

Chapter One

Abbey

I was a reluctant holiday-maker. Bedraggled, weary and extremely conscious of being single. But I was in the Maldives and the resort, well, it was lovely. Postcard-perfect. It was all palm trees, nicely swept paths and warm, welcoming lights. The staff were helpful in that ‘hotel’ kind of way, where they make you feel significantly more important than you are when checking in, but you strongly suspect they will talk about you meanly the minute you step away from the counter. But despite their charm, I could barely muster a polite smile.

It didn’t help that the past several hours had revealed that I was a nervous flyer. I never used to be. I was so nervous that the lady beside me suspected I was having a panic attack, and a flight attendant, who looked like Hannah Waddingham, gave me a Valium out of her handbag and a vodka to wash it down. By the time I arrived at the resort, the overwhelming feeling I remember was, well, relief. Followed closely by exhaustion, plus the solid conviction that my life was rubbish, and that going on a holiday by yourself was a one-way trip to Loserville.

The porter (Hot. Model hot. Twenty-five max.) opened the door to the beachfront room, and then we both just stood there while I took a deep, miserable, shuddering sigh. It was the perfect room, literally perfect. I walked into it slowly, taking in the lustrous white linen covering the enormous bed. It was so spacious I could stand there with my black tote held at arm's length, spin around and not hit a goddamn thing. It had better cupboard space than my house, and a gorgeous bathroom with subway tiles, fancy shampoo and conditioner in those exclusive smaller bottles, and a window to let you look out at the ocean from the tub. A bottle of champagne sat cooling in a silver bucket, three-quarters filled with ice cubes and two glasses laid out with their stems crossed in front of the bottle, suggesting there should be a couple staying here.

There were double doors with light-diffusing curtains draped from the ceiling. The doors were open, and a gentle warm breeze flittered into the room, making the soft curtains dance. From the door to where the ocean gently lapped was perfectly pale sand, the kind that squeaks under your feet and gets extremely hot in the sun. To add insult to injury, a full moon hung perfectly low, like a neon welcome sign in the night sky. It was the moon that pushed me over the edge, and I burst into tears and fell on the bed.

I don't know what happened to the hot porter. Perhaps it wasn't every day he showed someone the perfect room, only to have them collapse into a ball of grief and sadness. He had evidently made himself scarce, leaving the emotional wreck alone.

I cried a marriage-worth of tears on that perfect bed, bits of my tubular mascara balling up and marring the perfect white surface. Once I had noticed, I began trying to brush it off, but that just made the smudges much worse, so I simply gave up. Walking over to the champagne bucket, I reached into the slushy ice and wiped a little of the freezing liquid over my eyes. Then I popped

the cork and poured out a glass, downing it, failing to care about the not-quite-ladylike burp that came out. Unsatisfied with the glass's capacity, I placed it neatly beside the cooler and drank the next mouthful directly from the bottle.

Internally, I was prepared to acknowledge that it appeared I was bottoming out and having some sort of crisis. Maybe I was entitled to one. Six months and seven hours ago, I had been dumped by my husband of thirteen years. He came home, ate the mediocre dinner I had prepared for him and told me he was in love, just not with me. He laughed in a 'I cannot believe this has happened' kind of way, which reminded me of Elizabeth Bennet telling her father how much she loved Darcy at the end of the love-it-or-hate-it 2005 *Pride & Prejudice* movie. I had laughed too, though I was not amused. He moved his stuff out that day and left it to me to explain to our daughter.

Peter (deadbeat ex-husband) had insisted that I go on this holiday to recover, which I think he felt was a vaguely magnanimous gesture. This holiday, that we were supposed to take together, to reconnect. *Now that is pretty fucking funny.*

My phone vibrated on the perfect side table.

Hey Mum, just checking you got there okay? Miss you. E xx

My thirteen-year-old daughter, Ella. She would be anxious about me being away, even though she would pretend not to be. I took a deep swig from the bottle and smiled to engage my Mum personality, texting her back a bright and cheery message. Anything that did not scream, 'I've just arrived in a foreign country without waterproof mascara and am having a bit of a crisis'.

Here safe and sound, chickadee. It's gorgeous, looking forward to reading books on the beach tomorrow. Miss you. Love you. Mum xxx

Another message, this time from my sister, Kate.

Abbey, remember even though you are 42 years old, you're still bangable.

I stared at my phone, unable to respond to this message. I looked down at my boobs, which were not quite as high as they once were, and my stomach, which was soft instead of firm. I didn't feel very bangable. I felt like an emotional wreck, whose life had been going along fine until a crisis was forced upon me by the one person who had vowed in front of loved ones not to let me down. And, okay, I wasn't heartbroken, not really. It wasn't anything like the same devastation I'd felt when my first boyfriend had dumped me for my friend when we were sixteen. This was more a combination of humiliation and the sensation that my life was falling off the rails. It was miserable.

I tried to pull my shit together for a second, reminding myself that this was a fork in the road or an alternate ending. Reminding myself that I should look for positives. It was choose-your-own adventure time.

Except right now, I could not summon the energy for fresh thoughts.

The last time I had been single, I was twenty-two, hot, and my vagina had not delivered a small human. Now I was cruising towards perimenopause and upping my health insurance to include joint replacements. Could anyone but my grandmother even fall in love over forty? *Fuck. Probably not.*

My misery was allowing me to rapidly make my way through most of the champagne, sitting there on the perfect bed in the perfect room. I raised the champagne bottle to the light, estimating that there was still a glass left – the irony that I was still measuring in glasses, even though I was no longer drinking out of one, was not lost on me. I hadn't bothered to check the label, but it tasted French and expensive.

A stronger breeze rustled through the open doors, drawing my attention to the beach on my doorstep. *You know what? Fuck it. When in paradise, right?* That was as close to a positive thought as I was going to get tonight. I stood up and slipped out of my slides, stretching ruby-red toes in the plush charcoal rug, before stepping onto the sand, clinging to the champagne bottle like an alcoholic hobo in a pretty floral dress.

The sand felt warm under my feet, as if it was still being kissed by the sun even though it was late. My plane had been delayed and then the transfer took forever, so I estimated it must have been around eleven o'clock. Everywhere was quiet, not a soul around. My room seemed to be at the very end of the resort, which reached back towards the left, sprawling towards the restaurants near reception. I peeked at the corner room next to mine, the last room in this section. The beach appeared to go out to a point in front of it. The views must be wonderful from that room. It looked pretty much the same as mine, but larger; the open doors and the fluttering of the white light-diffusing curtains seeming to indicate that I had a neighbour. The horrifying thought came to mind that it might be a honeymooning couple, filled with dreams of happily ever after, who I would have to make small talk with. That made me worry I might not actually survive this holiday, but at least that was a problem for the next day.

I wandered slowly down to the water's edge past several sun

loungers, tables and chairs with folded-down, off-duty umbrellas. I leaned over and planted my champagne bottle into the sand, twisting it back and forth until it found enough purchase to stand upright. Two more steps and my feet touched the water, which felt warm – not bath warm, but not steal-your-breath cold either. I had another nervous look around the empty beach until I was confident I was alone. Peter had bought the holiday in a sale and booked it for the very beginning of the off-season, so it seemed fair to assume that not many people would be here full stop.

I stood in what my sister would call my thinking pose, with one hand on my hip and the other on my grandmother's pendant around my throat. The rectangle filigree pattern stamped into my finger, and I felt along the three small diamonds, centring myself. Grandma Iris was a bloody powerhouse. If she were here now, she would have told me, 'Abbey, stop being feeble.'

Non-feeble Abbey took a deep breath, channelling Iris. I slid the strap of my dress off my left shoulder, then repeated the motion on the other side. I lowered the dress over my chest, wiggled it down my hips and stepped out of it, throwing it back for the champagne bottle to look after.

It should be noted, before we go on, that it was not normally my style to get naked in public. I will blame the aforementioned crisis and the quickly drunk champagne on an empty stomach. My hands reached around my back, unclasping my bra, feeling the sweet relief of getting it off after wearing it all day. I was tipsy enough that I heard striptease music, and I threw my bra back for the French champagne bottle, like a stripper in a Kings Cross brothel. *Lucky you, champagne bottle, I'm still bangable after all.*

The water was black and inviting, and I walked in, throwing myself under. The sound of the sea echoed cavernously in my ears, and I stayed beneath the surface for as long as I could, holding my

breath, trying to let go of all the shit I was carrying around daily. It was time for a rebirth, time to let go of the sadness, of trying to hold on to what had been. Time to let go of Peter, or the idea of Peter, or the idea of Peter and me.

I made a vow, then and there, under the water, to come back from this holiday a different person, to reset into someone who could move past disappointment, someone who could set some rules for a better relationship next time. Sometimes life changed in more ways than one, and I knew in my heart that I just had to be elastic and stretchy enough for the changes not to break me. When I was reaching the end of my oxygen, I bent my knees, pushed my feet into the ever-changing seabed and surged up to the surface to come out of the water. I hit my head on something solid. Shocked, I tried to step back, but the solid mass grabbed me, and I took a huge breath into a firm, male chest.

‘Christ, are you all right? You were under so long I thought you were drowning.’ He dropped his arms to my waist, pulling me against him. His crisp, low voice seemed to almost vibrate in his chest. ‘Oh, my God, you’re topless. I did not realise that I, ummm, apologise. I’m so very sorry.’

The bright moon illuminated the two of us and the weird, dark light allowed me to take him in. My eyes roamed over shoulders that were broad and a dark thatch of hair I could also feel against my stomach trailing into his shorts. He had a lean throat, and he was breathing as hard as I was. His cheeks were covered in dark hair, not quite a beard, more an overgrown stubble. He had nice white teeth, and his mouth was opened in an ‘O’ shape as he tried to constrain the adrenaline pumping through him. His nose was perfectly strong without controlling his whole face and his witch-dark eyes, which could have almost been black for all I knew, were piercing me as if he was trying to read my mind. A crop of dark

hair rounded him out, water dripping from random curls. My eyes followed one drop down his nose and onto his top lip, where his tongue darted out to lick at it. I felt quite warm suddenly.

I was still breathing hard, trying to get oxygen back into my lungs and I now tried to compose myself rationally by stepping back from the very attractive would-be rescuer, but the height difference between us and the depth of the water meant that his feet were in the sand, while mine were several inches off it. His proximity was overwhelming. I had not touched a man in an age and our chests were pressed together. My nipples were already hard from the water, and I felt heat shoot down low into my stomach.

He moved, taking two steps towards the shore and gently set me down, making sure my footing was stable before letting me go.

‘Are you all right?’ he whispered, again.

His voice was as dark as the shadows where the bright rays of the moonlight could not reach, and my skin erupted into goosebumps at the absence of his body heat.

‘I’m fine. Although, weirdly, I’ve had “Hotel California” stuck in my head since I arrived,’ I stated firmly.

He gave a reluctant, short laugh, as if that was the most unexpected thing he’d ever heard. It was a harsh, raspy noise, as though it had gone unused for a period of time.

I placed a hand in the centre of his firm chest, into the thatch of hair, attempting to push away from him. The lack of oxygen had, apparently, severed the connection between my brain and arm, because my fingers lingered a little, exploring him. He drew a sharp breath and his hand launched up, quickly covering mine, his black-hole eyes boring into me.

Jesus, Abbey, stop touching the man. I moved to put space between myself and the touchable stranger, suddenly hyper-aware that my boobs were out. Uncertain how to remove myself from him while

covering this fact, I reasoned that there seemed little point in trying to hide it, although I wrapped one arm around them to give me a modicum of modesty and then walked out of the water. Reaching the collection of items on the sand, I picked up my dress, bra and champagne bottle before yelling over my shoulder, 'Thanks for rescuing me.'

I padded up to the doors of my room, throwing myself under the outdoor shower, removing the sand from my feet and sliding my knickers down from my hips, not particularly caring if my knight in shining armour caught more of a glimpse of my less-than-bangable body than he had in the water. I reached for the perfect towel, fluffy and white and huge, turning off the lights before sliding into perfect heavy cotton sheets. The bed was so tucked in it felt like a straitjacket, but the weight of it, and my inability to move, combined with the bottle of champagne, was comforting. Everything was perfect here ... but me. I drifted off to sleep.

Nick

*C*hrist, the glare is actually going to kill me.

It was even more of a struggle to feel the holiday vibes this year than usual. In fact, I couldn't remember a great time on holiday, ever. I'm almost certain it's a curse.

For instance, the year our mother and father took me and my siblings to Disneyland, I caught a stomach bug and ended up vomiting for four days straight. The year they took us to Tokyo, my little sister broke her arm after slipping on ice in the airport car park. *In Heathrow before we left.* Holidays did not bode well for Northbys.

I walked over to the block-out curtains of the floor-to-ceiling doors, which revealed the best view in the whole resort, and pulled

them firmly closed, shutting out the handful of couples on deckchairs under grassed umbrellas. The room itself was comfortable, the bed firm, but the breeze in the night that would come through the curtains was the only real bliss afforded here.

Last night, though, something out of the ordinary had occurred and I could not stop thinking about it.

The night had started exactly the way the previous three had: I'd showered, getting rid of the salt on my skin, after having my one swim per day in the late afternoon, avoiding sunburn; I'd drunk a bottle of wine for dinner along with a room-service order of a surprisingly decent hamburger and fries; I'd answered thirty emails in my work inbox that could not wait for my holiday to end. I'd then been walking towards the open doors of my bedroom to close the curtains when I saw her: a woman zig-zagging her way down the beach towards the water.

She was carrying a champagne bottle, which she put down in the sand, taking an inordinate amount of time to ensure it did not tip over. She'd turned her head towards the rooms and I'd frozen, only relaxing again when she'd changed direction, looking up and down the beach.

She'd removed her dress, and I felt my eyebrows rise into my hair. And, yeah, it was probably a little pervy to keep looking at the drunk lady going for a night swim. I am not in the habit of perving on women or looking for some sort of holiday fling, which, I've always thought, sounded vaguely exhausting. But there was just something about her. Like the way her fair, wavy hair was gently catching the breeze, revealing her neck, and I couldn't drag my eyes away from her.

She'd got the dress off with a wiggle of her hips and tossed it back to the champagne bottle. My breath had caught when I'd realised I could see her gentle curves, the outline of her hips, and

the swell of her ample bust. She'd stood with one hand on her hip for a moment before removing what I assumed was her bikini top. It wasn't until I saw the lace that I realised it was a black bra. It too was thrown back to the champagne bottle, a little flirtingly, I'd thought, snickering.

When she'd walked into the water, I'd returned to shutting the curtains, but then the worry started. How much had she actually had to drink? Would she be okay? It wasn't safe if she was alone. I stepped outside, trying to hear other sounds from her room, right next door. I just needed to know she wasn't alone in the world.

I was met with only silence, not even the television was on. I felt fear kick in. She'd been under at least a minute so far.

I'd seen enough therapists to know the signs of adrenaline rushing. I could taste it, a metallic flavour invading my mouth. *Fuck.*

I broke into a full sprint, the wine and the hamburger protesting the exertion. I threw off my shirt onto the white sand and briefly mourned my softest jersey pyjama shorts, before leaping into the water like David fucking Hasselhoff. The moon was full and there was an almost ridiculous amount of light, but my search for a shadow in the water was pointless as the water just looked black. I dived to the spot where I thought she had gone under. The panic increased as the sea beat and whooshed, rushing in my ears. I bounced up off the sand bed and took another four steps forward, preparing to dive again, when something collided with my chest. *Oof.*

I felt her try to pull back, but I reached out, firmly grabbing her and pulling her into me, ensuring she didn't go under again.

Even now heat climbed to my cheeks, remembering the feel of her velvety skin, cool and slippery, under my hands, the dawning realisation that her nipples were pressed into my chest. *Of course they were, idiot, you watched her take her bra off.* Her breathing was

hard, but she seemed calm, and I had the first inkling that she had not been at risk of drowning. Her wet hair was long down her back, and clear blue eyes inspected me; I felt they saw more than I wanted them to. I stammered out an apology and set her down, feeling awkward that it had taken me so long to let go of her.

Seconds later she hadn't moved or spoken and, worried, I asked her again if she was all right. 'I'm fine,' she had uttered before giving me a wisecrack about a song being stuck in her head. She had put her hand right in the centre of my chest and I felt myself audibly gasp. My heart had thundered.

It's just adrenaline. Calm down, Nick.

Her fingers had moved through my chest hair in this familiar way, and my hand shot up, covering hers to still it. My heart pounded harder, and I was clearly not calming down. Her eyes locked with mine and, I swear to you, it was like some sort of magical thing. I think she cast a spell on me. Water was dripping down her pale skin, and she had this vaguely amused look on her face. She took a step back, eyes cast down, and then draped an elegant arm across her chest and walked out of the water.

I watched her as she grabbed her collection of clothes and her bottle. She finally spoke again. 'Thanks for the rescue.'

Australian?

I stood in the sea for a few seconds, trying to get my head around the last two minutes, and watched her progress to her room. Finally, my body moved stiffly towards my door. About halfway, I could see her little collection on the table outside hers, the sound of her outdoor shower running. She was humming an out-of-tune 'Hotel California'. Better men than me would have dropped their eyes, turned their heads, looked towards their own doors. Good men. Gentlemen.

Three steps further towards my room was all it took to glimpse

legs being washed of sand. She was very pale; her golden hair had turned a light brown under the running water. Her legs were shapely, and she pointed her toes like a ballet dancer as she popped one and then another under the water. As she slid her thumbs into the last remaining item of clothing she had on and bent over to remove it, I almost collided with an umbrella. I picked up my pace and marched into my suite next door, dragging sand and water with me through the room, straight into the shower, which I ran on cold. A poor attempt to cool the need she had created in me. To cool the desire.

Crazy thoughts washed down the drain. Recklessness. Abandon. The desire, well, I could not wash that away, no amount of cold water could cool it, and I had to take care of it via another method.

A knock on the door that was heavier than was professional interrupted my daydream, bringing me back to the present. Hunger drove my pace to open the door; I was suddenly ravenous. I stood back, waiting for my 'personal valet', Oliver, to enter the room, which the man did. Without my breakfast.

'Sorry, did you forget something?' I asked.

'My apologies, *sir*. There was a mix-up in the kitchen with your breakfast this morning.'

'Right ... well ... I will just wait until you bring another.' My tone barely contained my annoyance.

'Very good, *sir*.'

'Just Nick is fine,' I growled out.

'Do you intend on sitting in the dark in your room for the whole holiday, *sir*?'

I scoffed at Oliver. 'None of your goddamned business.'

'As your valet, *sir*, it is my job to ensure you sample the delights of the resort. As such, I have booked you into dinner this evening. At the restaurant, *sir*. Eight sharp. Also, you will tour the private

island tomorrow, sir.' The younger man stopped and took a breath before adding in a softer tone, 'It's not good to sit around in the dark on your own, Nick. You know that.'

My head dropped to the floor, where I studied the polished wood. *Fuck me, if he wasn't right.* I looked up, giving his concerned gaze a quick nod.

'Eight sharp. Don't be late. I'll send your breakfast as soon as it is ready.' The young valet smiled. 'Sir.'

Little shit.