

THE RETURN JOURNEYS



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Addie

'Minstrels?'

'Check.'

'Dolly's *Greatest Hits* queued?'

'Check.'

'No stalkers, exes, or people with whom we have a traumatic history in the back seats?'

Deb makes a show of craning to look at the back of the Mini. She grins at me from the driving seat. 'Check. Though don't pretend you don't wish Dylan was here.'

I pause. 'You know what, I'm pretty much done with pretending I don't miss Dylan, actually. I *do* wish he was here. Last night was like . . .'

'No details, please, I can tell you're seconds away from the word "cuddle".'

'Excuse me, why are you assuming we weren't up all night having very hot sex?'

'Because I know you,' Deb says, pulling out of the parking space outside the Airbnb. 'And I know you'll want to take it slow this time. And I know Dylan, so I *also* know that "taking it slow" will

mean excruciating weeks of sexual tension and erotic poetry. And cuddling.'

'That about covers it, actually,' I say, closing my eyes for a moment. Last night had been . . . slow kisses and his hand on my hip, my waist, thumb just grazing the edge of my bra. Talking until our voices were hoarse. Crying in each other's arms. Wanting him. Loving him so much it ached.

I swallow, opening my eyes again. Only one day until we're together again. And it's been at least two hours since we said goodbye, so that's like . . . ten per cent of the time apart done.

Dylan's travelling back from Scotland with Marcus and his mum. Understandably, Elinor Abbott didn't really fancy getting a lift back with her soon-to-be ex-husband. She's going to stay with a friend in London for a while, until things get sorted with Dylan's dad.

Meeting Elinor for breakfast this morning had felt like completing a puzzle I've been trying to solve for years. She makes as much sense of Dylan as his dad does. Miles Abbott made Dylan wary and bruised; Elinor Abbott made him generous, and creative, and the sort of guy who loves you so much he doesn't give up on you for twenty whole months.

I wonder if it'll ever stop being a thrill, having Dylan as mine again. Knowing that wherever he is, whatever he's doing, he's loving me as much as I'm loving him.

'You're smiling like Riley after a really good feed,' Deb observes, glancing over.

I attempt to control my grin. 'Sorry. I'm sickening.'

'This is true,' Deb says, as I hit play on Dolly Parton's *Greatest Hits*. 'Luckily it's still novel enough that I don't mind.'

'That's the last you'll hear about Dylan though.' I raise my voice over 'Better Get to Livin''. 'No more boy chat. We're getting our road trip. No baby, no boyfriend, just you and me and the open road.'

'Amen to that,' says Deb, accelerating as the road opens out ahead of us.

I tear into the Minstrels. The windows are down and my hair is buffeting in the wind. It's cooler today – the sunshine's gentler than it was on our journey here. I'm so happy I feel like I'm overflowing with it, as if it's pouring out of the open car windows and trailing like streamers behind us.

'I'm glad we're getting our sisterly road trip this way around, you know, instead of on the way to the wedding,' Deb says. She opens her mouth for a Minstrel and I pop one in.

'Yeah?'

'It's not that I didn't want to get to Cherry's wedding,' Deb says, chewing. 'But this way around, the destination's better. We're going back to my baby. And that feels better than anything.'

I turn to look at her. When Deb says *better than anything*, she's not being overdramatic. She means it. Her happy is overflowing too.

'How did we both get so lucky?' I ask her.

She shrugs. 'I dunno,' she says. 'By being excellent?'

'Maybe,' I say, sucking on a Minstrel. 'Or maybe it was because we had each other?'

Deb thinks about it. 'Nah,' she says, grabbing for the packet. 'Definitely the excellent thing.'

My phone buzzes in my palm and I look down. It's a message from Dylan, a long one.

Travel Update

You left two hours

and fourteen minutes ago

and I'm really coping

very well.

I only miss

your touch

when I think of it,
which is barely more
than all the time,
and I only want you
as much
as I always have,
and for several minutes
I've not imagined
you naked
at all.

On top of that,
most admirable of all
if I do say so myself –
I've hardly written
you
a single poem.

Dylan

My phone buzzes just as we reach Edinburgh airport, and I'm smiling before I've even opened the message.

You're doing better than I am, then x

And then, a second later:

There once was a woman called Addie,
Who thought that her ex was a baddie.
She told him, 'Piss off!
You arrogant toff!
Then ended up back with the laddie.

I burst out laughing.

I should probably tell you Deb helped a lot. And I had to google all my rhymes.
So don't feel intimidated by my poetry skills x

'God, I love her,' I say, slipping my phone back in my pocket.

‘No – really?’ Marcus drawls.

He’s clean-shaven and his hair is still wet from the shower; he looks tired, but the drawn hollowness of his face has eased a little in the last day or so. We climb out of Cherry and Krish’s limo, whose number plate reads H0N1 M00N, and several passers-by stare, non-plussed, as this limousine ejects not just the newly married couple but also me, Marcus and my mother.

‘Thanks again for the lift to the airport,’ I say to Cherry.

‘No problem!’ She beams at us. ‘Do you know what makes me really happy?’

‘Being married to me?’ Krishna asks, as he heaves her suitcase on to a trolley.

‘Nope, not that,’ Cherry says blithely, then clocks what she’s said and bounces over to kiss Krishna in apology.

He grins at her, the lovesick, giddy grin of a man who’s found everything he’s ever wanted.

‘The fact that our entire homeward journey will be charged to Dylan’s father’s account?’ Marcus says.

‘Oh, I do feel badly about that,’ my mother says fretfully.

I shoot her a look. ‘It’s a joint account,’ I remind her. ‘That money belongs to both of you.’

‘It’s not that,’ Cherry says, ‘though that is great.’

‘What, then?’ I ask her.

‘It’s the fact that my wedding sorted everyone out.’

‘Our wedding,’ Krish says, with the air of a man who has made this correction several times before in the last year or so.

‘Yes, right, yes!’ Cherry says, blowing him an air kiss as we make our way into the terminal. ‘*Our* wedding. But you can’t deny that I have totally sorted you all out. Dylan’s back with Addie, Marcus and Dyl are friends again, Elinor’s dumped Miles . . .’

‘Oh, dear,’ my mum says, and I reach to squeeze her arm. Cherry is not *entirely* sensitive to the fact that leaving my father is the bravest,

biggest thing my mother has ever done, and that she's having a little trouble getting her head around it. Mum brightened up when she met Addie this morning, before Luke and Javier's flight back to the States; otherwise, though, she's been wide-eyed and silent, following me and Marcus around like a lost stray cat. But she's not wavered: her phone keeps lighting up with new calls from Dad, and she just flips it over so she can't see the screen.

'We are very grateful to you, Cherry – and Krish,' I say. 'Though I am concerned that this has validated Cherry's belief that she should be in charge of everybody else's life.'

'Of *course* I should be in charge of everybody's life!' Cherry says. 'Oh my God.' She stops very suddenly and lifts her hands to her mouth.

Krish narrowly avoids ramming the luggage trolley into the back of her legs with a manoeuvre that involves much side-skidding and a lot of arm strength.

'What?' I ask her.

'Rodney!'

'What?' says Krish.

'Rodney! Did anyone untie him?'

Marcus starts to laugh.

'Cherry,' I say, 'do you honestly think that Rodney has been quietly sitting in that bridal preparation chamber tied to a chair for the last twenty-four hours?'

'I just . . . forgot about him!' she says. 'I forgot about him completely! Once we got changed for the evening I had a lot more champagne and then Krishna took me to bed and then we were up pretty much all—'

'I'm sure someone else saw to your stalker man,' Krish says quickly. 'Right?'

He looks at me and Marcus.

We look at one another.

‘He would have made himself known if we’d left him there for that long,’ I say, simultaneously remembering the thickness of the castle walls, and trying not to visibly wince. ‘He wouldn’t just sit there. Would he?’

‘This is Rodney we’re talking about,’ Marcus says. ‘He probably had a flapjack in his pocket to keep him going. And we know he has form for pissing himself. Oh, excuse me, Elinor. Relieving himself in his own pants, is what I meant to say.’

‘Much better,’ my mother says faintly.

‘We have to go back!’ Cherry says.

‘No,’ Krishna says, taking her firmly by the hand, ‘we have to catch our flight.’

‘But! But!’

‘Cherry,’ Krishna says, ‘we are not delaying our honeymoon to go and release the man who tried to stop our wedding.’

‘Oh, he didn’t try very hard,’ Cherry says, eyes wide and earnest. ‘Really, he didn’t!’

‘I wouldn’t worry,’ Marcus says. He’s on his phone; he turns it so I can see the screen.

It’s Facebook, and there’s a new post on Rodney Wiley’s page. It’s a photograph of him in front of the wedding venue, beside a woman who I vaguely recognise as a relation of Krish’s – a cousin, maybe? We were definitely introduced yesterday.

The text reads: *Rescued by a beautiful damsel!!!*

‘There you go,’ I say to Cherry as Marcus shows her the picture. ‘Rodney’s fine.’

‘That woman, on the other hand . . .’ Marcus says.

‘Oh, don’t worry about Kiara,’ Krishna says, sounding surprisingly cheerful. ‘Awful person. Wouldn’t wish her on anyone.’

‘It’s true,’ Cherry says. ‘She once told me she hit a kitten when it was crossing the road and she just drove off and left it there.’

‘Christ,’ says Marcus. ‘Even I think that’s bad.’

'So there you go, Cherry,' I say. 'Maybe Rodney will bring out her soft side.'

Cherry beams at us, tightening her ponytail with her handbag swinging from her elbow; behind her, Krishna tries to prevent the weighed-down luggage trolley from rolling off towards a family of four in the queue for the check-in machines.

'Bye then, you lot!' she says, hugging us each in turn. 'And when I'm back, Elinor, me and my matchmaking skills are coming for you next!'

My mother's eyes widen.

'At least let the poor woman file for divorce first,' Marcus says as he hugs Cherry.

Cherry pouts. 'Fine. And Marcus . . .'

'Mm?'

'Don't think I didn't notice how you looked at Grace last night.' She points her finger at him. 'You're next on my list!'

'Please take her away, Krishna,' Marcus says.

'With pleasure,' says Krish, and in one smooth movement he hooks Cherry around the waist, pulls her down on to the luggage cart, and wheels his new wife away.

As we wave them goodbye, I pull my phone out again and reread Addie's limerick. We've got a little while until check-in opens for our flight; certainly long enough to compose a limerick or two in response.

There once was an absolute ninny
 Who drove his Merc into a Mini,
 But the car that he'd shoved
 Held the woman he loved
 So the ninny was in quite a spinny.

'twas a sun-beaten sauna-hot day,
And his love did not turn him away:
She saved him instead;
'I love you,' she said,
And happy as Larry were they.

BETH O'LEARY

'UTTERLY
HEARTWARMING'
LINDSEY KELK

'TRULY
BRILLIANT'
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