, including the website of a company that operated on-board spas.

To be honest, it did look quite exciting – the oceanic setting, visiting new places whilst doing the job I’d always loved.

‘You’re grinning,’ Jen said. She’d caught me.

‘Okay, yes. I’m grinning. It does look pretty amazing. Take a look.’ I slid the laptop down the table so she could see for herself. She spent a few moments scanning the screen.

‘Oh, Hannah, just go for it. What have you got to lose? Look, there’s an option to request more information.’ Her fingers flew over the keys, and she looked up at me sheepishly. ‘Whoops, I’ve requested it.’

[Chapter Four](#)

‘Sell the house?’ I slumped back in the chair and glared at Wilfred’s ruddy face. When I’d called for advice, I was hoping he’d talk through options that would enable me to keep my home and business.

‘You need to rebuild your business to be able to afford your house, and looking through these figures, you’re quite a way off.’ He plonked a pile of paperwork on the desk. ‘You could sell off your business, but it won’t fetch much, and when that money runs out, you won’t have the income needed to be able to afford the house. My best advice is to sell the house, use the proceeds to supplement your income until your business builds back up, and rent a small flat. You may even need a part-time job in the meantime.’ Wilfred let out a deep sigh. ‘I’m sorry, Hannah. I know you’ve been through the ringer and that’s not what you wanted to hear.’

I stomped out of his office and headed down the high street towards the hairdresser’s. It felt like I was on the AGV Italo to failure, desperate to get off – I was no longer in control. The only thing I felt I could take any charge of was my shapeless bob. I popped in on the off chance they could squeeze me in and luckily Sheila came to the rescue.

‘Of course, Hannah, after what you’ve ...’ I held up a finger to cut the well-meaning hairdresser off.

‘I’m moving on,’ I said defiantly. ‘But I’m going to need new hair to do it.’ I grinned.

‘Good girl,’ Sheila said, patting my shoulder whilst guiding me to the chair. ‘So, what are we doing today?’

‘I was thinking a few highlights to brighten it a little and a bit of shape cutting back in?’

‘You’re in good hands,’ she said placing an apron around me.

Soon, she was painting colour on my hair. The familiar tingling sensation on my scalp felt good. A trip to the salon was long overdue.

‘Olivia over there,’ Sheila said, nodding towards a young girl sweeping up, ‘she’s just had the worst date ever, you know.’

‘It was the worst date ever. He took me to McDonald’s and we didn’t even eat in,’ Olivia said sulkily. ‘Anyway, I told him, if he wanted to get a girl like me on a second date that he should reconsider his restaurant of choice. Another one bites the dust.’ She shrugged.

I laughed. It felt good. I admired how people had the strength to stick up for themselves and move on. When I was her age, I’d have probably felt flattered that someone wanted to buy me McDonald’s.

Absorbing some of her attitude I said, ‘Hey, you know. I never did get revenge on Daniel. Maybe I should have done more to pay him back.’

Of course I was joking, but Sheila jumped in almost too quickly: ‘Ooh, I would have. Burnt his clothes perhaps? Packed him up a box of embarrassing belongings – you know, like haemorrhoid cream or something for jock itch – and sent them over to his new place or his office marked “important”. Or made him jealous by hiring a gorgeous male escort to take me to the pub whilst looking fabulous.’ She cackled.

‘You’ve put a lot of thought into this for a happily married woman, Sheila,’ I replied with amusement.

Sheila ran her fingers through my hair, eyeing the shape with a grin. ‘Preparation is key, my dear. Now sit tight, I’m going to run the curling wand through this – the wavy bob is so in at the moment.’

‘Personally, I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of showing you care,’ Olivia chipped in.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

‘When I’ve split up with guys in the past, I’ve always just acted like I didn’t care. It always drives them mad to see me having fun, and always brings them back begging.’ She smiled smugly. It wasn’t such a bad idea.

Sheila teased the finished waves and added a bit of hairspray. ‘What do you think?’ she said proudly, holding a mirror behind me. My mouth dropped open. I looked like a celebrity.

‘I think I need you to move in with me and be my personal stylist. I love it.’ I swished my head from side to side to get a better look. ‘Thank you, Sheila. It’s just what I needed.’

‘And it’s on me,’ she said, smiling warmly. ‘Now get over to your salon and whack some make-up on. It’s quiz night tonight in the Foxglove, and you know who’ll be there don’t you?’

I gulped. ‘I can’t accept a freebie, Sheila,’ I protested. My precarious financial situation must have been the new village gossip.

‘You can and you will. I’ve been dying to do something different with your hair for years and now you look amazing – you’ll really make Daniel think twice when he sees you tonight.’

‘Well that’s very kind, but facing those two again is not something I want to do any time soon.’

‘You can do it. We’ll be in there at seven – have one drink with us, and book a taxi to take you somewhere nice at half-seven, just before the quiz starts. He’ll walk in as you’re leaving looking fabulous and wonder what he’s missing. We could even book you that male escort.’ She winked.

‘No thank you to the male escort – Tinbury isn’t ready for that.’ I shook my head at the silly idea.

I arrived home fully anticipating a night in front of the TV with a Chinese takeaway, but as I walked in I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror. My hair looked gorgeous; it was just how all the celebrities were wearing it. It made me wonder what Daniel would think – he always loved a new hairstyle or colour on me, or new clothes. *Perhaps ‘loves change’ should have been a warning sign.*

I shook my head, but my inner voice had a point. Maybe we had been stuck in a rut. Maybe something like this would wow him. I spent most of my time with my hair out of the way in a ponytail or bun depending on its length (getting wax in your hair is an occupational hazard), and despite the fake tan and the LVL Eyelashes, I probably did always look a bit samey.

After pouring a glass of wine, I headed upstairs to my dressing table. I spent a bit of time on some extra-special smoky eyes and nude lips, and slithered into a red dress I’d owned since I was about twenty-six and worn once. Trying it on was ambitious, but, to my surprise, it still fit. That fact alone excited me so much I decided to meet Sheila for a drink after all.

I marched into the pub feeling more confident than ever and spotted Sheila and Olivia straight away. Olivia’s eyes lit up as I walked over.

‘Wow, you’re slaying it for an older person.’ *Slaying it?* Olivia looked a bit sheepish. ‘Sorry, I was just trying out the phrase but it sounds weird in a Yorkshire accent. I think it reads better on a Kardashian’s Instagram post.’ She giggled, apparently less concerned about the ‘older person’ comment.

‘Er, thanks,’ I said, sitting down in the spare seat opposite her.

‘You look stunning, love,’ Sheila said. She lowered her voice. ‘Did you book a cab?’

‘Yes,’ I replied, suddenly feeling a bit foolish. Sheila didn’t reply. She simply took the wine bottle out of the cooler and filled the third glass that was already on the table. *She knew I’d come.* I wondered if Sheila had been scorned in the past.

Sheila spent the next ten minutes chatting about the roadworks on the A19 and the latest drama on ITV. Occasionally Olivia would look up from her phone and chime in, surprising us each time because it didn’t appear that she was paying any attention.

As it approached seven-thirty, there was no sign of Daniel – much to my relief. I downed the last of my drink and gathered my coat and bag. ‘Right, my cab is due so I’m going to head off.’

‘It’s only twenty-five past. You’ll just be standing out in the cold,’ Sheila said. My chest tightened a little in panic. I wanted to leave, not because Daniel didn’t show, but because there was a chance he still might. I didn’t want him to see me looking ridiculously overdone in my bright, ten-year-old beacon of a dress.

‘Daniel is always early,’ I lied, standing up and putting on my coat. ‘Thanks for today, I really appreciate it.’ I darted towards the door, each step closer chipped away at my panic. I stepped outside, and my sigh of relief caught fast in my throat. *Them.* She looked immaculate in her perfectly fitted jeans, white shirt, and barely there make-up. Her thick hair was blow-dried straight; it looked natural, unlike that over-straightened look. She reminded me of a thoroughbred racehorse.

‘Hannah?’ Daniel’s surprised tone was matched with a double eyebrow raise. ‘You look ...’ he stopped himself from whatever he was about to say ‘... different.’

My heart sank. It was a damp squib of a reaction at best. *I* was a damp squib at best. For all the effort I’d put in, I still paled into insignificance when compared to *her*, and I’d wasted valuable Smashbox primer doing it.

Luckily, at that moment my taxi pulled up. Knowing I had a getaway gave me the strength I needed to pull myself together and speak without my voice breaking.

I set off to walk past. ‘My cab is here. I should go,’ I replied as coolly as I could manage.

‘Off out, are you?’ He raised an eyebrow.

‘Yes, I’m meeting somebody,’ I lied, somewhat surprised at his interest.

‘Oh,’ he muttered. ‘Well, er, stay safe.’ *Stay safe?* Infuriatingly, *she*, seemingly secure in her bubble of gorgeousness, didn’t seem at all bothered by the exchange as she stood waiting patiently at the door.

‘I’ll manage. Bye, Daniel and Keeley, is it?’ I knew it was Kelly – I was just feeling very, very bitchy. Without waiting for a reply, I hopped in the cab.

‘Where to, love?’ the chirpy driver asked.

‘I don’t know,’ I replied sullenly. ‘Just anywhere away from this village.’ I sat back and stared out of the window. ‘Somewhere with a chip shop, perhaps?’

Twenty minutes later I sat, looking somewhat overdressed, in a fish and chip shop in Knaresborough, picking at the batter on my fish and wondering what the hell I was doing with my life. An outsider looking in may have even mistaken me for a life-sized bottle of ketchup.

I was heading for divorce, about to lose my home, and my business had all but fallen down the pan. Yet there I was, parading around trying to make someone jealous who didn’t want me anyway, and actually, didn’t even bloody deserve me. *I’m an idiot*. Jen was right: my life wasn’t in the village. I didn’t have a bloody life any more. I threw my half-eaten food in the bin and called a cab. *Maybe it was time to leave Tinbury after all*.

When I got home, my first thought was the big padded envelope on the side. Giving him his divorce would be just the first step in the moving-on-and-focusing-on-Hannah phase. I grabbed it from the pile, which had grown somewhat since I’d last checked. Sitting down, I tore open the envelope and slid out the glossy pack. It wasn’t divorce papers. The sapphire and turquoise cover was broken by the pointy white hull of a grand-looking ship. *The information pack*. I opened it up; it was full of information about working in an on-board spa. A typical working day, places you’d visit and testimonials – it was all as Cathy described.

As I flicked through the enticing pages, thoughts of divorce papers dissolved as I contemplated applying. Could I really do it? I wasn’t sure whether it was a perfect idea or a ridiculous one. I could at least apply, I reasoned. I fired up my laptop and filled in the online application. *Screw it – I’m doing it!*

My solicitor had said the divorce shouldn’t be too tricky. Other than the house, most of our assets were already *his and hers*. We’d agreed that I would keep the house and Daniel had the good grace to agree that the mortgage repayments he’d made over the years, essentially covered his ‘rent’ for living there at the time and, as such, he was happy to decline a buyout, which was just as well since I couldn’t afford one. There was little equity in the property anyway as we’d remortgaged it a few years back to pay for an expansion at Daniel’s shop, so I could have argued he’d already taken his share of the equity had I have needed to.

It was a bizarre feeling, to talk about our marriage like some kind of business deal. There was no emotion in the process from Daniel’s nor the solicitor’s point of view, which in some way helped me with my composure. Every now and then, though, an item would be dryly mentioned, like his car – a sporty Audi A5 that of course he would keep. But it wasn’t just a car was it? It was the car in which *we’d* travelled together, the car in which *we’d* kissed and on a few occasions, gone a little

bit further. It hurt to think of it as just a car, or just a house or just a running machine when they were all so much more. The meeting confirmed once more that I had to leave the village – it was suffocating and I needed some time away.

I returned home bone-tired and scooped up the mail on the way in. It was mostly bills of course, but one plain envelope stood out. My fingers trembled as I tore it open. It was a feeling not too dissimilar to the one I had when I'd finally opened my initial divorce papers just a few weeks before. Once I'd yanked the thick cream paper from the envelope, I scanned it quickly for the news I'd been waiting for.

We are pleased to offer you the job of on-board beauty therapist.

I felt lightness in my chest and had to control my breathing, taking deep breaths in and out. Then I read the paragraph again but slowly that time.

We are pleased to offer you the job of on-board beauty therapist. There will be a compulsory six-week training course to attend prior to your embarkation. Please see the attached for details.

My head spun. Everything I'd been through over the past few months cycled around: Daniel, my salon, my house, and then this – the first piece of good news I'd had since I could remember. I sniffed, but it wasn't enough. Frustration, sadness, and happiness burst out at once and I found myself heaving tears from the pit of my stomach.

I'd had many ups and downs, with Jen driving me to the interview in Leeds herself because she was sure I'd chicken out. I almost did as I sat there wedged into my smart Next dress. I'd eyed up the competition nervously, all of whom appeared younger and more confident than me. Two candidates went in before me and then it was my turn. Standing up to walk in, I tugged at my dress. It felt somewhat shorter than it did when Jen had coaxed me into it, and far too tight around the bust. Jen said it had looked fine; it didn't seem fine.

'Mrs Davis, take a seat.' A woman dressed in a smart grey suit smiled politely and gestured to a chair positioned in front of three other chairs where another woman and a man were sat, wearing blank expressions. I swallowed hard. I'd never been interviewed by a panel before. I sat down and clasped my hands together on my lap to avoid: a) visible trembling and b) flapping them about like a crazy person.

The questions were straightforward enough: 'talk us through your salon experience,' 'where did you qualify?' and so on until the final question, which stumped me. 'How do you think you'll cope being away from home for nine months?' I flipped through my brain like a teenager in the Eighties going through a Filofax searching for her crush's number. I came up with two options:

- Confess all, let these people know I was cast aside like garbage, that I'd lost everything and was clinging to this job opportunity in a last-ditch attempt to regain some sanity and dignity.
- Give a normal-person answer.

'I admit it will be tricky at times but I'm sure working hard and enjoying what the ship has to offer will keep me occupied. Running my own business often meant I didn't see family and friends much but having the clients to talk to helped ensure I never really felt it. I've read in the literature that Wi-Fi is available to employees so email and video chat would be an option,' I replied politely and added a low-key smile at the end, in the hope it came across that being away would be just a small matter to me.

They seemed pretty satisfied with my answer and asked if I had any further questions before telling me they'd be in touch. That was that. After all the build-up, being dragged around shops in York by Jen, and researching the company and role, the interview was over. I let my shoulders sag when I closed the door behind me.

It seemed such a distant memory as I sat there holding the acceptance letter. *I'd done it!* I allowed myself a smile, whilst simultaneously the last of my tears escaped and slowly crawled down my cheeks. My first thought was to tell Jen. I put the phone to my ear and it seemed to take ages to connect.

‘Jen, guess what?’ I screamed as soon as I heard it connect.

‘Aggh, I thought only young people and dogs could hear that frequency.’

‘Very funny. Anyway, Jen, I have some news.’

‘Well I haven’t heard you this excited since you got tickets to see Backstreet Boys in nineteen-ninety-seven so it must be good,’ she said dryly.

‘Jen, I got the job!’

‘What? The cruise job?’

‘Yup.’

‘Oh my God, Hannah, that’s amazing. When do you start?’

‘There isn’t much notice. I have to go to Reading next week for training. I’ll be there six weeks, then as soon as I’m done, I’ll have a few days at home to pack then I’ll be flown over to Miami to board the ship.’

Jen gasped. ‘It’s so soon.’

‘I know. I haven’t even sorted anything out with the house. I assumed there would be more notice.’

‘We’ll sort something out.’ She said, reassuringly.

Over the course of the week I’d started to get my affairs in order. I’d sublet the salon space to Graham for storage, which just about covered the rent, and Jen had arranged for an agent to come and photograph the house with a view to letting it out. The agency had said family properties in the area were in high demand and I shouldn’t have a problem letting the place.

The night before I was due to head down to Reading, Jen came over.

‘I thought we should have a little celebration or something,’ she said when I answered the door.

‘I’m too busy to celebrate! Do you think I’ll need anything dressy for training?’ I said holding up my old red dress.

‘I doubt it – just a few nice tops to wear with jeans in case you all go for a drink at night,’ she replied. ‘Don’t you fancy a drink at the pub?’ she asked.

‘Not really.’

‘Please, Hannah, just one.’ She held her hands pleadingly clasped together.

‘Fine, but then you have to help me pack!’

Fifteen minutes later we were walking into the Foxglove. The butterflies I’d experienced the last couple of times I’d walked in had fluttered off, leaving me with an unnerving sense of calm. Probably because I knew it would be my last visit in a while.

As I crossed the threshold, I was startled by a huge cheer of ‘surprise’. Jean, Sheila, Olivia, Amy, and Jess were all sat around a couple of tables that had been pulled together and united with a ‘Bon Voyage’ banner. I felt my cheeks flush; being the centre of attention wasn’t my thing.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ I said once the shock had simmered down. I felt Jen’s reassuring hand on my back.

‘Sit down and grab a glass,’ Sheila said, pulling out a chair.

‘It wasn’t my idea,’ Jen whispered in my ear as I went to sit down.

‘Hannah, I just have to say how excited we all are for you, love.’ Jean filled a glass with Prosecco and pushed it across the table towards me.

‘Thanks Jean,’ I said, taking a sip.

‘You’re so brave,’ Olivia said. ‘I can’t even imagine working on a ship after watching that film – *Titanic*. One iceberg and it’s game over. You’d think a big ship like that would have just shunted the ice out of the way or that the ship would have managed to make it to New York even though it had taken on a bit of water – you know, so it still had all the drama but a happy ending too,’ she continued, wearing a concerned expression. I wondered if she knew that the *Titanic* was a real tragedy and not just a film. I suspected she didn’t.

‘There won’t be any icebergs where she’s going,’ Sheila reassured her, purposely avoiding the more worrying issue at hand, I supposed.

‘We’ll miss you,’ Amy said. ‘Working with Cherry is awful. She’s lazy and does nothing but gives us a bollocking if one tiny thing gets overlooked.’

‘She shouted at me for not washing the towels when it was *her* week to do it,’ Jess butted in.

‘I think you’ve been spoilt by having a wonderful boss like me,’ I joked. Though Cherry was evidently a cow.

After a few more glasses of Prosecco, I’d started to enjoy myself and feel excited about my new life when Jen announced it was time to go.

‘But I’m having fun,’ I protested drunkenly.

‘I know, but if you miss your train tomorrow or feel like crap in the morning it will be my fault so I’m stepping in,’ she said sternly. Childishly, I pulled a face to Jess and Amy who giggled, then I stood up, using the back of the chair to steady myself. Everyone stood to wish me luck and hug me goodbye. Jen helped me wriggle into my coat and as we turned to leave, those familiar eyes pierced mine.

‘Bon voyage,’ he said slowly, reading the sign. ‘Who’s leaving?’ I felt the drunken, muddled thoughts in my head assemble like the North Korean military. Now was my time to show Daniel I was moving on.

‘That would be me,’ I said in what I thought was a smug fashion but in hindsight could have come out with the same elegant conviction as ‘Oh Danny Boy’ sung by a drunk uncle at a wedding.

He regarded me with wide eyes and I relished his shock, thrilled to have finally made him feel something.

That was all I could remember when I woke up the next morning. I was dehydrated and tired when my alarm went off before I remembered how important the day was. I was going to Reading to start my new life. I dived out of bed, remembering I hadn’t packed, but as I darted for the ensuite, I stumbled over my heavy-stuffed holdall. Bending down, I unzipped the bag slowly, catching sight of the red dress I’d shown Jen the previous night. There was a piece of paper stuffed inside the neckline that read:

Just in case.

J

X

I smiled, filled with love for Jen. Realizing I no longer needed to pack, I gave myself twenty minutes to enjoy a cup of coffee. As the rich, dark liquid filled my veins, I started to feel human again and thoughts of Daniel came whooshing back. Having finally gained the upper hand felt good and I knew I had because I recognized that expression on his face. Me leaving was not in his plan; it bothered him, which meant he still cared.

A flutter of excitement tickled my chest as thoughts of him turning up and begging me to stay filled my mind. He was probably too stubborn to do that but hopefully my six weeks away would hit home and when I returned, he’d realize how much he’d missed me and he’d be unable to imagine a whole nine months without me. It would be my movie-style happy ending.

As I contemplated how long I’d let him stew for, the doorbell rang. My breath caught fast in my throat. Could this be it? I flipped my phone camera to selfie mode to quickly check my appearance. It wasn’t great but it didn’t matter – I had the upper hand.

I walked to the door, trying to be casual but of course overthinking it meant it wasn’t at all casual. When I arrived, I took a deep breath and swung it open.

‘Jen,’ I said, feeling instantly deflated.

‘Oh it’s good to see you too!’ she said, barging past me. ‘Did you not notice I’d packed your bag for you? And that I’m here at eight-thirty on a Sunday morning to drive you to the train station?’ she ranted.

‘Sorry, and thank you for the bag packing. I really am grateful.’

She folded her arms. ‘Hmmm.’

‘Jen, I’ve been thinking. Maybe I shouldn’t go today?’

‘What? Why?’ she said, her eyes popping.

‘I just think, last night I might have got through to Daniel and really made him regret leaving me.’

‘What? How on earth did you get that impression from that brief chat?’ she said, in a tone that suggested she thought I was bordering on crazy.

‘I know him, Jen. I know that look in his eyes – he was scared of me leaving.’

‘Hannah, honey.’ She softened her tone. ‘If he thought that, where is he? Surely he would be here, telling you how he feels.’

‘I think he will come,’ I said defiantly. Jen opened her mouth to speak before clamping it shut again. There was no point in her arguing with me so I continued. ‘I’m going to get ready – when he does come, I need to look like I seriously am going.’ With that, I went upstairs to get ready. Jen didn’t follow.

When I came back down, Jen was sat waiting on the arm of the sofa. ‘So, are you going to Reading or not?’ she asked.

Obviously, Daniel hadn’t turned up but it didn’t matter. The seed had been planted and maybe six weeks away would nurture that seed a little. Plus, if I cancelled, I’d have six weeks of Jen to listen to. ‘Yes. I’m going.’

Once in the car, I almost backed out again. Protesting to Jen how ridiculous it was to have to train for six weeks when I’d run my own salon for ten years. ‘You’re learning how to use the specific products, Hannah; don’t be ridiculous,’ she said. I didn’t know why I was so reluctant to go. I’d felt so excited about it. Perhaps it was sensing a chance with Daniel, or feeling scared about the whole new adventure, or maybe I didn’t really want to leave Jen.

After more reassurance from Jen (a whole hour of the journey to Leeds station in fact), I made it onto the train.

On track for my fresh start.

[Chapter Five](#)

It was a wonderful sight. The moment my eyes set upon the magnificent ship, small eruptions of nerves and excitement exploded throughout my stomach. Getting there had been a different story. I’d had so many ups and downs in the last days of being in the village that I’d practically done the Three Peaks Challenge on a daily loop.

I’d left training feeling like a massive data dump was crushing my brain. From the moment I’d arrived and been greeted by the immaculate, ageless woman who managed the course it had been intense, with long days and sleepless nights. There’d been no time for socializing, which had suited me fine because I was exhausted by the end of each day. Most of the salon stuff I was fine with but there were so many rules on board the ship, I was bound to accidentally break one. I’d left feeling more nervous than I had before the training.

I’d spent most of the nights at the training camp thinking about Daniel, and returned to the village convinced he’d come back to me. He didn’t of course. He wasn’t even there. He’d taken *her* to Paris for a long weekend and the village rumours were that he was planning to propose. The news made me sick. Not only did that dampen my dreams, I’d also returned to find Jen had cleared out my house. The agents had been right and they’d found tenants in just a couple of weeks. By the time I’d returned, they’d already moved in and all my belongings were residing in Jen’s barn. I no longer had a home. I felt like a Love Island contestant, evicted from the village for being single.

With trains and a shopping trip to Leeds factored in, I only spent one day in Tinbury and as I was staying with Jen, managed to avoid seeing anyone, which suited me fine. More sympathetic glances were the last thing I needed. The only person I had wanted to see wasn’t there. If only I’d

have had the chance to speak to him. If only he'd watched me leave I was sure he would have doubted his choice.— I was sure of it. So sure in fact, that I'd even looked at ways to defer my contract. In the end, Jen had to get quite tough with me.

'You're going on the ship and you will forget about that waste of space. He doesn't love you any more and he doesn't deserve you,' she said. By the time she dropped me off at the airport she was fed up with me. She practically frog-marched me to the security gate and all but yelled at customs that I was an illegal alien who must be sent back to Miami.

'You drive me mad but I'll miss you,' she said pulling me into a tight squeeze at the security gate. When she pulled away, tears glinted in her eyes.

'I'll miss you too,' I whispered to steady my voice.

'You have everything don't you? All your documents? Your passport?'

I nodded. 'Stop fretting.'

She smiled. 'Remember some countries aren't safe for you to just wander around in, Han. Stick to the tours and groups.'

'I will.'

'And Skype me – as much as you can.'

'You could always visit me you know.'

'And cramp your style?' She grinned. 'Now go, before you miss your flight. I love you.'

I sniffed, hugging her again. Pulling away was hard. The invisible glue holding us together wasn't cheap PVA, it was No More Nails strength stuff and it was bonded to my heart. 'Love you too.'

Once I'd boarded the flight and there was no turning back, I allowed myself to relax, helped by a glass of wine or two in the departure lounge. Excitement even set in. I'd never flown alone before so flying out to Miami was a big deal. The poor old man sitting next to me didn't even get a chance to watch his film because I chatted the whole way there in a bid to stay calm. By the end of the flight he knew all about Daniel and Kelly, Cherry, my interview, and where I was going.

I shook my head, clearing it of the past, and refocused on the ship. I was there to move forward. *My new home*. I looked up in awe. I don't know what I was expecting. I supposed I'd only experienced ferries before, but the *Requiescence* cruise ship, at almost two hundred thousand tonnes, was something else. When it was full, the on-board population size was comparative to Tinbury but at least I wouldn't be the topic of conversation.

I couldn't wait to board and explore. As I entered the cruise terminal I was greeted by two cheerful American ladies from HR who checked my details and documentation. I was then directed through security – it was just like being at the airport, except a tad more challenging due to the full-sized suitcase I was hauling after me.

Once on board, the new arrivals (like me) were shown to our cabins, but we barely had chance to glance around them before we were whisked off for a full day of safety drills and orientation. It felt like the first day of college as I walked anxiously into the ship's theatre and sat down. The cruise director – dressed formally in his white officer's suit – began to speak, and I tried my best to listen intently.

There were all kinds of rules and regulations to take in. We'd covered a lot of it at training academy, but regardless of that I sat up straight in my seat, trying to focus on what the cruise director had to say. There was so much information that my head was in a spin.

'... Staff are not to form personal relationships with any of the guests. Any breach of this rule will result in instant dismissal.' I stifled a snort. His suddenly sharp tone had got my attention, but that was definitely one rule I didn't have to worry about. Romance was the furthest thing from my mind. I wanted to earn some money, see new places, and relax in the sun when I had some free time. I was still convinced Daniel would see the error of his ways. Absence makes the heart grow fonder after all.

A plump woman wearing a black tunic approached me. She looked to be aged around forty. 'Are you Hannah, my new beautician?' She sighed, looking me over.

‘Er, yes?’ I said taken aback by her stand-offish tone.

‘I’m Marion, the spa manager. Follow me.’ She strode off, and I scurried behind, trying to keep up as she rattled off a stream of information about the spa and her experience without looking back at me once. She too had just arrived on the ship but had been managing on-board spas for years.

‘Here we are.’ She stopped and pushed open the glass door in front of us. I walked in and looked around in disbelief. The on-board spa was huge enough to rival anything I’d seen on the mainland. There were four treatment rooms, a Jacuzzi, and a relaxation area, as well as two nail stations and pedicure chairs. The reception was opulent, with a marble-effect floor and tall counter, and behind it stood a tall pale woman with cropped black hair. She was called Agne, and was our receptionist from Lithuania. Vases of lilies here and there gave the whole place a welcoming feel. I was amazed by the facilities.

By the time I’d been fully inducted into the spa, my feet were aching and my mind was a blur. Marion invited me for a drink in the crew bar, but all I could think about was going to bed. I wandered through the corridors of my new home, heading for my cabin, and despite my exhaustion, felt a shiver of excitement. *Life at sea, here I come!*

There were two bunks, a small desk area with a telephone and kettle on top, and a TV on the wall. There was a private bathroom and the luxury of affordable Wi-Fi. I dotted a few pictures above my headboard to make it feel more homely; most were of me and Jen, plus one of the Yorkshire Dales and an old one of my parents that was creased and faded. Jen had taken it on holiday in Spain a few years before the accident. They were both tanned with broad, white shining smiles that reached their eyes easily. Dad’s arm was wrapped tightly around Mum’s waist, pulling her in close. Their love for one another was almost tangible.

I wiped a stray tear from the corner of my eye and scanned the room again, to clear my thoughts. My roommate hadn’t yet moved in, and it was nice to have the cabin to myself for the night whilst I grew accustomed to my new life. I’d taken the top bunk hoping my new roommate wouldn’t mind but fully prepared to switch if she did. I at least knew it would be a she since the cabins were single-sex, but that was all I knew.

The next morning I got up and got dressed in my uniform of black tunic and trousers. As I stared at my reflection in the full-length mirror I almost felt like my old self: ‘salon Hannah’. I took a deep breath and made my way to the spa. That particular day was a port clean, meaning we had to clean our areas thoroughly, ready for the arrival of guests the following day. It meant an easier introduction to the job and chance to meet the team.

‘Hiya, you must be Hannah?’ said a pretty dark-haired girl, who was also wearing the spa tunic, as I walked in. She appeared to be in her early twenties and it was comforting to hear she too spoke with a British accent.

‘Hi, yes I’m Hannah, the new girl.’ I tried to sound cheerful despite my nerves and the fact that I couldn’t stop wondering what the hell I was doing there.

‘Don’t worry, we’re all pretty new. I only arrived last week. I’m Kristy, by the way.’ She handed me a mop. ‘Here, grab this.’ She pulled out the sofa and started to wipe down the walls behind it, looking a little flustered. ‘It’s literally all hands on deck today,’ she said, spraying everything in sight with disinfectant. Once we got into the swing of cleaning, she relaxed a bit and started chatting.

‘So, what’s your story then?’ she asked bluntly.

‘Where to start,’ I replied, hoping a slight pause might make her reconsider asking. It didn’t; she just looked up with eyes that suggested we had all day. ‘Okay ... I used to own a spa, but my husband left me for another woman and I was forced to rethink my future. This is a stepping stone to whatever lies ahead.’ I filled her in as briefly and as matter-of-factly as I could. I didn’t want to bore my new co-worker to death on the first day.

‘God, that’s awful. But good on you for moving on.’ Her mouth twisted sympathetically and fortunately she continued chatting about herself. ‘I’d just finished my beauty course at college when

my nan suggested I apply for a job on a ship, you know, to see some of the world. It's not an opportunity I'd have probably had otherwise. I'm loving it so far. I mean, have you seen the colour of the ocean?"

Her eyes sparkled as she spoke. 'There are so many amazing people on board. Having said that ...' she paused to check that nobody was about before lowering her voice '... Marion can be a bit of a ... stickler for the rules and Agne keeps herself to herself. She has some other Lithuanian friends from other areas of the ship and she spends most of her time with them. But otherwise, you'll find making friends is easy on the ship. Plus, you already have me now.' She smiled. It was nice to chat to someone friendly.

The day was broken by a quick trip to the mess for some lunch. The mess was larger than I'd expected and painted a pale lemon colour. It wasn't too dissimilar to the canteen at college and was just as busy. We'd obviously hit 'rush hour' but it gave me a chance to suss out the people on the ship a little, and see who I'd be practically living with for the course of my contract.

Kristy had been right about Agne: she was already sat down with three other young women who were all wearing different uniforms. In fact, most people seemed to have a little group formed on the basis of job or nationality and I felt glad to have found where I slotted in with Kristy. She caught me eyeing up the food. 'It's not quite what they serve upstairs but it isn't bad.' It looked fine to me and nine months of not having to cook was a bonus anyway. I didn't care that the fancier fayre was upstairs only. There was beef stroganoff on the menu and that suited me fine.

After eight hours of cleaning, sorting, and prepping, Kristy brushed her hair out of her eyes and looked around. 'I think we're done. Fancy a drink?"

'Definitely,' I replied, and we headed to the crew bar. I tried not to feel intimidated as we picked our way through the groups of people standing around drinking, chatting, or playing foosball. The bar was a lot less opulent than the ones the guests got to drink in, but it was well-thought-out. It had a tropical theme and was decorated with quirky place-name signs like 'Bridgetown' and 'Honolulu'. Kristy pointed out a vacant table and told me to sit down whilst she got the drinks.

'What do I owe you?' I asked as she set two glasses of wine down on the table.

'Oh nothing.' She batted at the air with her hand. 'It's practically free.' She took a sip of her drink. 'Guess what?"

'What?' I eyed her suspiciously.

'The crew purser was at the bar. I've had a room to myself for the last week, but apparently they need it now, so I'm going to be sharing with you,' she said holding her hands up as if to say 'surprise'. I didn't know what to think. I suppose I'd hoped they wouldn't need to move anyone else in. Still, she was the only person I knew so far, and she seemed nice, so I guess I was glad.

'That's great. Here's to being roommates.' I raised my glass and she clunked it obligingly. 'I suppose we should have an early night given that it's such a big day tomorrow what with the guests arriving.' Kristy shot me a sideward glance and giggled, shaking her head.

'Oh, Hannah, you've got a lot to learn.' Before I could ask what she meant by that, she spoke again, but this time without her light tone.

'Oh God,' Kristy groaned as a group of six people entered the crew bar. There were three men and three women, each one tanned and buffed to perfection.

'What?' I asked, baffled by her reaction. Everybody I'd met so far had seemed lovely.

'It's the entertainment team,' she said, leaving me still none the wiser. I watched in awe, as discreetly as I could, as they breezed past the bar and headed straight to a table. The taller blond man at the front nodded at the bartender as he passed. A short while after, the bartender went over with a tray of six mojitos and placed it down.

'I didn't know you could get a mojito in here,' I whispered to Kristy.

'You can't,' she replied, glaring at the bronzed table of perfection.

‘Okay, I feel like I’m part of a conversation I don’t really understand here. What have you got against those guys?’

‘The tall girl, Britney, and the smallest of the guys, the blond one, arrived last week when I did. They just seemed a bit loud and obnoxious and I’ve gathered from other crew members that the entertainment team are just renowned tossers – excuse my language.’ She paused to sip more wine. ‘They walk around the ship like they own it. They get special privileges, more free time, and their only job is to prance around on stage for a few hours each night.’

‘I’m sure they do more than prance,’ I said, taking the diplomatic route.

Kristy shot me a glance of no amusement. ‘They just don’t seem like nice people. You’d do well to avoid them.’ She downed the rest of her wine. ‘Fancy another?’

The next morning was a blur. Kristy bounced about like she’d had an evening detox and a good eight hours’ sleep, whereas I reflected the more realistic, six glasses of wine and two a.m. fall into bed that we’d had. A quick breakfast of a pastry, strong coffee, and fruit juice in the mess helped me ease myself back onto the path of normality, and after a bit of work glamping up with make-up, I could just about manage my first job of leaflet sorting.

A flurry of staff members whizzed about the ship, ensuring everything was perfect. At nine a.m., Kristy announced that it was time to set up our promotion stand in the main atrium. ‘I feel like I haven’t stopped,’ I complained, feeling the need for a nice cup of something caffeinated since the positive effects of my breakfast were wearing off.

‘You’ve not even started today. This is your position from now until three-thirty. At least. We need to sell as many spa treatments as we can today. Once people get into their cruise, they don’t get around to booking in to the spa, and then we get a bollocking.’

I was beginning to notice that Kristy had a penchant for bad language.

By eleven a.m. we’d perfected the display and slowly, guests began to board. *Here we go.* I pulled in a long, slightly shaky breath. The first couple I set eyes on were elderly. ‘We’re not going to hit them with the sales patter are we?’ I asked, certain Kristy would say no.

‘Yes, we hit everyone. It’s not up to you to decide what someone may or may not want. Besides that, we work on commission! Remember your training.’ She whispered the last part as the couple got within earshot of us. Kristy plastered a large fake smile onto her lips, which were caked in the brightest red lipstick I’d ever seen and made her teeth dazzle white. ‘Good morning and welcome aboard the *Requiescence*. I hope you enjoy your time on board and wondered if I can interest you in any of our deluxe spa treatments or packages this cruise? We can offer a ten per cent discount on any bookings made today as a special introductory offer.’

I was in awe; she didn’t take a breath.

‘No thank you, love,’ the frail white-haired lady said with a smile.

‘Well if you change your mind, we’re located on deck fourteen, fore. The entrance is port-side.’ She handed over a glossy leaflet, which the lady took politely before moving on.

‘Nicely done,’ I said when we were alone again.

‘Not really. The first day is always a tough sell. Expect most of them to be just like those two – they’re tired from travelling, and they just want to get into their cabins and shower. Some are even quite rude.’ She straightened her tunic in readiness for the next target.

‘If it’s such a tough sell, why do we bother?’

‘Because, it plants the seed ... and it’s our job.’

I thought back to the time I rang all my customers, trying to win them back. ‘Good job I’m used to rejection,’ I sighed.

At four p.m. we had a muster drill for the guests up in the Jazz Lounge. I seemed to have forgotten most of my training, but luckily I was teamed with Kristy and followed her lead. As soon as the drill was complete, the ship’s deafening horn sounded, signalling our departure. I raced up to the promenade deck, which was already teeming with passengers, eager to see the sail-away. A wave

(pardon the pun) of excitement hit me as we moved slowly out of the berth. I leant against the rail to watch as the giant ship moved so elegantly and gracefully from the cruise terminal, away from Fort Lauderdale.

Mansions lined the large port. Their vast gardens backing on to the water were so close, I was sure I could jump the distance from the ship should I have wanted to. Tiny boats were dotted around us with the people aboard waving as we passed the harbour wall and entered the open sea. Guests sipped champagne on the deck whilst looking back, waving farewell. It was magical, and for a moment, I forgot I was there to work. Instead, I was at one with the guests, finally enjoying the excited atmosphere of a cruise. If I closed my eyes, I could almost imagine Daniel there with me, at sea, as I'd always hoped he would be.

'Come on.' Kristy bashed my arm, breaking my moment. 'Back to work.'

By half past five we were back up in the spa. Bizarrely, plenty of people had pre-booked treatments when they booked their cruises, so I actually got to do a few massages. It almost felt like being back at The Hollywood Hut. The spa seemed to attract all sorts – a well-heeled, well-to-do lady; the burly male owner of a building company. It didn't matter; they were on holiday and making it count.

Marissa, an older, well-to-do American lady was my first customer. She'd been widowed for fifteen years and often cruised alone. I hadn't even commenced buffing her nails when she asked: 'What possessed you to pursue a life at sea away from all the people who care?' in her southern-belle drawl.

I gave her the same short version of events that I'd given Kristy the previous day, to which she ummed and ahed. 'My husband, Earle, was a bore. He never wanted to do anything but sit on the front porch reading the paper. That was if he wasn't working of course, which he was, most of the time.'

I smiled politely and continued to buff her nails.

'What I'm trying to say is, sometimes the departure of our men is a blessing.' She winked.

I felt a little uneasy that she seemed happy her husband had died. I wouldn't even wish that on Daniel, but I knew what she was getting at and nodded in acknowledgement.

'You're lucky to have found your freedom at a young age.'

Long after Marissa had left, her words resonated. *You're lucky to have found your freedom at a young age.* Whilst I didn't feel young, in comparison to Kristy at least, I knew what she meant. I had to make my time count just like Marissa was. I thought back to the sail-away, when I'd pushed myself into imagining Daniel by my side. I made the decision there and then, to leave him at home and filed him under 'memories' rather 'imagination'. I wouldn't let him impinge on my new chapter in life.

We finally finished work at nine p.m. and I slumped into one of the chairs at reception, smiling.

'You're very happy for someone who's worked non-stop since the crack of dawn with a ... now how did you put it ... "hangover from hell!".' Kristy said, flopping into the leather chair next to me and closing her eyes.

'Do you know what I like about it? Working on the ship I mean,' I asked.

'Not really,' she replied wearily.

'Being busy and having a purpose. It's been a while since I've felt like that.' Back in the village, trying to save the business had been a necessity and a welcome distraction but being on the ship felt like I was part of something, a team, and that felt good.

'Well you're in luck. Tomorrow is a sea day *and* it's formal night, so there'll be plenty of walk-ins on top of the bookings we've already secured. There'll be a giant scoop of busy for you.' She winked. 'Fancy a drink?'

'You know what? I think I do.'

The dance team weren't in the bar when we arrived as the evening show was still on, and I sensed Kristy was more relaxed for that reason. As we sat down with our drinks, a few officers entered.

They intimidated me a little in their pristine white suites, very *Officer-and-a-Gentleman*-like. A little shiver of excitement ran down my spine.

‘Hannah,’ Kristy muttered. ‘Stop staring at them.’ She looked tense.

‘Sorry, I didn’t realize I was.’

‘We don’t bother the officers.’

‘I didn’t even realize I was. What’s the big deal?’ I asked, resisting the urge to look back over at them.

‘It’s like an unwritten code. You don’t bother the ranks above you. Only talk to them if they talk to you first, that kind of thing.’

I made a face. ‘Well that seems daft – there was nothing in training to suggest that.’

‘Like I said: It’s unwritten.’

‘So where do we fit in?’ I asked her, interested. Wherever I came in the pecking order couldn’t be worse than the status I’d earned back home – worst wife, worst business owner, object of pity for the whole village. Before she got a chance to answer, a guy strode towards our table. He was striking.

‘Hey, Kristy, how’s it going?’ he said in an American accent before turning to look at me. ‘And who’s this?’

‘Hi, Pete, this is Hannah. She’s just joined us in the spa.’

‘Oh hey, Hannah, welcome aboard!’ He flashed me a wide, bright grin and held a hand out for me to shake. It was a split second before my brain could register it. ‘I work in the gym next door, so you’ll see a lot more of me.’ Pete was toned and muscular in a lean, I-work-out way, and his naturally highlighted blond hair was shaggy and unruly. He had a friendly, attractive face, and the way he leant over the table to talk to us suggested an easy confidence. I estimated him to be in his late twenties.

‘It’s very nice to meet you,’ I said, coolly taking his hand whilst trying to act as if my being introduced to gorgeous American gym instructors happened all the time.

He turned to the bar and shouted over to the barman, ‘Hey, my man George, could I get a water please?’

‘Of course, Pete. Coming up,’ George said in his easy Caribbean accent. He smiled at Pete with friendly affection, revealing two rows of perfectly white teeth. I sat back in my seat as Pete and Kristy chatted about some beach they’d visited last week. I smiled as I realized I hadn’t thought about Daniel all evening.

I awoke in the pitch black as the ship groaned, slowly swaying to and fro. Disorientated and unsure of the time, I fumbled around for my phone. It was five a.m. I felt drunk, but we’d only had two drinks the night before. I rested my head back down and felt the sway, glad I had an extra hour. By the time six a.m. arrived, I wasn’t feeling very good. The relentless toing and froing had started to make me feel queasy, a sensation that intensified on sitting up. The light came on, causing the dizziness behind my eyes to sting.

‘Well you look crap,’ was the cheerful greeting I received from Kristy.

‘I don’t feel great. I’m hoping norovirus isn’t doing the rounds. In training they said it can spread quite quickly around the ship.’ My eyebrows knitted together as the dizziness made my head feel numb.

She laughed. ‘You’ve not got norovirus, you daft cow; you’re seasick!’

‘Seasick? I’ve never been seasick before.’

‘You just haven’t been out on the open sea for any length of time before. It’s the Atlantic; it gets choppy. Here, take a couple of these.’ She threw a foil packet of travel sickness pills onto the bed in front of me. ‘No time to be sick. I’m afraid we’ve a busy day ahead.’

On our way up to the spa I noticed piles of sick bags attached to the handrails around the ship, which made me feel even more uneasy.

‘Are we expecting things to get worse?’ I asked nervously. Kristy just shrugged.

When we walked in Marion was already on reception, checking through the booking forms for the day.

‘Oh good, you’re here. We’ve a busy day today as expected,’ she said without making eye contact.

‘Where do you want us first?’ Kristy asked, but I couldn’t stand it any more. I ran outside onto the deck. The wind was against me and took my breath away as I went towards the rail. It was early enough to be completely empty so I stood, looking out to sea. The horizon moved up and down slowly in the distance and the strip of grey sea grew narrow and wide with the movement.

I inhaled deeply, hoping the fresh air would help, but the sickness tingled around my numb head before plummeting to the depths of my stomach, churning up whatever lurked in there – I grabbed the paper bag from my pocket and retched into it, feeling better as soon as I had.

‘Oh dear,’ Kristy said, coming up behind me. She chuckled. ‘It gets us all on the second day,’ she added. ‘Take another couple of pills and sip some cold water.’

The nausea subsided over the course of the day as Kristy’s pills kicked in, and besides, I was far too busy massaging and exfoliating to even notice the motion of the ship. Before I knew it, it was seven o’clock. I told Kristy I’d meet her in the bar and went up to the private crew deck for some fresh air. The warm, salty wind whipped about my hair and tunic as I walked to the rail. The orange sun had already sunk below the horizon, leaving just its glow across the dark ocean and inky sky. The waters had calmed, presumably because we were getting closer to the Caribbean islands.

I dragged out a sun lounger and sat down. The warm evening air had lost its humidity and, for some reason, left goose bumps on my arm even though it was far from cold. I closed my eyes and imagined Daniel was with me. We were sat in silence, basking in tranquillity, sipping tropical cocktails.

‘Hey, Hannah?’ A deep American voice startled me, and I scolded myself for going back on my vow not to think of *him*.

‘Oh, Pete, hi,’ I said, before yawning and rubbing my eyes. ‘Sorry, I think I nodded off. I’ve had a long day.’

He gave me an understanding smile. ‘Me too. The problem with being a personal trainer on a cruise ship is that clients are always new to training. Like, we never get past the basics. It can be tiresome.’ He laughed easily and sat on the edge of the lounger beside me. ‘I’ve spent a lot of time up here since I’ve been on board. Most of the team head to the bar but I just need a bit of downtime alone, you know? Here is always quiet.’

‘Yes, it’s really nice,’ I agreed. ‘So how long have you been on the ship?’

‘Two weeks, but I’ve worked on ships for over three years. Moved around some, but mostly been based here in the Caribbean and around North America. This contract will be the first time I’ll have made it to Europe though.’ The ship was heading over at Easter.

Pete and I chatted for a while, and I felt that we’d instantly clicked. He was friendly and easy to talk to. I found myself telling him about Daniel and Kelly and how I couldn’t bear to stay in the village when he asked me why I’d chosen to work on a ship. I managed to conceal the sporadic twinges of pain in my chest as he listened attentively.

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