

Chapter 1

“Merry Christmas! And welcome to the most magical ten days of your entire life!”

I stare at the perky blonde lady in her crisp white uniform. Maybe the longest ten days of my life. Or the most annoying ten days of my life. But I can pretty much guarantee that the next week and a half will not be the most magical.

I respond with a slight smile—she has no way of knowing that ever since my parents’ divorce, holidays have lost their magical appeal. Shuffling between Mom’s home in Minnesota and Dad’s place in Illinois, pretending all is well, does not make for precious memories.

And this one will be particularly straining, ten days alone on a cruise ship with my dad—and his old high school classmates. What a stupid time for a class reunion. Who would want to spend ten days, over the holidays, with the teenage acquaintances you’ve spent decades trying to forget? Apparently, my father.

I tuck a strand of dark hair behind my ear, hitch my bag higher on my shoulder, and continue following Dad as we make our way onto the ship. I’ve yet to understand exactly why he wanted me to join him on this Caribbean cruise. While I’ve always dreamed of such an exotic vacation, him bringing me on this cruise with his old buddies, defies all logic. Over the years, our infrequent time together has not been fun weeks of togetherness. When I do see him, we generally just do our own thing. Which means not only will I be spending the week on my own, but I’m also going to miss all the fun of the Christmas break back in Minnesota. He probably doesn’t even know that I always look forward to all the time-honored traditions that my best friend, Josie, and I have created over the years—my favorite being our annual sleepover followed by a day of sledding and snowman building sometime between Christmas and New Year’s.

Get real. Josie will most likely spend the entire break with Ryan. The two love birds are nauseatingly inseparable. As soon as the thought pops into my head, a massive dose of guilt wells within me because I know it’s not true. Before Christmas, Josie went out of her way to make time for our other holiday traditions. She made sure all our must-see movies were watched, our gingerbread houses decorated, and our present wrapping extravaganza fulfilled.

I’m jerked back to reality as some young boys bump into me, knocking my bag off my shoulder as they scamper past us on their

way up the ramp leading to the cruise ship. Their mother offers a weary apology as she hurries after them. A man, who I presume to be her husband and the father of the little ruffians, strides past us. With his phone plastered to his head, he's completely oblivious to his stressed wife and out-of-control children—clearly Father of the Year material.

Dad wraps his arm around my shoulder as I readjust my bag and then leads me up the gangplank. “You’ve been sulking long enough. Time to have fun.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Bring on the fun.

As we enter the ship, we’re welcomed by the beaming staff. I politely nod but don’t even hear their greeting because the opulent promenade demands my full attention. Three levels of balconies, adorned with tiny, glittering lights, tower above me. The long, fully enclosed hallway has the feel of a European street lined with fancy shops and cafes, elaborately decorated for the holidays.

Dad steers me through the crowds of happy vacationers to the elevator and down to the floor where our rooms are located. I follow him along a narrow hallway, past countless doors, until we locate our two rooms. I use the key card to open my door while Dad checks out his adjacent room, then step into my home for the next ten days. Not too shabby. It’s roomier than I expected. Not as big as my room at home but larger than the walk-in closet I feared. And look at that—a balcony.

I pull open the sliding glass door and step out, despite the not-so-impressive view. Since this side of the boat is tied to the dock, all I see are guests being herded through lines like cattle being led to the slaughterhouse and onto the boat. Right across from me is the fake backdrop where all the passengers patiently wait for their first photo memory of the trip. No doubt ours will look like a mug shot. I tried to muster up a smile, but despite years of acting, faking excitement proved to be too difficult because I’m still baffled why Dad wanted me to come on this ten-day trip with him.

When he first mentioned it, Mom hesitated and grilled him to make sure he wasn’t inviting his girlfriend along. Mom, who can be a fierce protector, remembered what a disaster my summer with him and his barely-older-than-me girlfriend had been. After assuring her that it would just be him and me and two hundred of his classmates, she agreed, then eagerly booked a flight to visit a girlfriend in New York. Neither caring about my preference of how to spend the holidays.

The three of us spent an awkward Christmas together yesterday in Chicago. But at least it was lucrative for me. They’d gotten me all kinds of new cute clothes for the ten days in the Caribbean. Technically, Mom had purchased my vacation wardrobe, and Dad

had shelled out some money. Luckily, they were both on their best behaviors. After hours of stilted conversation and prolonged silences, Mom left for her hotel fairly early, under the pretense that I needed to pack all my new outfits. Then Dad and I caught an early flight this morning for Miami.

I sink into the lounge chair on my mini deck and pull my phone from my backpack. Soon we'll have no service, so there's no time to waste if I want to send any final texts. First, I send a quick one to Mom to let her know we've boarded. She's probably on her flight, so I'm not surprised when no immediate response appears. Next, I text Josie.

I'm wishing for a snowy Christmas.

Just like the ones you've known your entire life?

Josie types back in our musical theater dialogue that we've perfected over the years.

Although didn't you technically have a white Christmas? I'm pretty sure Chicago is rather snowy this time of year.

I grin.

Fine, I'm wishing for a snowy day after Christmas.

Miami isn't a winter wonderland?? Shocker.

Seriously. Who wants a tropical heatwave during the holidays? That's not natural.

I wait while she responds.

I'm pretty sure it didn't snow in Bethlehem when baby Jesus was born. So...how was Christmas with mom and pop?

Josie knows just how much I was dreading spending the holiday with both my parents—a first since their divorce eight years ago. *Ehh...We're all still alive.*

And how are you?

I stare at those four little words. How am I? That's the million-dollar question. Only Josie knows how much it hurt when Dad walked out on us. And how I've never truly been able to forgive him. In the aftermath, Mom was such a mess that I felt the need to hide my feelings from her. But Josie was always there for me through all the tears and anger. It's better now, but I'm still waiting for the childhood pain to disappear. I take a deep breath and type.

I'm okay. I made it through a whole summer with him. Ten days should be doable.

I'll be praying for you!

Thx.

Maybe this is a good time to try those prayers I suggested.

My shoulders sag with a sigh. Josie keeps trying to get me to go to her church youth group with her and Ryan. But always being the third wheel is not my idea of fun. And then there's her newfound enthusiasm for the faith, which I don't really get. Ever since

the summer and meeting Ryan, she's become more involved with the church. I thought maybe it was a passing phase, but it seems to be the real deal. Before the trip, she even gave me a little prayer card with a novena to pray for healing a family. I know she means well, but my family may be beyond repair.

Yeah, maybe. Hey—good news is I pretty much got a whole new wardrobe for the trip.

Sweet!

BTW, how's your head?

The day before Mom and I left for Dad's place in Chicago, Josie and I had gone ice skating. My best friend had one of her "Josie moments," slipping, falling, and taking out a slew of little kids in the process. Luckily, no one but Josie had gotten hurt.

Oh, it's fine. Ryan brought me over a gallon of ice cream to make me feel better.

Spumoni?

Of course!

Your Prince Charming knows you well.

Yeah, he's a keeper! Hey, please try to have fun—okay?

She's been trying for weeks to get me excited about this trip. Visiting my dad is never the easiest time. We always struggle with what to say to each other—but lately, it's been even more strained. Our summer visit was such a disaster that I went home early. Maybe he's trying to make up for that catastrophe with this trip.

All right.

That's all the excitement I can muster.

Take lots of pictures.

Will do.

Adios

Au Revoir

Arrivederci

Auf Wiedersehen

I smile at our signature signoff—my last text for the next ten days. I turn my attention back to the happy vacationers as they stream up the ramp. Josie had a life-changing vacation during the summer. She came back focused and full of confidence. If not a little delusional. That's when she and Ryan came up with this crazy idea of making our school less cliquy. While their intentions are honorable—who wouldn't want to change the hierarchical tier system in our school?—there is no way it will work. The popular crowd is too proud of their status to ever willingly let it go. So, while Ryan and Josie keep trying to implement their idealistic vision, I remain realistic.

I don't know what craziness they are preaching at that youth group, but the change in Josie in such a short time is a little concerning. Take the novena, for instance. I'm pretty sure the only other person I've ever known who mentioned praying a novena

was my great-grandmother. In fact, that's exactly what I told Josie when she handed me the little pamphlet. But she just laughed and explained that novenas are simply structured prayers that ask certain saints to pray for us. I guess that's not too weird. I dig through my bag until I find the little pamphlet. The front is a picture of the Holy Family. Joseph has his arm around Mary, and they are both gazing at their little bundle of joy with pure love and devotion. For the first time, I read the fine print: the novena lasts nine days and begins on the first Sunday after Christmas. Today. Okay, Josie—this one's for you.

I open the brochure and read the first prayer. I stifle a laugh when I read, *Help me and the members of my family to love, listen to, support, and accept one another*. Clearly, my family will need the assistance of the entire Holy Family to achieve that goal. I stumble through the prayers and end with a sign of the cross like Josie always does. *Okay, Lord, it's up to You*.

"Hey." Dad steps out onto my balcony.

I shove the novena back into my backpack. "How'd you get in my room?" So much for privacy.

"We have an adjoining door."

Super.

He runs a hand through his touched-with-gray, sandy-blond hair. "I knocked, but I guess you didn't hear."

"Guess not." I know I should be nicer, but when it comes to my dad, sulky, sullen Liz immediately emerges.

He stuffs his hand in his pocket, pulls out a phone, and holds it out toward me. "I got you something."

I stare at the small device in his hand. "What's this for?"

"I've heard nightmare stories about people who try to use their phones on vacation and rack up outrageous charges from international calls and roaming fees. But I thought it would be good for us to have a way to get ahold of each other, so I bought us each a prepaid phone. Plus, it takes photos!"

"I thought I'd just use my phone for photos only."

"But now you won't be tempted to send them or post them."

He inches his outstretched hand closer to me.

A twinge of annoyance flashes through me. Thanks for the vote of confidence, Dad. Although, he may have a point. I finally take it. "Thanks."

"I added my number to your contact list."

"You've thought of everything."

He nods, happy with my less than heartfelt statement. "Well, since our luggage isn't here yet, want to go up on deck for the bon voyage party?"

"Sure. Sounds fun." I manage a little half-smile—I think.

I lead the way to the door, then stop and turn toward him.
“Do you have your room key on you?”

He pats down his pockets, then gives a sheepish grin before retreating to his room. I’m unable to control the roll of my eyes. Dad isn’t necessarily absentminded, but he certainly has a tendency to leave things laying out and forget them.

Up on the deck, we wedge our way through the crowd to find a spot along the ship’s railing. Before too long, the bullhorn of the ship blasts, and the boat slips away from the dock.

Dad’s arm circles around me. “Bon voyage!”

“Bon voyage!” I half-heartedly echo along with all the other passengers. I lamely wave at the workers on the dock who look bored to tears. How many times have they seen hundreds of strangers waving at them as their boat leaves the dock? Who started this silly tradition?

The crowd begins to filter away from the railing. Dad and I turn to leave, practically toppling over an elderly woman standing in front of us. She’s about a foot shorter than me, and since I’m not gifted in the height department, that’s pretty tiny. Her white hair is perfectly styled, and her oversized sunglasses almost hide her entire face. She’s dressed in a crisp white pantsuit and probably wearing her weight in gold between her many gold rings, bracelets, necklaces, and earrings. The afternoon sunlight gleams off the precious metal, practically blinding me. The woman flashes us an equally bright smile. “Are you ready for a wonderful vacation?”

“Yes, we are,” Dad cheerfully replies. “Are you?”

She tilts her head to the side. “Yes. I am definitely ready for an adventure.” She touches my arm. “How about you, dear?”

I force my gaze off her bright red lipstick to my reflection in her designer shades. “Yep. I’m ready. Ready for a magical ten days.” Ready as I’ll ever be.

“Oh, there’s someone serving champagne.” Dad squeezes my arm. “Can I get a glass for you?” he asks the lady, his simple question oozing charm.

The miniature octogenarian shakes her head. “Thank you, dear, but none for me.”

His smile flashes toward me. “I’ll be right back.” With that, he disappears into the crowd.

And so, it begins.

My gaze shifts to a large family walking by, all in matching neon green shirts. An elderly couple leads the group, which consists of bouncy little children, talkative middle schoolers, and pairs of laughing adults. A baby sleeping in her daddy’s arms is even

dressed in the festive attire. At least half of the group has red hair, ranging in color from fiery to dark auburn. The words printed on their shirts confirm the obvious; the Desmont family is enjoying a family reunion.

Envious longing floods through me as I watch them cross the pool deck like a line of ducklings. Another thing I'll never enjoy—a large, happy family. Heck, I'd even settle for a small, happy family instead of my broken, dysfunctional one.

“Are you traveling with your family?”

I'm startled to see my diminutive geriatric friend still standing beside me. “Um...Nope. Just me and the old man.”

She taps my arm with her wrinkly, age-spotted hand. “Make sure you use plenty of sunscreen on that beautiful fair skin of yours.”

I nod. “Will do.”

“Well, I'm sure I'll see you around, dear. This ship might be large, but it's not that large.” She turns and gracefully glides through the crowd, past a whining little kid tugging on his mom's arm.

“Mo-omm.”

“What?” The woman snaps, and she yanks her arm free.

The boy swoops a chunk of hair out of his eyes. “You said we had to leave our devices at home.”

She nods. “That's right. We're having a nice family vacation.”

“Well, why doesn't Dad have to follow the rule?”

The mother and son both turn to look at a man standing beside them, looking out toward the ocean. White wires snake from his pocket up to his ears.

The woman yanks the earbuds out of his ears. He turns to them bewildered, then glances at the earbuds in his wife's hand.

“Peter! We agreed to leave our phones in the stateroom.”

“I did. I just downloaded a lecture or two onto my old iPod.”

He pulls a small little device from his pocket.

The woman's face turns an unnatural shade of red. Surprisingly, steam doesn't start shooting out of her ears. The polite thing would be to turn away, but it's like watching an accident; I want to avert my eyes, but I just can't.

“We agreed that we would leave work behind for the whole week.” Her raised voice draws looks from various passengers. “I can't believe you brought along a lecture to listen to.”

“I didn't technically agree.” He winces at the icy glare aimed at him. “I promise listening to a few lectures won't interfere with our trip.”

Her eyes narrow into slits. “That's how it always starts. You listen to one of your colleagues' lectures and then you have to

send a reply or do some research or look up an article or something. Well, not this time.” She grabs the iPod from his hand and tosses it on the lounge chair next to them. “We are going to have a fun time and make some wonderful memories if it kills us,” she hisses between gritted teeth. “Now, I want a cocktail to start this enjoyable vacation.”

The husband stares at his wife for a moment, then nods. “One cocktail coming up.” He dutifully makes his way toward the bar while his wife and son turn their attention toward the distant horizon where we’re headed.

Well, maybe I’m not the only one with a dysfunctional family.

After Dad and I scope out the whole ship, I’m satisfied there are enough places to keep me occupied during our days at sea. Once we finish the tour, we swing by our staterooms to change into something more suited for the cocktail meet and greet for his class reunion. But as luck would have it, my suitcase has not arrived yet. So, while Dad’s all spiffed up in dress pants and a nice yet casual untucked shirt, I’m stuck with the jeans and t-shirt that I’ve been wearing since five a.m., Chicago time. I don’t even have deodorant or a hairbrush to try and look presentable. I can just hear it now, “Oh, Wade, you didn’t tell us your daughter was a gypsy. How very bohemian.”

He insists I look fine, so nixes my plea to skip the dumb shindig. Despite his bald-faced lies, I dutifully traipse along anyway. The first stop inside the large lounge is a table for our nametags. Next, Dad steers us toward the bar for a little liquid courage. My father is nothing if not predictable.

I take a sip of the soda he hands me, then set it back on the bar. Figures. How hard is it to remember that your only child hates root beer? Dad takes a swig of his drink, then scans the room. The bartender looks at me with one raised eyebrow.

“Could I please have a cola?” I answer his silent query.

He nods and pours me a new drink.

“Hey, I see Pat Holliday. I’m going to go say hi.”

“Cool. I’m going to take my *cola* and go sit by myself in that lounge chair over there.”

He squeezes my arm without even looking at me. “Okay, great. Have fun.” He strides toward a group of people.

I settle into the comfy chair to people-watch and enjoy the live piano music. The handsome dark-haired musician ends one song and begins another. Sadly, the beautiful tunes are largely ignored by the growing crowd.

Middle-aged men with thinning hairlines and widening waistlines shake hands with each other. Groups of ladies, who look far

better than their male counterparts—plastic surgery much?—give each other fake squeals of delight and air kisses. Is this what my high school class will succumb to one day? I can only hope that justice will be served and the jocks and princesses of our cliquey class that terrorize everyone on a daily basis will fall victim to the cruel hands of time.

As more guests filter in and the crowd grows, it's easy to tell the spouses from the classmates; they all look how I feel—bored out of their minds, wondering why they agreed to this trip. How many of the poor souls are like me and didn't have much of a choice?

“Is this the teens-who'd-rather-be-anywhere-than-here section of the room?”

I look up to see a guy my age standing in front of me. Tall, muscular build, dark hair—cut very close on the sides and back with slightly longer waves on top—flawless olive skin, undeterminable ethnicity, nicely dressed, eyes with ridiculously long eyelashes. Cute.

I motion for him to sit down. “Yep. But be warned—I've noticed a lot of bored spouses eyeing this designated section.”

“Thanks for the warning. I'd better sit while I can.” He lowers himself into the comfy lounge chair next to me. “Do you come here often, or is this your first thirtieth high school reunion?”

Good-looking and witty—this boy has potential. “Do you flirt with all the girls you pick up at your parents' social gatherings?”

He grins. “Just the ones who are incredibly underdressed.”

I'm unable to stop the little laugh that manages to escape. He's right, of course, but I'm surprised he actually pointed it out. I reach for my soda. “Just my luck, a modern-day Henry Higgins.”

He arches an eyebrow. “Does that mean I should call you Eliza?”

My eyes narrow as I take a sip. I never would have pegged this preppy guy to know the characters in *My Fair Lady*.

He shrugs. “My mom is a little obsessed with Audrey Hepburn.”

Apparently, he's a mind reader. “Who isn't?”

He leans back, scrutinizing me. “You know, you remind me a bit of her.”

I lean back and cross my arms. “Who? Audrey or your mom?”

His deep laugh could only be categorized as charming. “Definitely Audrey.” His head tilts to the side. “You think I'm joking, but I'm serious—fair skin, dark hair, slender, poised. If it weren't for the unusual choice of clothes for a cocktail party, you could fit right into *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.”

“Now you're just showing off. I'll only be impressed if you can name one more Audrey Hepburn movie.”

He strokes his chin. "Is this a bet of some sort?"

I shrug, coyly looking at him over my raised shoulder. "Sure. I'll tell you my name if you answer correctly."

"Hmm...well, I would like to know your name." He leans forward, his forearms resting on his thighs, and concentrates on his clasped hands.

Before he has to declare defeat, Dad approaches with a tall, pasty-looking gentleman with thinning wheat-colored hair.

Dad points at me with the index finger of his hand that's holding the whiskey glass. The ice rattles. "Tad here just said he should introduce his son to you."

Dad playing matchmaker. What could possibly go wrong?

Tad nods. "And here you've already met."

I look between pasty Tad and this cute guy I've been flirting with. The two of them look *nothing* alike. Wow. Never would've guessed that connection. Wonder what his mom looks like. She must possess the exotic, dark genes that make this boy so handsome.

"Tad and I were tennis partners back in the day. We even played on a league together before you were born, until he moved to Virginia." Dad pats his old friend on the shoulder.

Tad reaches out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Liz."

"Liz!" Tad's son exclaims. "Guess I win the bet by default."

Way to go, Dad. "It's hardly a win when you couldn't complete the dare."

The two ex-tennis partners exchange a confused look.

"Cole, ready to head to dinner?" Tad asks his son. "Your siblings are probably anxiously waiting for us."

Cole? Wouldn't have guessed it. Coles should be blond and blue-eyed.

My verbal sparring partner stands. "Sure." He looks down at me. "See ya later, *Liz*."

"Not if I see you first, *Cole*."

He begins to walk away, then turns back and grins. "I hope you enjoy your holiday. Even if it isn't a Roman one."

I cover my mouth to hide my smile at his Audrey Hepburn reference. *Roman Holiday*. Well played, Cole. Maybe this cruise won't be so excruciating after all.