

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

UNCHARTED WATERS

*A
Short
Story*

SALLY HEPWORTH

New York Times bestselling author

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Published by Amazon Original Stories, Seattle

www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781662508158

Cover design by Kimberly Glyder

“The sea, the great unifier, is man’s only hope. Now, as never before, the old phrase has a literal meaning—we are all in the same boat.”

—Jacques-Yves Cousteau

Today’s Challenge: Speak Your Truth

Welcome aboard the *Lady Emerald*, shipmates. On behalf of myself, our staff, and our crew, I’d like to tell you how delighted we are to be spending the next week with you.”

Captain Leo beamed. He looked fit and distinguished in his merchant navy uniform and hat. If not for his greying moustache and weathered skin, he could have been mistaken for a twentysomething, rather than a sixtysomething. It was the first day of the seven-day island hop of the Whitsunday Islands in northeastern Australia, and the eight eager-faced new residents of the *Lady Emerald* lounged on the white U-shaped sofa on the upper deck, ostensibly for the safety briefing, but in practice for Captain’s pep talk about life.

“The first and most important thing I have to tell you is that your time on the *Lady* is not a vacation; it’s a voyage. A time to cast off the moorings and hoist the mainsail of your life . . .”

The charter was pitched as “a wellness retreat on water,” and Captain started every charter by talking about the *Lady*’s transformative powers. (His wife, Joyce, also one of the yacht’s chefs, said he was a stifled yogi.) It was Ella’s sixth time aboard the *Lady* now, and she and Mac had agreed that while the wellness part wasn’t exactly in their wheelhouse, a little self-reflection was worth it in exchange for the luxury escape.

Mac had first heard about the charter six years ago, while removing a basal cell carcinoma from a patient’s neck. The patient, a middle-aged stockbroker with a practically adolescent-aged third wife, had waxed lyrical about the weeklong escape as Mac performed the surgery, and by the time he was suturing, Mac had all but paid the deposit.

“I’ve seen countless people step onto this yacht feeling rudderless, drifting from point to point in their lives, and just a few days later they are transformed, hoisting their spinnakers with confidence, captains of their own lives . . .”

It was Ella’s first time on the *Lady* without Mac, a last-minute, unwelcome change after Mac’s business partner, Jerry, had chosen yesterday to fall off his bike and break two bones in his leg. As the only other dermatologist at the clinic, and with patients requiring urgent attention, Mac had no choice but to man the fort. Ella had assumed this meant neither of them would go, until Mac pointed out that they weren’t going to get their money back and said it would be a waste for *both* of them to miss out.

Ella was embarrassed to realise that she was nervous about this. She was a nearly forty-year-old woman, after all, and how hard could lying around on a yacht in a bikini really be? Ella often heard herself described as articulate, intelligent, aloof—a genius cover, she thought, for the fact that she was actually uncertain, hesitant, befuddled. One of the things she loved about Mac was the social lubrication he provided. It wasn’t that they were codependent, exactly, but as a child-free-by-choice couple, they had a particular closeness born of being each other’s *everything*. But for the next few days, Ella was on her own.

“Like any transformation, it will feel difficult at times,” Captain said. “Out of your comfort zone. I’m going to ask you to lean into this discomfort. Nothing worthwhile happens in the comfort zone.”

Ella had to withhold a smile at the suggestion that anyone could feel discomfort on the *Lady*, with its eight-metre infinity pool, its soothing bleached-oak panelling and mother-of-pearl interior, its vast array of water toys, and its floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking aquamarine seas. As for the transformation Captain promised, Ella couldn’t say she’d ever experienced it. (Although Mac had once left with the intention of becoming a pescatarian. It lasted until they got to the airport to fly home and he ordered a Big Mac.)

“All right. Time to get to know each other. Why don’t we go around introducing ourselves, and tell the group a little bit about yourself? Ella, you’re practically family around here, why don’t you start?”

“All right.” Ella attempted to cover her radiating discomfort by untying and retying the straps of her bikini. “I’m Ella. I’m a chartered accountant, and as Captain said, I’m a returning guest on the *Lady*.”

“Care to do my taxes while you’re here?” one guest asked her, with a guffaw that suggested he thought it was the funniest, most original joke ever.

Ella shrugged. “Why not? Anything to make this trip a business expense.”

There was a brief pause where the man looked uncertain.

“Kidding!” She smiled. Ella wasn’t much of a jokester, but she had come to understand (thanks to Mac) that humour was the fastest way to create connection among strangers. “I have no plans to work this week. My husband, Mac, will be doing enough of that for both of us. A last-minute work crisis, which is why I’m here alone.”

“Such is the life of a doctor,” Captain said.

They continued with the introductions. There was Magnus and Karl, thirtysomething Danish newlyweds on their honeymoon who seemed to have multiple jobs (and after a lengthy discussion about their work, Ella still couldn’t quite decipher what any of them were). There was Stephanie—who appeared to be in her midsixties and who had just finished treatment for breast cancer—and her adult daughter, Vanessa. Stephanie called it a YOLO trip, which Ella smiled at (mostly because Stephanie explained that it stood for You Only Live Once, and Ella had always wondered).

There was Jonathan and Meera, investment bankers from Sydney who had spent most of the first hour on board trying to get an internet signal. (They confessed during introductions that part of the reason that they took this charter was because their therapists had advised that they needed a digital detox.)

Meera, Ella had already noticed, was the type who liked to tell you the kind of person she was. Since setting foot on board just an hour and a half ago, Ella had overheard her start four sentences with the words “I’m the kind of person who . . .”

Lastly, there was Chloe, a nurse who, like Ella, was from Melbourne. Chloe was here “to recover from a broken heart.” Ella had to admit, she’d found this admission endearing. A good thing, since Ella, as the only other guest attending alone, was likely to be paired up with her for dinner and water activities.

It was a diverse group, which Ella liked. One of the things she and Mac had appreciated about these “by the cabin” charters was that there was a variety of rooms at different price points—from the VIP cabins to the single-bunk rooms. This, they thought, was quite egalitarian, allowing a wider swath of people to experience the *Lady* than it otherwise might have.

“All right,” Captain said. “Today’s challenge is to use your voice. Speak your truth. Say something out loud that you wouldn’t normally say. Maybe it’s something you’re shy about, or an opinion you don’t usually feel comfortable expressing? Maybe it’s a truth that you’ve been afraid to say out loud.”

Captain’s gaze travelled across the faces of the guests until it became clear that he meant they were to do it now. If Mac were here, he would have made a joke to settle the tension. Ella hadn’t realised how much she relied on him to do that. Spending most of her days with numbers and spreadsheets, Ella didn’t get to exercise the small-talk muscle as much as she should have. As such, she tended to avoid socialising, preferring instead to spend time just at home with Mac.

“All right, I’ll go,” Chloe, the nurse, said finally. “Tom, the guy that I came to get over? He was married.”

She shrugged, and Ella felt struck, not by the admission but by the quiet vulnerability it took to make it. Also, by her poise. The way she seemed ashamed of the act but not herself,

aware of her failings while also certain of her right to be here. It was, Ella thought, a rare and lovely thing.

“He was the one who told me about this charter,” Chloe continued. “When things ended between us, I thought, *What the heck? I’ll take myself.*”

“Good for you,” Ella said.

The rest of the group reacted largely with indifference, apart from Meera, who seemed appalled. Her husband, Jonathan, put a preemptive hand on her arm, but even he didn’t appear to hold out much hope that Meera wouldn’t say her piece. He glanced around nervously at the other guests.

“Well,” she said, “I’m not the kind of person who could ever date a married man.”

Chloe nodded, unbothered. “I know. That’s what I thought too.”

Chloe was, Ella noticed now, very beautiful. The kind of beautiful that you didn’t notice at first, but then suddenly it knocked you over. She was small and shapely, with blue eyes and freckles that made her look childlike, though she must have been in her midthirties. Her teeth were pleasantly, ever-so-slightly crooked; her chestnut hair was full and lush, running halfway down her back, with bangs.

“Haven’t you ever done anything you never thought you’d do?” Chloe asked.

“No,” Meera said.

“What if Jonathan was married when you met him?” Chloe asked Meera. “Or . . . what if Karl was?” she said to Magnus. “Or if Mac was?” she said to Ella. “Would you have been able to walk away from them?”

There was a moment of quiet as everyone, Ella included, contemplated this.

When no one replied right away, Meera looked victorious. “Of course they would.”

Chloe’s gaze landed on Ella. Ella wasn’t entirely clear on why she did what she did next. Perhaps it was because she

hated Meera's bland, holier-than-thou sense of justice? Perhaps it was because she saw an opportunity to take Captain's challenge and speak her truth? Or perhaps it had something to do with Chloe, and the fact that Ella found herself wanting to make a connection with her.

"Actually, my husband *was* married," Ella said. "And I didn't walk away either."

On her eighth birthday, after Ella blew out the candles on her cake, her grandmother had asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up.

"Married," Ella had replied without a second thought.

She hadn't understood the raucous laughter that followed, and to be honest, she still didn't. Yes, most people cited a career in response to this question, but to her, that was the answer that warranted a laugh. Yes, Ella wanted to have a career, but she didn't want to *be* one. She also wanted a home and nice things, but she didn't want to *be* them.

But marriage was different. Something to embody rather than have. She was bolstered by company, camaraderie. She liked to know she had someone to rely on. Even during school, she liked it best when she had just one closest friend to call her own. She was her best self with a cheerleader. Put simply, she was best when she was part of a pair. A terribly unfeminist thing to say, but that was how she felt.

Her parents trotted out the story at every birthday and function of Ella's childhood, and eventually, in her father's speech at her wedding to Mac. In her reply speech, she'd said she had a small amendment to make to her eight-year-old answer. She didn't simply want to be married.

She wanted to be married to Mac.

Dinner was on the deck at sunset. As Ella sat at the long dining table, she felt grateful to be off her feet. It took a few days to find her sea legs, and the first day was always the worst.

The air was warm and sweet, and the table was elegantly set, laid with navy-and-white linen and tableware. The food—lobster cappuccino, pan-seared sea scallops, sautéed greens, and minted pea puree—appeared at intervals, each dish more delicious than the last. Opposite the table was an outdoor bar area, staffed by a handsome dreadlocked steward doing moves with a shaker to rival Tom Cruise in *Cocktail*. Beyond it all, an apricot sun sank into the ocean.

Ella was seated next to Chloe. An appropriate placement, after her admission, and one Ella knew Captain wouldn't have made by accident. But if Captain had feared that discussion about extramarital affairs might spill over into dinner conversation, he needn't have worried. Meera was on the opposite side of the table, already in a discussion with Karl and Magnus about investments and how it wasn't immoral to invest in gambling, tobacco, and fossil fuels, even though she wasn't the type of person to gamble or smoke herself.

Ethics were a strange, strange beast.

At Ella's end of the table, Vanessa talked proudly of how her mother had beaten cancer a second time, while her mother, Stephanie, smiled with a weariness that said it had taken its toll. Chloe was an adept conversationalist, with a way of making meaningful eye contact under her bangs, which brushed her eyelashes. A couple of times, she'd held Ella's gaze for so long that Ella had actually started to feel shy.

"That's right," Stephanie said, when Chloe asked her a medical question. "You're a nurse."

"Yes," she said. "Paediatric oncology."

Vanessa winced. "Not an easy job, I imagine."

"It's not for everyone," Chloe agreed. "But I'd never do anything else. I leave every shift in awe of the bravery of kids, and the strength of their parents. It's a privilege really."

They all stared at her for several beats. Ella felt a mix of emotions. Wonder, that such people existed; shame, at her own more selfish existence; marvel, at the way people could be so many things at once.

After a moment, Chloe smiled. “Okay, before you put me on a pedestal, remember I had an affair with a married man.”

“We should tell Meera,” Stephanie said. “Maybe one will cancel out the other?”

“She’s not the type of person to change her mind about things,” Ella chimed in.

They all chuckled. Ella thought of a study she’d read recently that said that women were twice as likely to bond over mutual dislike than over shared passion.

“All right,” Captain said as the dessert—limoncello cream panna cotta and almond biscotti—was brought to the table. “It’s time for a game!”

He was still dressed in his uniform but had removed his hat. He was holding a wooden box, which Ella knew was filled with ethical dilemmas. This was a fun icebreaker that Captain trotted out each time, as a way of bringing the group together. Ella had actually stolen the idea for her own dinner parties back home. As much as she disliked hosting, it was part of the marriage package with an extrovert like Mac for a husband. Besides, when Ella was the host, it meant she could hide in the kitchen whenever small talk became too much for her, which tended to be most of the time.

“I’ll get us started,” Captain said, pulling the first card from the box. “Your teenage child has confided that they’ve stolen some cash from the register at their supermarket job. You counselled the child to return it in secret. But before they have the chance to do so, you discover that another person was fired for the crime. The person who was fired was already on a warning after a customer had made a complaint about overhearing his racist comments. Your child wants to donate the money to charity and move on. What do you do?”

Meera started—no surprise there—with a declaration that there was only one possible option. The child had to come clean, return the money. The person who was fired should remain fired because who on earth got a *warning* for making racist comments at work?

For all of Meera's foibles, Ella had to admit that there was something soothing about her clarity.

"Hey, thanks for earlier," Chloe said quietly as Jonathan offered his take on the dilemma. She touched Ella's forearm. "Saying your husband was married when you met him, I mean. I was worried I might be thrown overboard for a moment there."

Ella smiled. "Let he who hasn't sinned cast the first stone. Or she."

"I didn't even know he was married until well down the track," Chloe offered. There was an intensity to her face, as if she somehow needed Ella to understand this.

"Then it's not your fault," Ella said, with a certainty that rivalled Meera's. "Besides, you probably dodged a bullet. If he started the relationship keeping secrets, it doesn't bode well for the future."

"That's true," Chloe said. "Then again . . . it worked out for you, didn't it?"

Ella hesitated, hovering on the edge of a truth. But before she could speak it, Captain interrupted.

"How about you, Chloe?" he said. "Would you turn your child in? Or do you think the racist had it coming?"

Chloe thought it over for a second. "If my child had suggested donating it to charity, and the person who lost his job had it coming . . . I think I'd probably let it slide."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Meera muttered.

"Pardon?" Chloe said.

"I said, 'Why doesn't that surprise me?' Of course you'd let your child off the hook. You clearly have no grasp of right and wrong."

Ella glanced at Chloe, who'd registered the comment but seemed to have chosen to ignore it. Jonathan's cheeks flamed at his wife's gaffe. Magnus and Karl looked delighted by the scandal.

“There’s no right or wrong, Meera,” Captain said, trying to steer the conversation out of dangerous waters. “The thing that makes ethics interesting is that no two individuals see things the same. We all have our own internal barometer of what’s right and wrong.”

“Nonsense,” she said with a hand flick that nearly knocked over Jonathan’s cocktail. “We all know what is right and wrong. Some people just know how to spin things to suit what works for them.”

There was a short silence as even Captain seemed at a loss for how to respond.

“If that’s the case,” Ella said after a moment. She spoke softly, but one of the benefits of appearing articulate and intelligent was that when she spoke, people tended to listen. “Who is right in this situation? The person who honours the sacred vow of marriage but spends her days making money for organisations that devastate the lives of problem gamblers and smokers? Or the person who had a relationship with a married man but in her role as a paediatric nurse, cares for our most vulnerable citizens on a daily basis?”

Everyone was quiet now, even Captain. As they continued to wait for an answer that wouldn’t come, Ella considered how good it felt to speak her mind. She was so used to letting Mac take the stage, happy to have the spotlight on him, rather than on herself. Now she understood that there was something about speaking her mind that made her . . . feel *alive*.

Maybe this would be her epiphany?

Ella and Mac had booked the VIP cabin. It had been an off-the-cuff decision—a *Why not?*—and they’d justified the expense by the fact that it was their ten-year anniversary in a few months’ time. Now, as she looked around the backlit panelled room, with its full-size Calcutta marble bathroom and plush white bathrobes, it felt incredibly decadent.

Outside Ella’s cabin, the hallway was quiet. Her response to the ethical dilemma had done a good job of dispersing the

guests to their cabins, which she suspected Captain was grateful for, even if he wasn't grateful for the comment itself. It was strange, the way different people brought about different responses. The guests of the charter hadn't known Meera for twelve hours, and yet they'd come to accept her comments as expected. But Ella made a similarly direct comment, and everyone scurried back to their rooms to take shelter. How funny that was.

If Mac were here, he'd certainly have had something to say about her comment. Reflexively, she reached for her phone to text him, forgetting that they'd decided not to text each other. Reception was patchy on the *Lady*, and it would be good for her to detach and have a proper holiday rather than be trying to get in touch with him, Mac had said. She'd agreed that it was a good idea, but in practice it felt strange, given that she was so used to Mac coming back to the cabin with chatter about who he'd met, what they did for a living, anecdotes he'd learned.

He was the social one, and always made a point of making sure he talked to everyone. He wasn't a social climber, just one of those rare people who was genuinely interested in everyone. Ella was also interested; it was just that she was interested quietly, reflectively. In a way, it was quite nice to come back to the room and have silence.

Nice, but also . . . a little eerie.

Ella often felt like this when Mac wasn't around. Just a little off, a little anxious. She was, Mac said, a victim of too many scary movies and novels. Her fears were illogical at the best of times, and even more so on a boat, with the door locked, but fears, as Ella knew, thanks to years of therapy, weren't logical. To take her mind off it, she got into the king-size bed and pulled the covers up.

Her mind turned to the *not quite truth* that she'd told.

It wasn't, strictly speaking, a lie. Mac was married when she met him. He was a client at the accounting firm where she worked. Not *her* client—she was always quick to point out. He had come in to see one of her colleagues, Samantha, to

organize life insurance and financial affairs when his wife was diagnosed with a terminal heart condition.

When his wife passed away, Ella had attended the funeral, along with the rest of her colleagues, and like everyone else, was moved as Mac eulogised his spouse as only he could—with respect, dignity, and love.

Six months after the funeral, Ella ran into Mac again, outside a fish-and-chip shop. It was a scorching summer day and Mac was at the end of a very long line.

He'd called out to her as she strode back to her car.

“What time did you get here?” he said.

“Five minutes ago. I preordered.”

He sighed. “Smart.”

“Practical,” Ella corrected, because the two, she'd found, were actually quite different. “How are things?”

It was the best question she could come up with on the spot, preferring it to the more obvious and pitiful *How are you?* that she knew grieving family members tended to hate.

“Things,” he said, “have been better. But nothing fish and chips can't fix.”

“I'll keep that in mind next time I'm having a rough day.”

He nodded. “Less side effects than Zoloft.”

Ella laughed. That might have been the end of the conversation if there hadn't been a commotion in the line ahead. After a second or two, people started to disperse, huffing.

“They've run out of fish,” someone said.

Mac looked despondent. “Might have to get that Zoloft after all.”

“Or you could just share my fish and chips,” Ella suggested.

They wandered to the beach and ate fish and chips together on a bench, as seagulls crowded around them like an

angry mob. Conversation flowed easily. Mac, she realised, had a gift for setting her up for conversation. She was better when he was around. Funnier. Happier.

Afterward Ella committed the cardinal sin of asking him to look at a red dot that had recently appeared on her forearm. A burst capillary, he said, and offered to laser it off for her in the office.

Three days later, she took him up on the offer. A year after that, they were married.

So, strictly speaking, he *was* married when she met him. And yet, Ella knew she'd misrepresented this.

She still wasn't sure why.

She rolled over in bed, and that's when she saw it. A shadow at the base of the doorway. As she watched, a small white square appeared, like the edge of a note being pushed under the door.

Ella sat up and turned on the light. She reached for her dressing gown and pulled it around herself. By the time she got to the door, though, the white square was nowhere to be seen. Bizarre. She pulled open the door and glanced up and down. The cabin doors were all closed and in darkness. She had most likely imagined the whole thing. And yet, the hallways pulsed with the energy of someone who had vacated in a hurry.

"Name something that scares you," Captain said the next day. "Ella? Chloe? Anything at all."

They'd anchored an hour ago, and Magnus and Karl were on the Jet Skis. Vanessa and Stephanie were snorkelling. Joyce was explaining to Meera how she could re-create last night's meal at a dinner party. Ella and Chloe lay on loungers by the pool on the sundeck, each with a novel in her lap. When they appeared confused by Captain's question, he pointed to the blackboard, which displayed the daily quote and the daily challenge.

Life is like a boat—you move when you paddle, and you drift when you don't.

Challenge: do one thing that scares you today

Ella sighed. “I don't know. Climate change?”

“The rise of technology?” Chloe suggested.

“No, no,” he said. “Something that affects *you!*”

Ella wanted to point out that, in fact, climate change and the rise of technology affected them all, but she suspected he wouldn't appreciate it.

“Sunburn,” Chloe said. “Speaking of which, I need to reapply my sunscreen.”

Captain rolled his eyes as Chloe started applying sunscreen to her legs.

“You know what I mean. A fear you can face. A way you can challenge yourself.”

The handsome steward from the night before walked past, carrying an elaborate cocktail for Meera, who somehow had managed to avoid Captain's pestering about the challenge.

“I'm not mad on heights,” Ella said, when it was clear he wasn't going away.

Captain beamed. “Right then. You can jump from the upper deck.”

Ella instantly regretted her comment. They were on the upper deck now, the highest of the four decks. Even so, she knew, logically, that it wasn't particularly high. Guests had been jumping off all morning. Even Stephanie, a sixtysomething cancer survivor, had done it. But . . . Ella actually *was* afraid of heights. Why hadn't she said she was afraid of public speaking? Or elbows? (Once Mac had operated on a patient with an elbow phobia. Ishicascadiggaphobia, it was called. They'd had to google it to check that it was a real thing. Indeed it was.)

She must have looked nervous because Chloe touched her arm. “I'll do it with you if you like.”

“Wonderful!” Captain said, clapping his hands, and stood to retrieve his good camera and to fire up the guests into an awful sort of cheer squad. Ella knew this was what he was doing, because she’d been part of this cheer squad in the past. Every year there was a guest who had a fear of heights and was cajoled into jumping from the upper deck. It was a party favourite of Captain’s. Probably because it looked better in the photos than the ones of people public speaking.

Ella stood and looked over the rail. As she saw the distance down to the water, she started to feel queasy. She wondered why she had opened her mouth, knowing this was where she’d probably end up.

“Wait! Can you do my back first?” Chloe said. She held out the bottle, and Ella walked back and took it, noting it was a good-quality, broad-spectrum variety. Mac would have been impressed, she thought as she lathered Chloe up. *Nothing looks better in your fifties than good sunscreen in your twenties*, he always said.

“Don’t skimp on the lotion,” Chloe said. “It’s important to be thorough.”

“Don’t I know it,” Ella said. “There. All done.”

She tossed the bottle onto a nearby lounge, and they walked together to the edge of the boat.

“*He* was a dermatologist,” Chloe said as they stood side by side on the edge.

Ella looked down at the water, feeling her crab benedict breakfast curdle in her stomach. She tightened the knot at the neck of her bikini. “Who?”

“The guy. The married one. If nothing else, I’ve learned about the importance of good sun protection,” she said.

They were balanced on the edge of the ledge now. Captain stood on the deck below, looking up through his lens. From the water, Ella could hear other guests cheering.

“He had this catchcry,” Chloe said. “Nothing looks better in your fifties than good sunscreen in your twenties.”

It took a beat, and then Ella's world began to shift. She opened her mouth, started to step back, but it was too late. Chloe grabbed her hand and they both went over.

Ella had often wondered what it would feel like to drown. When she watched *Titanic*, mostly. People always talked about drowning as peaceful, but Ella had often had her doubts. Indeed, it appeared she was right—there was nothing peaceful about it. Her chest was bursting. Her head pounded. Her lungs screamed for air, but she couldn't seem to break through the surface of the water.

Nothing looks better in your fifties than good sunscreen in your twenties.

She wanted to tell herself that it was a common phrase. And maybe it was. But what about the rest of it?

Mac was married. A dermatologist. A man who loved this particular charter.

Ella recalled suddenly that, during introductions, Chloe had called him Tom.

Dr. Thomas McAllister.

No one called him Tom, except his parents. His school friends called him Macca. Most people assumed Mac was his given name. When he and Ella got married and Ella's surname also became McAllister, she wondered if she would stop calling him that. But she didn't. It felt too strange.

Ella couldn't help but suck in a breath. Salt water filled her nose, her throat, her lungs. Was this it? Was this how her life was going to end? Was she going to drown while ruminating on her husband's betrayal? The horror of it burned inside her, just like her lungs.

Hands circled her waist, and she was travelling upward. As she burst through the surface of the water, she tried to suck in air, but her lungs were still full of water. She was hoisted onto something, and she felt a sharp thump on the centre of her back. She began to cough, then vomit.

Mac was the married man whom Chloe had come on the charter to recover from. Ella knew it with a bizarre certainty, the way that one knew, the moment their phone rang, that they were about to receive news that would change their lives. What she didn't know was what to do with this information.

Or what Chloe planned to do with this information.

She was, she realised suddenly, lying across the seat of a Jet Ski. After another seawater vomit, she finally managed to suck in some air.

"I've got you," Chloe's reassuring voice said in her ear. "It's okay."

It's not okay, Ella thought. You had an affair with my husband.

"That was one hell of a belly flop," Magnus said, from somewhere nearby. There was a hint of amusement in his voice that irritated Ella, but there were too many thoughts, too many questions going through her mind. It had a paralysing effect.

Chloe was looking down at her. Ella's brain felt foggy and swollen; her throat and lungs still felt scratchy and wrong.

What is going on? she wanted to ask. What do you want from me?

"Let's get her back to the boat," Chloe said.

"I feel awful," Chloe said. "I should have let you jump, not pulled you in. I knew you were scared but . . . have you had a panic attack before?"

Back on the boat, Ella was lying on a white lounge, her head supported by a blue-and-white-striped cushion. Someone had brought over a blanket, and everyone hovered around worriedly. Captain and Joyce had found a medical kit somewhere and were staring into it as if it might know what to do. Chloe covered her with a towel, a second after Ella realised her bikini had become askew.

"A panic attack?" Ella said.

“You thrashed about on your own for a few moments before Chloe got to you,” Joyce told her, holding up a blood pressure cuff, then discarding it. “Lucky she pulled you up when she did, before you swallowed any more water.”

Chloe took a seat beside her. “A panic attack can be disorienting at the best of times, let alone underwater,” she said gently. “Give yourself a minute to make sense of things.”

The fact that Chloe was a nurse fluttered back into Ella’s consciousness. She seemed like a nurse, the authoritative way she disregarded Ella’s personal space, the intimate way she took Ella’s wrist between her slender fingers and looked at her watch. She smelled, Ella noticed, of mango and coconut.

“Things make sense,” Ella said weakly.

But they didn’t, of course. How could they? She’d just very nearly drowned, her husband had had an affair, and she was spending the next five days adrift at sea with his mistress, who may or may not know this.

Ella looked at Chloe again. She tried to see her, really see her, in light of what she’d learned. Her face was the image of desperate concern.

Which meant Chloe truly had no idea who Ella was . . . or Ella was spending the rest of the week at sea with a sociopath.

“Happy hour!” called the handsome steward, whose dreadlocks were now held back with a navy scrunchie. He was holding a tray of frothy drinks—chili-lime margaritas, he informed the group. Magnus and Karl snatched one each as the rest of the guests appeared as if called by a whistle—first Stephanie and Vanessa, then Jonathan, and finally Meera, still in her bikini with a sarong around her waist, loudly asking for a strawberry daiquiri. “But with *fresh* strawberries, not a mixer. I know the difference.”

Captain and Joyce, seemingly satisfied that Ella was not in imminent physical danger, had returned to their duties, leaving Ella on the deck, shell-shocked and in the care of the one person who may wish her harm.

Ella was digesting all of this as the steward made his way toward them with the cocktails.

“Ladies?”

Ella shook her head. He held the tray toward Chloe, and she waved him away while looking at Ella. “You okay?”

Ella was still staring at her, wondering how on earth to answer that, when Chloe held up one hand, five fingers outstretched. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Five.”

“Do you feel drowsy? Groggy? Confused?”

“I’m . . . not sure. I do feel thirsty.”

Chloe nodded. “Okay. I’ll get you some water.”

And off she went. It was too bizarre. Was Chloe the enemy or her nursemaid? Friend or foe? Even if not for the “panic attack,” she would have had trouble unscrambling it. The only thing she knew for certain was that Mac had had an affair with Chloe. It felt so cliché that the question on her lips was . . . why?

Why?

She and Mac were happy. Ella searched the corners of her mind for evidence to the contrary, but she didn’t find it. It wasn’t that her marriage to Mac was perfect. They had issues. Their communication, for one, could have used some improvement. It drove her crazy the way he never said what he wanted for dinner, forcing her to dream something up, night after night. She hated the way he let his mother manipulate him into answering medical questions for her friends in his time off. And she knew it drove him crazy that she left her shoes all around the house; that she bought takeaway coffee even though they’d spent a fortune on a coffee machine; that after ten years of marriage, she still didn’t know how to stack the dishwasher “properly.”

But they weren’t unhappy. Were they?

They still had sex. Not as often as he would have liked, probably, but more often than most of her friends did. More

importantly, Ella *enjoyed* the sex. She didn't do it out of obligation the way her friend Susan had proclaimed every wife should do. "They're like dogs! They need to get out the pent-up excitement or they're a nightmare to live with!"

A year or so ago, Mac had told Ella that his friend Dave only had sex with his wife half a dozen times in a year. "Let's never let that happen to us," he'd said, with what Ella had read as gratitude.

The strangest part was that, even knowing what she knew, it didn't feel real. She'd always heard that when women discovered this kind of thing, everything clicked into place. The secrecy. The late nights. The change in moods or sudden withdrawal. But Ella hadn't noticed Mac pulling away. He'd always worked long hours, but no more recently than usual. Aside from the odd medical conference or dinner and a weekly Pilates class that Ella had recently signed him up for, he went to work and came home. If they socialised, they did it together, with the same people they'd socialised with for ten years.

She had so many questions. How did it happen? Why did this happen? How long did it last?

Perhaps most importantly, what had Ella misunderstood so wildly about their relationship that allowed her to miss this?

"Here," Chloe said, handing Ella a glass of ice water. A steward appeared at the same time with an umbrella, which he erected above Ella, shielding her from the hot afternoon sun. "Drink."

In the shade of the umbrella, it came to her. The information she needed was right in front of her. Ella lifted the glass to her lips and took a deep sip.

"Better?" Chloe asked.

"No," Ella said. "But I will be."

The chili-lime margaritas had a lot to answer for. By the end of dinner—fresh oysters, followed by seabass and sautéed baby squid with capers, olives, and saffron aioli—Stephanie and Vanessa had twice sung the national anthem, Karl had the

hiccups, Meera was too drunk to offer a strong opinion on anything, and Jonathan was slurring every second word. Chloe had only had two cocktails, and though she wasn't slurring her words, even she seemed merry. Finally, under duress, Ella had accepted a cocktail herself, but so far, she'd had only a couple of sips.

It wasn't difficult for Ella to ensure that she was sitting next to Chloe at dinner. Chloe had saved her a seat. It would have been sweet, had she not been an adulteress.

"So, how did you meet your married guy?" Ella asked as the plates were collected.

It wasn't entirely out of left field. Earlier in the evening, when the other guests were still able to communicate, conversation had travelled to Stephanie's cancer treatment, Vanessa's divorce, Magnus's estrangement from his mother when he came out as gay (and their subsequent reconciliation). In light of this, and the fact that Chloe had offered this information on the first day, Ella got the feeling that anything was fair game.

Indeed, Chloe didn't seem suspicious. "He took my Pilates class on a Monday night."

Ella thought of the reformer Pilates pass she had bought for Mac last Christmas. Six months ago, she'd reprimanded him for not using it. Knowing that was unlikely to prompt him, she'd signed him up for his first class. It was on a Monday night. He'd booked the rest of his classes himself. He enjoyed it more than he expected, he'd said.

"He was the only guy in the class, which made him the butt of a lot of jokes," Chloe continued. "After class, we often go for a tea or coffee, so I asked him to join us. Turned out we were the only two. We got along famously. He wasn't wearing a wedding band."

He never has, Ella almost said. She'd had a few more sips of her cocktail, and she was losing track of what she could say and what she couldn't.

Mac had never worn a wedding band. His father never had, nor had Ella's, and she'd never thought to question it. Why would she? Mac had always been so proud of being married. Loved talking about "the Mrs.," the "ball and chain," and "the other half." How could he have done this?

"It was just coffee, that day. Thirty minutes. But . . . I don't know. He was just so damn charming. He seemed like . . . such a nice guy, you know?"

I do, Ella thought.

"He paid for the coffees, so I said I'd get them next time. Then I suggested we make it a glass of wine. It happened bit by bit. I thought that boded well."

In her peripheral vision, Ella noticed that Stephanie was slow dancing with one of the stewards. Meera was shouting at another one to put on some music. It felt so shocking to her that the world was just going on—that people were *dancing*—while she was hearing the details of her beloved husband's infidelity.

"The stupid thing was . . . I saw a future with him. I told my family about him!" Chloe sounded drunk now, and a little teary. "It was stupid, because it had only been a short time. But I was head over heels. I thought he was too. He said I was magnetic."

Magnetic. It was a good description for her, Ella thought. But the idea that Mac had felt that way . . . about Chloe . . . it cut deep.

"When did you find out he was married?"

"A couple of weeks ago. He told me. Just . . . needed to come clean, he said. It took me completely by surprise."

"Things weren't . . . good with his wife?" Ella choked on the words.

Chloe shrugged. "I don't know. He didn't really talk about her."

"Never?" Ella said.

Chloe looked at her, and Ella worried she might have said too much. She began to backpedal. “It’s just . . . often in therapy men give reasons for why they strayed, you know? Their rationalisations? They’ll say, ‘She doesn’t listen to me,’ or ‘She doesn’t have sex with me,’ or ‘She’s a narcissist.’”

“Oh,” she said. “No, he never said anything like that to me. The only thing he ever said about her was . . .”

Ella held her breath. Chloe seemed to take an inordinate amount of time to spit out the words.

“What?” she said finally.

“That she wasn’t me.”

Ella downed the rest of her drink.

After dinner, Chloe and Ella sat in the deep plush armchairs of the covered lounge room. It was uplit and cosy, with floor-to-ceiling windows, which gave them a clear view of Stephanie, Meera, and Jonathan, and Karl and Magnus, who were dancing on the upper deck and intermittently exploding into fits of laughter. (Vanessa had fallen suddenly and violently ill half an hour earlier and had been taken to bed.)

Despite her commitment to keep her wits about her, Ella accepted a second cocktail. After the emotions of the day, she needed something to take the edge off, to dull the sharp edges of her pain. Chloe, too, accepted another one.

“Who ended it?” Ella asked. “Between you and Tom?”

“He did.” Chloe lifted her drink to her lips and used her tongue to position the straw in her mouth. “Couldn’t take the guilt, he said. He said he cared about me, but he was in love with his wife and he got swept up.”

Ella hated the fact that there was something understandable about that. Each time she looked at Chloe, each time their arms brushed, each time she smelled her coconut-and-mango fragrance, she understood.

After a moment, Chloe sat up in her armchair and swivelled to face Ella. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“But you’re crying.”

Ella sat up, mirroring Chloe’s position. Was she? She reached up and wiped away a tear, but it was quickly replaced by another. “So I am. Just drunk and emotional.”

Chloe leaned forward and wiped a tear away from the corner of Ella’s eye with her thumb. It was, Ella supposed, an unusually intimate gesture, but somehow, perhaps due to the evening light, the alcohol, the gentle rocking of the boat, it felt . . . right.

“Well,” she said. “No more tears. You’re on vacation.”

“Okay.” Ella nodded. “No more tears.”

“Right then,” Chloe said, standing. “Time for bed.”

They stood together, waving to the remaining guests outside, none of whom were paying attention. Meera, they noticed, was slow dancing with the steward with the dreadlocks. Jonathan was nowhere to be seen.

Ella and Chloe walked down the spiral staircase to the cabins. For Ella, each step felt heavier than the last.

“This is me,” Ella said as she arrived in front of her door. She felt grateful to be there. There’d been too many emotions today. Too much alcohol.

“You’re in the VIP cabin?” Chloe said, eyeing the double doors. “I’m in steerage, the bunk room. Can I see inside?”

“My cabin?” Ella said, surprised.

Chloe looked chided. “Is that weird?”

It was, and yet, perhaps out of tiredness, Ella found herself opening the door and stepping back for Chloe to go inside. She watched silently as Chloe made her way around the lowlit space.

“Wow,” Chloe said, after she’d finished her very short tour. “It’s nice.”

She came to a stop just inside the open doorway in front of Ella and hesitated, pulling her ponytail over her shoulder. There was a sudden shift in energy. The air felt fragile and charged. An image sprang to Ella's mind, of Chloe's tongue tracing Ella's lips.

What was *wrong* with her?

"I just realised something . . . ," Chloe said finally. "I didn't take the challenge today. To do something that scares me."

"You leapt from the upper deck—"

"Yes, but that was *your* challenge. Heights don't scare me."

They were inches apart. Ella couldn't decide if she was exhilarated or uncomfortable. The two, under these circumstances, felt surprisingly alike.

"Well," Ella said at last, clearing her throat. "What scares ___"

She couldn't finish her question because Chloe stepped forward and kissed her.

It lasted only a couple of seconds. But it was a kiss unlike any kiss Ella had ever experienced. It wasn't chaste, nor was it French. It was slow, exquisite, and it tasted of chili and tequila. Ella had no idea she could feel so much from doing so little.

It surprised Ella, the intensity of her reaction. The way her body moved to meet Chloe's. The way her insides fluttered and her breath caught. It took her back to the heady days of her twenties, when it was fashionable for girls to kiss each other, at nightclubs or parties, usually for the benefit of the boys watching. Then, like now, Ella had enjoyed the kisses more than she felt she should. Back then, when Ella had considered the possibility that she was gay, or bisexual, neither descriptor had felt right. She was predominantly attracted to men, but she'd never felt the sense of . . . wrongness . . . expressed by some of her heterosexual friends at the idea of being with a woman. In fact, she'd often felt curious about

what it might be like. With certain women, Ella had always thought, it could feel very, *very* right.

When Chloe pulled back, her eyes were cautious. “Sorry. Was that . . . okay? I know you’re married.”

Yes, Ella thought as that fact came back to her. But my husband had an affair. With you.

Is that why I’m doing this? Ella thought suddenly. Some perverse kind of revenge? Is that why Chloe is doing this?

“I’ll go,” Chloe said finally, when Ella still struggled for words.

As she watched Chloe leave the room, Ella fought an urge to call her back. It was madness, she knew it. *Lunacy*. Ella blamed it on Chloe’s magnetic energy.

Just as Mac had done.

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes . . .

—Marcel Proust

How fitting it was, Ella thought as she dressed the next morning, to be stuck on a boat. Caught somewhere between her life before and her life after. She was aware of what Mac had done, and she knew she would eventually have to go back and deal with it. But for now, the lack of need to address it, or make a decision about it, was comforting.

The possibility that Chloe had somehow orchestrated their rendezvous last night felt less and less likely in the light of day. After all, if her plan had been to try to seduce Ella as payback to Mac . . . how did she know that Mac would cancel at the last minute? Seducing your ex-lover’s wife was challenging enough when your ex wasn’t around. But if he was right there? No, it didn’t make sense.

As for the kiss, Ella chalked it up to the cocktails and the situation. At least on her end. She understood that difficult feelings could get misplaced and muddled. One minute she’d been imagining Mac and Chloe together, the next she’d internalised his feelings and made them her own. Still, Ella felt

like a nervous schoolgirl as she headed to the lower deck for breakfast. She was half an hour late and still only half the guests were there, all of them in varying shades of green, clutching large glasses of water and coffee. Blister packs of ibuprofen lay haphazardly on the table next to the untouched plates of smoked salmon, omelettes, and sundried tomato focaccia.

Chloe, Ella noticed, was at the head of the table.

“Coffee, madam?” the handsome steward asked her. His dreadlocks were out this morning, free of the navy scrunchie. His eyes looked tired. The guests weren’t the only ones who’d had a late night, evidently.

Ella found herself desperately craving a chai latte. On Saturday mornings, Mac would head to her favourite café, Augustus, to get her one and then bring it to her in bed. She wondered if that was ever going to happen again.

“Coffee would be great.”

“It’s been very popular this morning,” the steward said with a smile, tipping his head toward Magnus, who was holding a coffee in each hand and alternately swigging from each.

The steward went to get the coffee, and Ella made a beeline for the continental buffet of fresh fruit, yoghurt, freshly baked pastries, and home-roasted granola. Not thirty seconds later, Chloe was at the buffet beside her. “Morning.”

Ella focused on the buffet, as if it weren’t the same fare that she’d enjoyed the previous two days. “Morning.”

Chloe’s shoulder bumped affectionately against hers, and Ella’s heart rate skyrocketed. “You okay?”

“Of course.”

“I’m sorry again about last night.”

“No need to be.” Ella stabbed a piece of pineapple with a fork.

“That’s not true. I overstepped. I’m sorry.”

Ella looked at her. Her face was so open, like a child's. She was, once again, so willing to be vulnerable. This wasn't the face of a liar or someone who'd come here for revenge.

"Please," she said. "Stop apologising."

"Sorry," Chloe said.

They both smiled.

"If you apologise again, I'm going to tell Meera what happened last night," Ella said, lowering her voice. "Then you'll really be sorry."

As if on cue, Meera appeared, dressed in what must have been one of Jonathan's T-shirts. Her eyes were smeared in last night's makeup; her hair was piled atop her head in a navy scrunchie. Both Ella and Chloe clocked it.

"Coffee," Meera said quietly to no one in particular. Her tone was somewhere in between demanding and begging. When no one responded, her voice became louder. "For the love of God, someone bring me a coffee."

"Or perhaps Meera is having her own awakening?" Chloe said.

They both chuckled. And after that, Ella's nerves started to disperse.

The upper deck, with its fluffed blue-and-white cushions, its pristine loungers, and its rolled white towels, bore no telltale signs of last night's dancing and debauchery. Ella and Chloe once again sat poolside, their novels positioned in their laps, but by midafternoon, they still hadn't opened them. The more interesting stories, they discovered, were right in front of them, and they barely drew breath in their desperation to tell them. It was as if they'd slipped into a parallel world, and suddenly they were back in high school. Now, everything was important, urgent, and nothing was out of bounds.

"Have you ever cheated on your husband?" Chloe asked her, late that afternoon, when they'd moved into the sky lounge to get out of the sun.

"Depends," Ella said. "If last night counts."

They smiled at each other wryly.

“And him? Has he ever cheated on you?”

The question brought Ella out of her head for long enough to remember that, in fact, he *had*. How odd to realise that, after discovering this yesterday, she’d barely given it a thought all day.

“If he has,” Chloe said, when Ella didn’t respond, “he’s a fool.”

Ella smiled. She hated to admit it, but with every passing second she spent with Chloe, the less foolish Mac seemed.

They drifted through lunch and dinner, not even bothering to include any other guests in their conversation or spare a thought about whether they were being rude. They didn’t even stop chatting as they viewed the school of spinner dolphins that had appeared during happy hour.

During dessert, as Captain gave his rundown of the evening activities, Chloe slipped her hand onto Ella’s lap. Ella’s heart ceased to beat. It was madness, what she was feeling. At best, she was starting something with a woman who had a track record of getting involved with married people. A woman who’d had an affair with *Ella’s own husband!* At worst, she was starting something with a woman who knew this, and had an agenda.

And what about Ella’s own motives? Were they less than pure? At this point, even Ella didn’t know.

“We were planning a disco for tonight,” Captain said, “but due to the spontaneous disco that started last night, we thought you might want a change of pace.”

Under the table, Chloe’s fingers traced her palm, her fingers, her wrists.

“Anyway,” Captain said, “we thought, trivia?”

The group was perhaps less enthusiastic than Captain had been hoping, but that likely had more to do with their hangovers rather than the trivia. After a few seconds, Meera

commented that she was the kind of person who really enjoyed trivia.

“Makes sense,” Chloe said. “All those right and wrong answers.”

Meera scowled.

Chloe’s hand slipped onto Ella’s bare thigh. Ella felt like she was peaking, flying. She became drunk with dopamine, oxytocin, adrenaline. Who cared what their motives were? she decided. Who cared about any of it?

“You’re going to have some stiff competition,” Captain said. “Ella has been the running trivia champion for six years running. Will it be seven, Ella?”

Ella could barely reply. Luckily, Chloe helped her out.

“It’s only fair to give Meera a shot at it,” Chloe said. “Maybe you should skip this one, head to bed?”

“I am quite tired,” Ella agreed. She stood and walked with Chloe to the top of the spiral staircase, where she paused. “But for what it’s worth, my money’s on Magnus.”

This time, Ella kissed Chloe. As their bodies strained against each other, Ella felt desperate with arousal, faint with it. There was no hesitation, no pausing. No shadow of a doubt as to what they both wanted. Ella ached to be touched in a way that she couldn’t remember aching. They fell onto the bed as one, removing their clothes between kisses. Ella’s hips rose as Chloe peeled off her underwear and rose again at the first touch of her mouth. She opened to her—the ultimate soul connection—soothing and intense, comforting and euphoric. Intimate and otherworldly. Never ending but over in seconds.

Afterward, as she lay on Chloe’s bare chest, Ella thought of today’s quote.

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes . . .

It occurred to Ella that she disagreed with this. Seeking new landscapes was important too. After all, without new

landscapes, she thought, what was the point of journeying at all?

“A sailor is an artist whose medium is the wind. Live passionately, even if it kills you, because something is going to kill you anyway.”

—Webb Chiles

Today’s Challenge: Let Go of What Is No Longer Serving You

It was day four of the charter, and as usual, the guests had relaxed into the routine of things. They had also, as usual, broken into smaller unofficial groups. This time, Karl and Magnus had buddied up with Stephanie and Vanessa, Jonathan and Meera had stuck close to the staff, and Ella and Chloe had become an inseparable unit of two.

They spent the day snorkelling and kayaking at the Pinnacle and Lighthouse Bommie, stopping only to eat lobster rolls served with lemon and dill. The energy between the two of them was electric—the current that charged through Ella whenever their bodies touched, the feeling she got when she’d steal a look at Chloe and find her already looking. Every so often Ella found herself wondering if Mac had felt this way.

“What are you going to let go of?” Chloe asked that evening. She was referencing the day’s challenge: to let go of something that was no longer serving her. It was very late, well after midnight, and they were tangled in their sheets, eating the Doritos that had been left in the room with the bottled water. Ella could feel a Dorito crumb digging into her hip.

“Hmm,” Ella said. “Something that is no longer serving me . . .”

“Fidelity?” Chloe suggested, rolling to face her.

Ella laughed.

“I’m serious.” Chloe propped her chin in her palm. “Are you going to tell your husband about . . . this?”

Ella had no idea. She'd kept this relationship entirely separate from him in her mind. Now she imagined it. *I had an affair, Mac. With Chloe. The woman you had an affair with.*

"I'm not saying you *should*," Chloe said. "You don't just want to blow up your marriage after ten years together. I guess I just . . . wanted to get a read on where your head is at."

"Honestly," Ella said, "my head is here, on this boat. I haven't given much thought to what happens when we get off. I guess I should start thinking about it."

She paused. "Did I tell you we'd been together for ten years?"

A couple of beats passed.

"You must have," Chloe said. "How else would I know?"

For a split second, Ella's mind drifted back to the moment she found out about the affair, and her suspicion that Chloe knew something. She tried the idea out in her mind again, to see how it felt. But it was too ridiculous. If she did know, what was her plan here? To get the ultimate revenge on Mac by sleeping with his wife? To break up his marriage so she could get him back? To sleep with everyone with the last name McAllister? It was too far-fetched. It couldn't be real.

Besides, she'd told Chloe everything else about herself. She must have also told her this.

"Yes," Ella said finally. "Yes, I must have told you."

The next few days should have been the saddest, most confusing of Ella's life. Instead, they were some of the best. She swam and snorkelled during the day, and her nights were spent cushioned in her little bubble of euphoria with Chloe. She felt completely safe and held—free from the need to make any decisions. It was a little vacation from her life. Ella hadn't realised how much she needed it.

*"A man is never lost at sea."
—Ernest Hemingway*

Today's Challenge: Count the Blessings in Your Life

On the seventh day, the crew set up a makeshift beach club on a private beach. The group swam and snorkelled and kayaked, laughing at Meera falling off the Jet Ski before deciding she wasn't the kind of person to ride Jet Skis. They'd delighted in Joyce's food and had attempted to avoid Captain's challenges.

In the evening, Ella and Chloe lay together, rocking gently with the waves. It had become part of Ella, this sway, the past few days. Now, she moved her body to allow for it, to accommodate it. In the morning, when they got off the boat, the still earth would feel strange under her feet. The solidness of it. But before long it would feel normal again, and the sway of the ocean, foreign. Funny how that happened.

"After tomorrow, we won't see each other again," Chloe said. She smiled, but her expression was sad.

Ella felt a stab of guilt, which of course was madness. She felt guilty for sleeping with her husband's mistress. The funny thing was, suddenly she felt a closeness to Mac that was even more profound than before. Was it possible that by hurting someone in the exact way they'd hurt you, you could become even closer to them?

"I'm sorry."

"Please don't apologise. This time, I knew what I was getting myself into."

Ella didn't know what to say to that. Luckily, after a few seconds, Chloe continued. "So you're happy with your husband then?"

"I thought I was." Ella paused for a moment. "I mean . . . our relationship isn't perfect. But there are a lot of good things about it."

Chloe rolled to face her. "Like what?"

“I don’t know. Just . . . the way we are together, I guess. The way Mac knows what I want before I ask for it. The way I know he’ll be kind to people and treat them with respect. The history we share. The way we know each other so well and still like each other.”

Chloe nodded silently.

“Sorry, is that awful of me to say while I’m lying here with you?”

“No. It was honest. Thank you for that.”

It wasn’t, perhaps, the best way to end the conversation, but it was late, and Ella found herself getting sleepy. When Chloe yawned, Ella decided to give in to it and let her eyes close. Tomorrow, she was going back to the real world. To her life. She was sad for the vacation to end. But something about it ending felt right too. That was, after all, what vacations were meant to do. It was in those few seconds before sleep overcame her that Ella heard it. A tiny, faint click, like someone taking a photo. Ella registered it, then immediately lost interest, assuming it had come from another cabin.

“All right,” Captain said. “Let’s go around the table and talk about what you’ve learned on this charter.”

It was their last group breakfast, and as was customary, it was time to share what they’d learned.

“I called this a YOLO trip when I introduced myself,” Stephanie said. “But it occurred to me over the past few days that we don’t actually only live once. I’ve lived many times. Before children, and after. Before marriage, and after. Before cancer, and after. Before this charter, and after. I hope I live many more times and take advantage of every one.”

“I learned that new friends are as good as old friends,” Vanessa said.

Karl learned that the Great Barrier Reef had the best snorkelling in the world. Magnus learned that the word *thong* meant “sandal” in Australia. Jonathan learned that he liked

oysters. Captain didn't seem particularly pleased with those answers, but he let it slide.

"I learned that things aren't always right and wrong," Meera said. The scrunchie, Ella noticed, was back in the steward's hair, but Meera had the good grace to look shamefaced. "Sometimes there are more shades of grey to situations than you might initially think."

"I learned to be changeable," Chloe said. "To let go of things that aren't serving me and appreciate what is right in front of me." She smiled shyly.

Finally, it was Ella's turn. In the past, Ella had always felt anxious about this part of the charter and agonised over what she'd say. But this time, she didn't even give it a moment's thought.

"I learned that I disagree with you, Captain," she said. "You said this charter was a voyage. I think that life is the voyage. This is the vacation."

Captain opened his mouth.

"It's not a criticism," she said. "Quite the opposite, actually. Frankly, I had no idea how much I needed a vacation." She looked at Chloe. "And I'll go home forever changed by it."

An hour before they got off the boat, Ella and Chloe sat in the cabin together.

"Would you have wanted to see me, after we got off the boat?" Chloe asked. "Had you not been married?"

"What do you think?" Ella said.

As she hugged Chloe goodbye, Ella was flooded by feelings about another life she may have shared with Chloe, had things been different. Had Mac had similar feelings when he said goodbye to her? Was it as real for him as it was for her?

A little while later, when Ella stepped off the boat and felt the solid ground under her feet, it didn't feel strange. She was back where she was meant to be.

Chloe's plane sat on the tarmac, waiting for its turn to taxi to the runway. As the attendants walked up and down the aisle handing out bottles of water, she alternated between looking out the window and looking at the phone on her lap.

A week ago, she'd boarded the *Lady Emerald* with the intention of seeing Tom. *Mac*. Confronting him, with his wife by his side, perhaps, or maybe just making him suffer through seven days of having her watch them, not knowing when or if she was going to drop the bombshell. It was a stupid idea, she could see now, but in the middle of her pain and heartbreak, it had made sense. It didn't make sense now. Captain would be pleased to know that she was no longer the same person who had stepped on that yacht seven days earlier.

She wasn't a stalker. Mac had *told* her about the yacht charter. He had told her the name of it and that they went in the first week of September every year. The fact that he hadn't thought to hide this information was another indication that she was an aberration. If he was the type to have affairs with reckless abandon, he'd have been better at hiding things. Over the past few days, she'd come to realise that he *was* probably the nice guy she'd fallen for, rather than the evil philanderer she'd built him up to be in her mind. He'd made a mistake, that was all. Everyone did sometimes.

When he didn't get on the boat, she'd assumed neither of them had come. Perhaps they didn't come every year, as he'd said. Or perhaps they'd rescheduled?

Then Ella introduced herself.

Chloe wished she could remember her feelings for Ella *before* the moment she found out who she was. It was evident immediately, of course, that she was a beautiful woman. A smart, interesting, funny woman. There was no denying that the chemistry she felt with Ella was palpable and the feelings she developed were real. But were those feelings tangled up in the fact that Ella was Mac's wife? Was that chemistry fuelled by a desire to hurt, destroy, or even continue her connection to him a little longer? She didn't know. Probably, she never would.

The plane started taxiing toward the runway.

Whatever it was, when it became clear that Ella didn't know about the affair, Chloe knew she couldn't tell her. She had tried once, had even started to slide a note under her door on the first evening, but then she withdrew it. It was clear from the beginning that she was never going to leave Mac. Ella loved him. Chloe understood because she loved him too. She also knew the relationship with Ella would never make it off the boat, and that by ending up with neither of them, she'd be the loser in this scenario. At the same time, maybe, by taking a small piece of each of them, she'd manage to leave an indelible mark on both of them, making sure she'd never be erased.

As the plane picked up speed, she looked down at her lap again, at the photo of them, in bed, wrapped around each other. She'd taken it last night after Ella had fallen asleep. As a keepsake, she'd told herself at the time, even though it wasn't entirely true. While she'd been lying there, it had occurred to Chloe that there was a way to hurt Mac. Chloe may have become a different woman than she was seven days ago, but she was still human. She hovered her thumb over the photo, then pressed "Send."

A few seconds later, the plane took off. Back to the real world.

Mac was standing beside his car in the five-minute zone outside the double doors at the airport. He waved to her. Mac always waved with such enthusiasm. A real wave rather than a gesture to catch her attention. But this wave was tentative, almost nervous.

"Welcome home," he said as she dragged her bag over to him. "How was it?"

Mac had always been terrified of upsetting the traffic controllers at the airport. In the past, when he'd picked her up at the airport, he barely greeted her before loading her luggage into the boot of their station wagon and shouting for her to get in.

Today he didn't so much as reach for her bag.

"Intense," Ella said finally.

"Oh yeah?" he said. "How so?"

Ella tried to read his expression. It was curiously blank.

"Oh, you know, Captain's hippie stuff," she said, dragging her own bag to the back of the car. Finally, Mac took the hint and opened the boot, putting it inside as Ella walked around to the passenger side.

"I jumped off the top deck," she said when they were sitting side by side in the car.

The surprise on his face was rather rewarding. "No way."

She shrugged. "Faced my fear."

"Wow. I'm impressed." He put on his indicator and glanced over his shoulder. "So . . . what else? Eye-gazing? Mantras? Affirmations?"

His voice was casual, but he kept stealing glances at her. It was as if he knew something.

"More like . . . self-expression," she said carefully. "Self-compassion. Cultivating empathy."

"Oh." Mac moved into the next lane and merged onto the highway. "Was that as awful as it sounds?"

"No, actually. It was exactly what I needed."

Suddenly Ella noticed that a takeaway coffee cup sat in the cup holder.

"Chai latte from Augustus," Mac said. "I thought you'd need your fix after a week away."

He stole another glance at her, and this time she got a different feeling. She felt something move in her chest.

"Well." Mac was quiet for a moment. "Sounds like Captain's mumbo jumbo did its job."

"Yes," Ella said, picking up the latte. "I think it did."

Mac was quiet for a moment. “Does this mean you’ll be taking the charter without me again?”

“No. Once is enough for me.”

They came to a traffic light, and Mac turned to look at her.

“And you too, I hope?” she added.

Ella may have been imagining it, but it felt like understanding travelled between them.

“Yes,” he said. “Once was definitely enough for me.”

“Good,” Ella said. “Then let’s go home.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Sally Hepworth is the *New York Times* bestselling author of seven novels, most recently *The Younger Wife*. Sally writes incisively about family, relationships, and identity. Her novels have been translated into twenty languages.

**SALLY
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