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Chapter 1

Luna

'No,' I say, pushing my printed confirmation across the counter, 'see? I booked hold luggage. It's right there.'

'I'm sorry, miss, it's not on our system.'

I gulp. What kind of useless, cheapo airline is this? Well, not *that* cheapo, since they're currently trying to charge me again for my supposedly unbooked hold luggage.

My palms are sweating. I hate stuff like this. I hate *arguing* over stuff like this. If there's one thing I normally avoid like the plague, it's confrontation. But I am *not* paying that money. Liam would've dealt with it so well; he was great at stuff like this – especially because he knew I wasn't.

I get a pang in my chest just thinking about him, and push that feeling deep, deep down. I've got the entire week ahead to get my head around that. Right now, I need to deal with the fact that this woman wants

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to charge me £58 for luggage I've already paid £23 to put on the plane.

She's smiling at me as if she'd like to load me onto the conveyor belt just to get rid of me, clearly waiting for me to cave and pay the money.

Come on, Luna. You can do this. You're almost twenty years old. You're an adult now, and adults know how to handle these things.

I inhale a deep breath through my nose and tap the paper on the counter. I'm so glad Mum insisted I print everything out 'just in case' now.

'But I paid for it. Look, it's – it's right here. Confirmation of payment, see? That's what it says.'

The woman suppresses a sigh, but gives me a too-wide, toothy smile and says, 'Let me go find my manager, and we'll get this sorted for you.'

'Thank you,' I say, but I don't let myself feel relieved yet – I'm already mentally drafting an email of complaint demanding a refund, just in case this all goes south.

(Confrontation is a lot easier on the other side of a screen, after all.)

I stay on tenterhooks, feeling pissed off and more than a little bit tearful until I've had the same argument again with the woman's manager, who looks my booking up on the system just to tell me I need to pay

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the fee, and I try not to lose it as I push my printed email towards her, too. I can hear other people in the queue behind me grumbling because I'm causing trouble and taking so long.

Don't worry, I want to snap at them. The plane won't leave without you.

Even though I know I'd be doing exactly the same in their position.

And even though I am also worried the plane might leave without *me* at this rate.

Eventually, the manager concedes that I have in fact paid the fee due and lets my baggage through. My boarding pass is handed back to me with a smile. 'So sorry about that. It must be because you booked through a third party. Have a safe flight, miss.'

'Thanks,' I mumble, praying I don't have the same trouble at the hotel, too. Maybe booking this whole thing when I'd had a few drinks wasn't my smartest move . . .

Then again, there are a *lot* of things that make the 'Luna's Completely Lost It' list lately – and a solo trip to Spain isn't even the most drastic of them.

I turn away, examining my boarding pass and checking my seat number for the billionth time. I'm so focused on it that I walk right into someone trying to get to the counter to check in.

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‘Oof!’

‘Sorry, sorry! I’m so sorry,’ I say as the girl starts apologizing too. ‘Totally my fault,’ I tell her.

She fixes her sunglasses, perched artfully on top of her head, where her blonde hair is piled into a messy bun. ‘No worries, hon.’

She looks so zen, a pale blue travel wallet clutched between fingers with lilac nail varnish on long nails, a small and lazy smile on her face. She’s wearing a white camisole tucked into grey linen shorts with a long, almost see-through white cardigan with a fringe that brushes her knees. The look is tied together with a chunky turquoise necklace and giant cork wedges with brown suede straps that match the brown leather bag hanging from her elbow.

For a moment, all I can think is: *She’s so Instagramable.* In spite of the fact she only looks about my age, I wonder for half a second if she’s some popular influencer because my next thought is: *Who dresses like that to travel? She’ll have to take those shoes off when she gets to security, and I bet that necklace buzzes when she walks through. And how can she fit her hand luggage in that handbag? It looks mostly empty.*

As I get out of the way so she can wheel her small suitcase to the check-in desk, I take another look at how glamorous she seems. She’s joined the back of the

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queue and is holding her travel wallet between her teeth, bags on the floor, as she takes a video of herself wiggling her passport in the air for the camera.

I feel like such a slob in my most comfortable leggings and T-shirt, with my big rucksack, Vans and thin hoodie. We always dressed comfortably to go on family holidays, and it's a habit I'm apparently not breaking anytime soon. Travelling alone is nerve-wracking enough without suddenly throwing new habits into the mix.

Well, the joke's on Instagram Girl, I think, hiking my rucksack higher up onto my shoulders and heading towards the escalator to make my way through security. Her legs will be cold on those aeroplane seats.

It takes me forever to get through security. I remember being tempted, in my moment of madness (or rather, drunkenness) by the security fast-track option, for however much extra money. I'd talked myself out of it then, but standing in the queue in front of a man in a suit talking loudly on his phone, and behind a family with a screaming toddler and a little boy who keeps running under the ropes, I regret it.

The line crawls along. I get my phone out, clicking out of my boarding pass now that I no longer need it and instead tapping aimlessly across social media. Not

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much on Twitter catches my attention, and my headphones are in the bottom of my bag somewhere so mindlessly scrolling TikTok isn't much of an option. I have one rubbish email promoting a make-up brand, which I delete, and just as I'm about to check Instagram, my phone buzzes.

Liam.

For a second, my heart stops. Then it launches into a somersault, leaving me feeling queasy in the pit of my stomach.

Saw on Insta you're off on holiday. Hope you have a good time x

I stare at the message for a while – long enough that Mr Noisy Talker behind me taps me on the shoulder and says, 'Excuse me, could you move forward?'

I do, and before I can even decide if I should reply or not another text comes through.

Roger brought my stuff over. I'd have come to get it if I'd realized you were moving out early. Thanks though

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The dots reappear while he types another.

They disappear.

They come back again.

I miss you

The guy behind me clears his throat, pointedly enough that I look around to see him nod irritably in front of me, and I shuffle along into the space between me and the family.

What am I meant to do about that? What am I meant to do with an 'I miss you'?

Especially when I've spent the last couple of weeks wallowing in regret because I've realized I miss him too?

I knew Liam was The One from the second I met him. We were introduced through friends a few years ago. He went to a different school, but we spent practically all our time together since we were fifteen. I was thrilled when we both got into Newcastle University, so I didn't have to worry about what the stresses of long distance might do to our rock-solid relationship. I thought things would only get better for us.

Usually, I was more sensible than to believe in things like love at first sight, but Liam ticked every one

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of my boxes. He was smart, funny, popular among our friends and even his tutors – and he was close with his family. I liked that most about him.

His laidback attitude was at complete odds with my compulsion to control everything, but we worked; we balanced each other out. He was tall where I was short, lean where I was curvy, outspoken when I was reserved and thoughtful. He pushed me outside of my comfort zone and helped me have a busy, vibrant social life when I might otherwise have wanted to stay in.

And he loved me.

It was always so easy to picture my future with Liam: we'd graduate at the same time, find jobs near each other, rent a place together while we saved for a house deposit. We'd be on each other's car insurance, share a Netflix account, argue over what to call the cat we both wanted. He used to laugh when I'd say things like, 'I want to be married by the time I'm twenty-five, and have kids by the time I'm thirty,' but then he'd kiss me and say that was good to know – he'd keep it in mind, block out his calendar so he'd remember to go ring shopping in plenty of time.

We were going to be in the same house-share next year at uni; it would be good practice for when we lived together, just the two of us.

He was supposed to be my forever.

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I've not heard from Liam since I broke up with him a few weeks ago.

I guess I don't have much right to wish he'd get in touch when I was the one who ended things, but it still hurts to go from having my whole world wrapped up in him to – nothing.

Well, not *exactly* nothing, because any time I opened an Instagram Story from one of our friends, bam, there he was. Out with everyone. Having fun with everyone. Not wallowing at home, heartbroken, his entire future in tatters, like I was – if only because nobody had invited me along to give me another option.

I was the one who asked our mutual friend Roger to come and grab the things he'd left in my room. I was too much of a coward to face Liam myself because I knew if I saw him, I'd end up breaking down in tears and begging him to take me back. Which I would've done already if he hadn't been out with all our friends, carrying on as if everything were the same. As if the last four years just meant . . . nothing.

Until that text, I hadn't even known he missed me.

I shove my phone in my pocket; I can guarantee that given half a chance I'll get drawn back in, trying to win him back when I'd already tried so hard all of last year just to *keep* him. I think about the vision board I threw in the bin, the pages I tore out of my

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journal in a flood of drunken tears the night I booked this holiday. I think about all the time I wasted being with him, and the time I'm about to waste trying to get over him.

A lump forms in the back of my throat, and I choke it down.

The *last* thing I need right now is to dissolve into floods of tears at the airport, for God's sake. I can even hear my brother in the back of my mind, teasing me for being so sensitive.

(Although he was pretty devastated when I told him about the break-up. He really liked Liam.)

I draw a shaky breath and square my shoulders.

Get it together, Luna.

I slip my phone out of my pocket. Liam's text is still up on the screen.

Going from seeing him every day to not even sending him a video I think he'd like has been torture. I don't think I've ever felt so lonely.

There's no reason we can't be friends, I think, once we've both moved on. I'd like to be. Isn't that what grown-ups do? And we *are* grown-ups now. And if we can be friends, then everyone else will stay friends with me, too.

'Miss?'

I look up, fingers hovering over the onscreen

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keyboard, ready to tell him I miss him, too. But instead I'm being beckoned forward towards the empty trays behind the security belt.

'Please place all electronic items in the tray separately. Any liquids . . .'

I tune out but follow the instructions, placing my phone in the tray next to my iPad and Kindle.

By the time I've gone through the metal detectors and picked up my tray to begin putting everything back into my rucksack, my phone screen lights up with an incoming call from Liam. My heart stops.

Is it because he thinks I've moved on if I'm going away on holiday without him, and wants to patch things up before I leave? Or did he just find one of my textbooks while packing up his room and wants to know what to do with it? No – no, he misses me, he still loves me, this is all just a horrible mistake, a big mess and . . .

I stare at the screen for a second, hardly even able to breathe for hoping, but then I'm being jostled along by other people coming through the security scanner, and when I snatch my things out of the tray I accidentally cut off his call.

I wince, but . . . maybe it's for the best. I broke up with him for a reason, didn't I? And this holiday was supposed to be a chance to have some space

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and get over him. Or, at least, stop me from running back to him.

Standing out of the way, I cradle my phone in my hands, and put it on mute.

Sorry, Liam. But this week is all about me.

Chapter 2

Rory

My big sisters are way too good to me, I think, breezing past the people in the hideously long security queue with the fast-track pass my eldest sister Hannah bought me without a second thought.

'I don't need that,' I'd told her, watching her click the box as she booked my holiday. If I were a nail-biter, my nails would've been in shreds at that point. I should stop them, I kept thinking. I shouldn't let them do this. I should just grow the fuck up and take some goddamn responsibility for my shitty life.

But I was: I was letting them do it. I was even recommending the resort and pulling up a promo code from an Instagram ad I'd seen about it. I was far too excited by the idea of running away from all my problems for seven days in paradise.

(A little *less* excited about having to give up social media for a week, but . . .)

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‘Oh, please,’ my other sister Nic had scoffed. ‘It’ll give you more time to nose around in duty-free or grab a coffee.’

‘You know I can’t afford flavoured syrup in my coffee, right, let alone anything in duty-free?’ I’d pointed out to them – but now my travel wallet is thick with euros that my parents gifted me. It’s a total pity gift, but I think they prefer the idea of me jetting off to get some sun rather than moping around in my childhood bedroom, withdrawing even more than I already have.

All this makes me feel spoiled and bratty, and I know I should be guilty as hell, but I’m just *not*.

I’m about to spend a week in the Spanish sun, in a luxury beachside resort, sipping on mojitos and nibbling at tapas, with no responsibilities other than ‘having a break’, and I feel pretty damn great about it. Who wouldn’t?

Not to mention it’s the perfect opportunity to run away from the impending doom of A-level results and university once summer ends. I can bury my head in the sand (maybe literally; that is very much to be determined) rather than deal with reality.

A few weekends ago, I’d gone out for lunch with my sisters, letting them pick up the bill because I couldn’t

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afford it on my zero-hours contract, and knowing full well it was our parents' idea of a gentle intervention.

'You've just seemed so down in the dumps lately,' Nic cooed, pouting at me.

'Me?' I scoffed. 'I'm fine. You're the one with a new baby and getting like, no sleep. And Hannah, you've got your fancy promotion and have to work twelve-hour days –'

'Aurora,' Hannah snapped, and I'd felt the blood drain from my face. I couldn't remember the last time either of my sisters had used my full name like that. 'We're serious. We're worried about you.'

'Maybe you should go back to the doctor,' Nic suggested gently.

And because I couldn't face going down *that* road and having *that* conversation again I'd declared, 'I'm not depressed. I'm just . . . I'm nervous about starting uni! That's all. Moving out, making new friends, having to try not to burn pasta! Did Mum tell you? I ruined the pan. How does a person even manage to burn *pasta*, I ask you! So much for a fail-safe, student-friendly meal.'

Either I did a good enough job of convincing them, or they felt straight-up sorry for me, but they decided that what would *really* do me some good was a holiday. And a digital detox one at that – because apparently

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I spend too much time on my phone. Which is ridiculous, if also absolutely true. And it's a holiday generously paid for by them because my savings account has less than fifty quid in it.

I may not have touched a single book from the suggested reading list for my new course, but I definitely have a head start on the whole 'broke student' vibe.

Now I breeze through the fast-track security like I do this all the time, and wander around duty-free, sniffing perfume samples like I'm actually considering buying one of them. I take a free chocolate and chat to the lady on the stand, telling her I'll have a think and maybe come back later, even though we both know I have no intention of doing such a thing.

I've got half an hour to kill before they announce the boarding gate, so I work my way through to the Costa cafe and splurge (my own money this time) on a venti chai latte with whipped cream. A dusting of cinnamon on top and it looks – and smells – like heaven. Drink in hand, I have to stand for a few minutes, peering through the heaving crowds, before I spy a couple leaving a table. I make a beeline for it.

As I slam my cup onto the table, someone nearby huffs.

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Ha, I think, seeing a guy roll his eyes and turn away with his tray, I win.

I rummage through my bag, tipping out my notebook and a couple of pens. Blue and green felt-tips and my favourite biro. I can work with that.

I have one week on an all-inclusive digital detox holiday to stop thinking my life is tragic (because it isn't *really*) and instead consider what to do after the summer – and map out a plan.

I've never been much good at planning, but maybe this will be the week that finally happens.

Maybe inspiration will *strike!*

Maybe, when I come back, I'll find my TikTok account has totally blown up, and I'm being slammed with offers to work with brands. Maybe I'll have sold something off my Etsy store, after a months-long dry spell. Maybe my parents will see it and think, *Wow, look how good Rory is at this thing!* And maybe I'll finally find the guts to turn down the uni offer I never actually wanted in the first place.

I scoff at myself as I press my notebook out flat to a clean set of pages. Not bloody likely. But hey, I can hope.

Before I get stuck in, I take a video of my coffee and the airport to add to my 'Come away with me!' TikTok video, then I stand up and lean over the table

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to snap a flat-lay photo for Instagram. I fix the filters, tag my location – and Costa Coffee, Tiffany & Co and the independent online shop where the notebook is from.

Unwinding at the airport with some organization and a latte . . . Going to be off the grid for the next week. Try not to miss me too much! xxx

PS Has anyone checked out the new @tiffanyandco perfume? Talk about YUMMY

I polish it off with some hashtags and turn my phone screen-down on the table in an attempt not to pay too much attention to the notifications. Hannah and Nic kept telling me to make the most of this holiday so I guess I should probably start practising being without my phone a bit.

This week is supposed to be all about being ‘restful’ and ‘rejuvenated’, and I don’t want to waste it. I do *not* intend to come home with just a tan to show for it. Plus, I know my family want me to get something out of this break. Mum told Nic she hopes I come back ‘a bit less depressed’, which Nic wasn’t supposed to tell me, but obviously she did, because that’s what sisters do.

This week is my chance to turn it all around.

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To feel like I know what I'm doing with my life. To stop moping and start succeeding. I don't usually go in for all that manifestation stuff, but I'm tempted to give it a shot for a change. Send some positive vibes and a can-do attitude out into the world.

What I need is a bucket list.

I sip my latte, then smack my lips and click my biro. Time to get to work.

~The Holiday Bucket List~

1. Write pros and cons list of actually doing the law degree you got an UNCONDITIONAL OFFER FOR
2. Write pros and cons list of doing literally anything but that.
3. Consider other degrees to apply to through clearing?
4. Write pros and cons list of a gap year, just in case
5. HAVE FUN! BE RESTFUL! PRACTISE MINDFULNESS!
6. Talk to strangers (make friends??)
7. Try something new!
8. Figure out how to tell Mum and Dad and Nic and Hannah I don't want to do the law degree, never wanted to do the law degree, never will want to do

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the law degree, and might cry if someone mentions
the law degree one more time

9.

10.

I stare at the blank spots on nine and ten for a while, tapping my pen absently against the page and then chewing the end of it – then tapping again while I drink some more coffee. It bugs me there’s only eight things on the list instead of a nice round ten (ten would make for better content, I can’t help but think), but hell – I’ve got the whole flight to come up with two more things to do this week.

I embellish the page with a couple of tiny doodles with my felt-tips, then drop the lot back into my handbag and reach for my phone instead. It’s been maybe ten minutes, which I think is a pretty good start to the digital detox. That’s about the longest I’ve left my phone alone in years.

I have a few notifications – mostly consisting of overenthusiastic messages from my parents or my sisters telling me to have fun. There are some from my friends about how jealous they are, which I reply to with a selfie of me grinning in the airport. I *do* feel a bit superior about it, but in my defence, they’re all off on a group holiday to Ibiza this year and I have to miss out

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because it clashes with the family trip to Tenby, and Dad wouldn't let me bail on that. Which royally sucks, but I do love the family trip to Tenby. And they're kind of footing the bill for whatever holidays I go on, so I can't argue too much.

Not that it's that big a deal anyway because there's plenty of time this summer to hang out with my friends. The girls from netball, some of the gang from art club, a few people from my classes . . . I do feel a bit proud when I see all their different faces popping up as they read my update in Messenger. All these different people I've brought together. It's a nice feeling.

But before the group chat can start sharing their Ibiza holiday plans and make *me* the jealous one, I swipe over to the comments section of my #GRWM #getreadywithme TikTok from this morning – and my stomach plummets when I see it only has a few hundred views, making it a total flop in comparison to most of my other videos. My views have been going steadily downwards for weeks now, and my number of followers has hit a plateau – none of which is helping my recent grand total of zero sales from my Etsy store.

Why? What am I doing so wrong? Did I upset the algorithm by switching to a different filter on my videos? It doesn't make sense. Plenty of my videos

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have tens of thousands of views. And a GRWM is always popular!

What gives? I want to yell.

Is this it? The beginning of a downward slope into nothingness?

Not to be dramatic or anything, but it sure feels like a pretty firm sign to pack in any ideas of pursuing a creative career and do the boring, sensible, stupid law degree that, for some unfathomable reason, my parents suggested might be a good fit after the careers teacher said I had ‘tremendous potential’ and that, for some even more unconscionable reason, *I said sounded like fun*. It’s the universe telling me I’m a joke.

Furiously biting back tears (because I’ll be damned if I’m going to *cry* in the *airport* over one measly, pathetic video), I throw my phone back into my bag and down the last dregs of my latte, which has gone almost cold by now.

My nails sound loud and sharp as they tap across the tabletop. A woman on the next table clears her throat, jerking me back to reality. It’s only then I realize that I’ve been huffing through my nose, and my lips are twitching like they’re making argumentative replies to my parents, to the algorithm, to that awful letter of doom congratulating me on a place at Bristol Uni.

I take my phone back out – but only to check the time.

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The gate should have been up four minutes ago. Dad joked about how I'd probably get so distracted, travelling alone, that I'd miss the flight, and I *cannot* prove him right. Not after everything my family have done to try to cheer me up with this holiday. Quickly gathering my things, I take a deep breath and stand up, bag slung over my shoulder. A quick scan of the table to check I've not left anything behind, and I pick my way between the tables that have been packed in way too close to each other to the nearest board.

I stand under it for a few minutes, not quite seeing it.

Then I say, 'Shit. You've got to be kidding.'

And a voice says, 'Are you delayed too?'

I look at the girl next to me, with mousy brown hair pulled taut in a tiny, high ponytail and wearing the most outrageously bright pink trousers I've ever seen in my life. She's got to be about my age, and her mouth is twisted in sympathy.

'Yeah. To Mallorca.'

'Same. Ugh, the perfect start to a holiday, right? Apparently there's a fault with the plane, but I don't think we're supposed to know that.'

'Where'd you hear it?'

'One of the airline staff. I kind of badgered it out of him.'

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She shoots me a quick grin, giving me the impression she did a bit more than ‘kind of badger’ the guy. She starts tapping her phone rapidly against the palm of her hand.

I take a guess. ‘Nervous flyer?’

‘Kinda.’

So I say, ‘I reckon there’s something wrong with the left phalange.’

As soon as I say it, I regret it because if she doesn’t get the reference I’ve probably made this poor nervy girl even more anxious, and I’ll have to explain the whole thing, and it won’t even have been worth it.

But to my relief, she laughs. ‘Here’s hoping, huh? I mean, it’s only delayed twenty minutes. It can’t be that bad if it’s just twenty minutes, right?’

‘Right,’ I say, unconvinced, but what else does she want me to say? I know I said I wanted to ‘talk to strangers’ and ‘make friends’, but I didn’t necessarily mean with the first person I bumped into . . . Honestly, I’m enough of a shitshow on my own – I don’t need to tag along with a nervous flyer.

Already backing away, I offer a polite smile and say, ‘I’d better go buy a drink for the flight, actually, before we board. I bet it won’t even be that long a delay. Ten more minutes, max.’

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Chapter 3

Jodie

By the time we're boarding, eighty minutes later than planned, I'm frazzled.

I'm seriously considering downloading Twitter just to message the airline and complain, but I figure I've done enough of that with the staff here in the airport.

I like to think of myself as a go-getter. I am the *dictionary definition* of 'strong, independent woman', thank you very much . . . but I am *terrified* of flying, and haven't holidayed abroad for the last few years. Whatever tolerance I'd built up in my early teenage years seems to have vanished without a trace.

I'm glad there's nobody I know here to see me falling apart now.

I smile through gritted teeth at the perky flight attendant and show her the boarding pass on my phone. She points me in the direction of my seat, and I think about how that's a practice I'll never understand.

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I mean, there's literally only one way to go, other than the cockpit. You don't have to be a genius to figure out where row eleven is.

But I say, 'Thanks,' and make my way down the aisle on wobbly legs, stopping every so often as people in front of me get to their row and take forever to stow things in the overhead locker, or have the window seat and need the rest of the row to get out, all of which stretches out the torturous process of settling in for my flight. Like this wasn't already bad enough without me seeing who'd be too slow to move out of the way in the event of an emergency . . .

When I get to my row, there's a girl in my seat.

'Excuse me,' I say to her.

She must be about my age. She's bundled up in a hoodie, and wearing leggings so worn I can see the bobbles on the fabric. Her short, black, curly hair is held back by a headband, showing off a simple pair of sparkling studs in her ears, and she glances up from a book she's only three or four pages into with wide green eyes.

'Sorry, but I believe you're in my seat.'

'Oh God, I'm sorry,' she blurts, smiling awkwardly, half standing. 'I just – I really like the window seat. I've got the aisle seat. Would you mind?'

I have never minded anything less in my whole life.

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I relax a little, saying, 'Actually, that's perfect. I hate the window seat.'

'Match made in heaven!' she declares, sinking back down. She smiles at me again and then returns to her book. Some cheesy romance with loopy writing on the cover, like Gran would buy.

I clutch my bag on my lap, waiting for the plane to fill up and for someone to stop next to me and ask me to move so they can get to the middle seat. But then the attendants start shutting the doors on the plane and everyone's in their seats, buckling themselves in or setting up iPads with movies, and I realize nobody is sitting beside me.

At least something's gone right today.

First, I'd been delayed getting to the airport – Mum had insisted she'd left enough time, but had to stop to fill up with petrol, then she took a wrong turn at the airport and we spent another fifteen minutes driving around, trying to get back to a drop-off point. *Then* the airline said I couldn't take two bags on the flight so I had to pay a ridiculous fee to check in my suitcase, after I'd worked so hard to squash everything in so I could get away with just hand luggage. But it didn't stop there as *of course* I got stopped going through security, which is never fun . . .

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And to top it off, the flight was delayed. By *eighty minutes*.

It doesn't help that I've never flown alone before. I wasn't even totally sure about this holiday, but Gran and Mum convinced me in the end, and two years of frugal student-living and a part-time job where I consistently take on extra shifts meant I had the savings to cover it.

Plus, they'd made such a compelling case.

'You've just wrapped up your second year of uni, you're home for the summer, you're at a bit of a loose end with no plans before you start your summer job at the cafe in town . . . And you work so hard!' Mum had grinned at me, Gran nodding along fiercely behind her. 'Nothing wrong with a little holiday! You deserve it, Jodie. When was the last time you treated yourself?'

'I bought that coat from Zara a couple of weeks ago. And I have a millionaire's shortbread from Starbucks every Wednesday after my computational methods lecture.'

'It's not all about material goods, missy,' Gran barked, before Mum could wheedle me around. 'When was the last time you went out and *did* something?'

It had shocked me that I couldn't actually answer her, even after spending several nights lying wide awake, considering it. So . . . here I am. On a flight to

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Mallorca. To take a week-long holiday in the sun all by myself.

Which, admittedly, I *am* excited about.

But this has *got* to be the worst pre-flight in history.

All I can think is that it doesn't bode well for the rest of the holiday.

I'm fumbling through the pockets of my bag for my headphones, quickly stuffing my bag under the seat in front once I've got them, as the cabin crew take us through the emergency procedures and point out exits and things, as though they're not already clearly signposted. The captain apologizes for the delay – a delay arriving, due to adverse weather conditions on the flight out.

I let out a small sigh of relief. Not entirely convinced it wasn't a problem with the plane, but . . .

Maybe it *was* a problem with the left phalange.

I smile a little as I remember that. That was funny.

When the plane starts taxiing down the runway ready for take-off, I remember my travel-sickness tablets. I bend down and try to get them out as discreetly as possible, without moving my bag from under the seat in front.

I stuff two in my mouth, swallowing them dry. They don't go down easily, and I cough, pulling a face.

'Are you okay?'

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The girl in my assigned seat has set down her book to look at me with a mixture of sympathy and *oh God, please don't puke on me*. The plane picks up speed, and I can't reply except to grind my teeth, squeeze my eyes shut, wrap my fingers tightly around the armrests and nod stiffly.

Fake it till you make it, Jodie. Come on, get a hold of yourself.

Oh right, a voice in the back of my mind bites back. Because that mantra has served you well so far, hasn't it? It's not like you wake up sick with dread over lectures or expect to be told you've failed every piece of coursework and every exam you do . . .

'Do you want me to talk to you? Will that help? My brother used to be a nervous flyer and it always helped him.' I don't manage to answer, but she barrels on regardless. 'Are you heading to Mallorca for a holiday? I am. A week away, all-inclusive. I can't wait. Well – I'm a bit scared, to be honest, because it's my first time going away by myself, but I'm sure it'll be alright once I'm lying next to a swimming pool with a book. My boyfriend – ex-boyfriend – was always much more keen on adventures than just chilling out, so that'll be a bit of a nice change, I think.'

This is where I'd say something about being a fellow solo traveller, and how I'm hoping to relax this week,

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too – but I can't even relax my *jaw* right now to get the words out.

The girl carries on. 'The last holiday I had, we went to visit my dad's family in Jamaica, which should have been *way* more exciting than it sounds – it was only for some cousin's wedding, and I ended up with food poisoning for half the trip anyway . . . Do you want some water?'

We're in the air.

Thank God.

'No,' I churn out. My voice sounds dry and cracked. I clear my throat. 'Thanks.'

She grabs the water out of her seat pocket and uncaps it, handing it over anyway.

I take a sip, kind of worried that if I don't I might throw up.

'Thank you.'

'No problem. You're not as bad as my brother – he used to cry. He's older than me, so he'd always act all butch and macho and important, but then we'd get on a plane and he'd turn into a total wreck. I used to love it. I'd tease him about it relentlessly in front of his friends.'

'Bet he loved you for that.'

'Well, he deserved it. He'd tease me for crying over Pixar movies.'

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'I thought everyone cried over those.'

She laughs. 'Not my brother. Those first ten minutes of *Up*? Not so much as a sniffle. If he didn't used to cry when we got on a plane, I'd have thought he had a heart of stone. Do you fly much?' She glances around as if trying to work out if I'm with anybody.

I shake my head. The plane is noisy and a little rattly, and they haven't turned the seat-belt sign off yet. The perky flight attendant who pointed me to my seat is getting something from an overhead locker. She staggers ever so slightly going back down the aisle. My right hand hasn't unfurled itself from the armrest yet.

Dictionary definition of 'strong, independent woman', huh? *Yeah, right.*

'Not really,' I tell the girl. 'I think last time I went away was with some friends from school?'

'Ooh, those trips are always a riot, aren't they? We all went to Amsterdam during reading week, end of last year. Stayed in this God-awful hostel because nobody would listen to my suggestion about sharing rooms in a nice hotel. One of my flatmates got high and accidentally hired a sex worker. We ended up playing Uno with her.'

I peel my eyes open a little wider, my neck stiff as I turn to give her a baffled look. She's smiling at me, a gap between her front teeth, chattering away as if

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we're old friends. I can't quite decide if it's weird or comforting, but the alternative is thinking about all the ways this plane might crash (I should *not* have let Gran convince me to watch that Tom Hanks film about Captain Sully last week) so I decide to roll with it.

'How does that happen? I mean, how do you *accidentally* hire a sex worker?'

'Honestly, I have no idea. We were all too busy trying not to pee from laughing so hard, we never figured it out. Great story, though, isn't it?'

'Most definitely.'

There's an electronic *ding* throughout the cabin.

'Ladies and gents, the captain has now turned off the seat-belt signs. The cabin crew will be providing a trolley service shortly where you will be able to purchase food and drinks. If you are removing any hand luggage from the overhead lockers, please be careful as items may have moved during take-off.'

The girl next to me goes quiet, and I've relaxed into my seat.

'I'm Jodie, by the way,' I tell her.

There are hundreds of hotels in Mallorca, but we still have to spend the next couple of hours on this flight together; I can't redo the first impression I made, but I can try to make up for it a little bit.

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I stick my hand out towards her, which she looks at in amusement before I realize that this is probably a really weird thing to do. It's a bloody aeroplane, not some networking event. What, do I expect a keynote speaker from Glossier along with the trolley service?

She grins, though, and shakes my hand firmly. 'Luna.'

When the trolley comes around, I let her go first – she asks for a cup of tea and a Twix. I jump in straight after with my order, telling the guy I'll pay for it all.

Luna blushes furiously and says, 'Oh gosh, no, please. You don't have to do that.'

'You didn't have to be nice to me during take-off,' I tell her, and hand over the cash for our drinks and snacks before she can protest again.

When I pass hers along to her, she purses her lips and quirks an eyebrow at me as if to chastise me, but then she grins again and says, 'Thank you.'

We chat a little more, but I can feel the conversation fading – I notice her fidgeting with the book in her lap, and I have a few podcasts downloaded I was hoping to listen to. We both let it drop off, turning to our own in-flight entertainment for the rest of the way.

I find myself breathing a sigh of relief I didn't know I was holding. Maybe I can do this after all – *relax*. Have a *holiday*.

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Despite all the hard work I put in, I'm not very *good* at the whole university thing. But this isn't molecular biology – or even rocket science. This is a break, and a well-earned one. And I can *definitely* spend a week not worrying about what's next and just enjoy some sunshine and a trashy podcast to take my mind off everything.

Chapter 4

Luna

The baggage carousel is broken.

It takes forever for the bags to appear, and even then they only show up three or four at a time. Then it stops for another couple of minutes, churns out another few, and stops again. It's torture.

I tell myself the bus won't leave without me, but I still find myself chewing on my thumbnail while the seemingly endless wait for my suitcase drags on. *It won't leave without you. It's a resort shuttle bus. They have a list. They'll wait.*

I can't help but remind myself about the whole pre-paid checked baggage debacle back at the other airport though, and I can feel my heart jump into my throat every time the carousel groans to life again and starts to move.

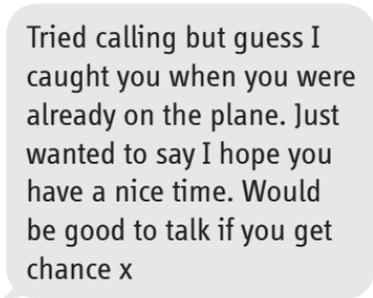
While I'm waiting, I fire off a couple of texts. I had one from Dad almost as soon as I landed saying, I see

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you've landed. Let us know when you're at the hotel. I text my brother, bemoaning the baggage carousel and grinning at the string of GIFs of Captain Holt from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* he sends back.

As I'm replying to let him know what a dork he is, a new message pings through.

It's from Liam.



Tried calling but guess I caught you when you were already on the plane. Just wanted to say I hope you have a nice time. Would be good to talk if you get chance x

Does he want to talk because he wants to fix things? Does he even realize that there were parts of our relationship that *needed* fixing? As much as I miss him, as badly as my heart is aching in the space he used to be, I immediately recall the sorts of things that pushed me to break up with him.

Messages that went unanswered, hardly speaking to him for days on end, even with him only living across campus. How I was always the one putting in the effort to make plans for us because, if I didn't, he sure as hell wouldn't. The fact that he prioritized his

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new friends over me again and again, and made me feel like *I* was the one not spending time with him if I didn't go along on a night out – just for him to practically ignore me if I did.

I miss Liam, but I *really* don't miss all that.

It's those memories I focus on as I fight the urge to text him back – not the ones where I was wrapped up in his arms like it was exactly where I belonged, or all the fun day trips or times out with friends I would have missed if he hadn't coaxed me along, and the way my heart sang when he sat there with his arm around me and smiled like I hung the moon.

We probably should talk. The break-up – my *breakdown* – was so out of the blue I probably owe him at least more of an explanation.

But not right now – and not this week. This holiday is supposed to be completely self-indulgent and an attempt to get over him. If I'm still hung up on Liam by the time I get back home, maybe I can tell him that I miss him – and *only* then.

I mute the notifications from him until the end of the week.

A text comes through from my service provider saying WELCOME TO SPAIN and reminding me about all the tariff details. I open up the WhatsApp chat with my friends from uni to message everyone and see how

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they're doing. It's been quiet lately, which is weird because with seven people in it, there's usually some conversation going on.

In my group chat of friends from home, which has also been quiet for a few weeks, I send a longer message saying that I'm off on holiday, ask how everybody's exams were, and say it'd be nice to catch up properly when I get back next week.

I get one bland, brief reply from the uni crowd a few minutes later, and something heavy settles on my chest. It's the same feeling I get when I see the photos they recently posted, which include Liam, but not me.

He would have told them about the break-up. That's always been the way with us: Liam's the extrovert, forever on his phone, messaging people, and we were constantly together so he'd read out whatever was going on, and I'd pitch in to the conversation via him. Of course he would have told them what happened, they're our friends, but . . . Hardly anyone from *either* group has reached out to me about it, and the way my messages go unanswered now feels like a line in the sand.

The luminous orange suitcase strap I borrowed from my parents catches my eye, and I'm saved from having to speculate about the fact that mine and Liam's friends might *not* be mine anymore.

I shove my phone into my hoodie pocket while I

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