

The day before: Olivia: The Bridesmaid

In the chapter of *The day before: OLIVIA: The Bridesmaid*, In the cave the sea has come in, so it's practically lapping at our feet, the water black as ink. It makes the space feel smaller, more claustrophobic. Hannah and I have to sit nearer to each other than we did before, our knees touching, a candle we nicked from the drawing room perched on the rock in front of us in its glass lantern. Now I understand why it's called the Whispering Cave. The high water has changed the acoustics in here so that this time everything we say is whispered back to us, as though someone's standing there in the shadows, repeating every word. It's hard to believe there isn't. I find myself turning to check, every so often, to make certain we're alone.

I can't make Hannah out all that well in the soft light of the candle. But I can hear her breathing, smell her perfume. We pass the bottle of vodka between us. I'm already a bit drunk, I think, from dinner. I couldn't eat much and the booze went straight to my head. But I need to be drunker to tell her, drunk enough that my brain can't stop the words. Which seems silly, as recently I have been needing to tell someone about it so badly that sometimes I feel like it's going to erupt out of me, without any warning. But now it has actually come down to it, I feel tongue-tied.

Hannah speaks first. 'Olivia.'

The cave replies in a whisper: Olivia, Olivia, Olivia.

'God,' Hannah says, 'that echo. Did your ex ... did he do anything to you? Someone I know—' She stops, starts again, 'my sister, Alice. She had this boyfriend when she was at university. And he reacted really badly to the break-up. I mean, really really badly—'

I wait for Hannah to say more, but she doesn't. Instead she takes the bottle from me and has a very long drink, about four shots' worth.

'No, it wasn't anything like that,' I say. 'Yeah, Callum was a bit of a shit. I mean, he wasn't very subtle about hooking up with Ellie straight after. But he was the one who broke it off, so it wasn't that.' I grab the bottle from her, take a big gulp. I can taste her lipstick on the rim. 'It was in the summer holidays after term had ended. I was staying at Jules's place in Islington, while she was away for work for a few days.'

I speak into the darkness, the cave whispering my own words back to me. I find myself telling Hannah how lonely I felt. How I was in this great big city, which I've always found so exciting, but realised I had no one to share it with. How it was Friday night and I'd gone to the Sainsbury's down the road from Jules's flat and bought myself some crisps, milk and cereal for the morning, and how my walk home took me past all these people standing outside pubs, drinking, having a laugh in the sun. How I felt like such a fucking saddo, with my orange carrier bag and a night of Netflix to look forward to. How it was at times like that that I always thought of Callum, and what we might be doing together, which made me feel even more alone.

I still can't quite believe I'm telling her all this, when I hardly know her. But maybe that's the point. Maybe, of all the people here, she's the one person I can tell, because she's basically a stranger. The vodka definitely helps, too, and the fact that it's so gloomy in here that I can hardly see her face. Even so, I don't think I can tell her all of it. The thought of doing that makes me feel panicky. But maybe I can start at the beginning and see if, once I've told her most of it, I'm brave enough to tell her the whole thing.

'I was on my phone,' I say, 'and I could see that Callum was with Ellie. She'd shared all these pics on Snapchat. There was one of her sitting on his lap. And then another one of her kissing him, while she held one middle finger up to the camera like she didn't want anyone to take the picture ... except then she went

and shared it for the whole world to see, for fuck's sake.'

Hannah takes a drink from the bottle, breathes out. 'That must have made you feel pretty awful,' she says. 'Seeing that. Jeez, social media has a lot to answer for.'

'Yeah.' I shrug. 'It did make me feel a bit ... shit.' In case I sound like a total stalker I don't tell her how many times I looked at those photos, how I sat there clutching my Sainsbury's bag and crying while I did it. 'My mates had been saying I should have some fun,' I say. 'You know, like show Callum what he was missing. They kept telling me to get myself on some dating apps, but I didn't want to do it at uni, where it was all so incestuous.'

'What, apps like Tinder?'

I think she's trying to show she's down with the kids.

'Yeah, but no one really uses Tinder any more.'

'Sorry,' she says. 'I'm ancient, remember. What do I know?' She says it a bit wistfully.

'You're not that old,' I tell her.

'Well ... thanks.' Her knee bumps against mine.

I take another swig of vodka. And remember how that night in Jules's flat I drank some of her wine, which made me realise how all the stuff we drank at uni for £3 a glass in the local bars tasted like absolute piss. I remember how I felt quite sophisticated walking around in my pants and bra with one of her big glasses. I imagined it was my flat, that I was going to go out and find some man and bring him back here and screw him. And that would show Callum.

Obviously I didn't actually plan to do that. I'd only had sex with one person before, with Callum. And even that had been pretty tame.

'I set up a profile,' I tell Hannah. 'I decided in London it was different. In London I could go on a date and it wouldn't be all over the whole of campus the next morning.'

'I'm kind of impressed,' Hannah says. 'I'd never have been brave enough to do something like that. But weren't you, you know ... worried about safety?'

'No,' I say. 'I'm not an idiot. I didn't use my real name. Or my age.'

'Ah,' Hannah nods. 'Right.' I get the impression she's not convinced by that and is trying very hard not to say anything else.

I put my age as twenty-six, in fact. The profile photo I put up didn't even look like me. I ransacked Jules's closet, did my make-up perfectly. But it was kind of the point not to look like me.

'I called myself Bella,' I say. 'You know, as in Hadid?'

I tell Hannah how I sat there on the bed and scrolled through photos of all these guys until my eyes burned. 'Most of them were rank,' I say. 'In the gym, like lifting up their shirts, or wearing sunglasses that they thought made them look cool.' I almost gave up.

'But I did match with this one guy,' I tell Hannah. 'He caught my eye. He was ... different.'

I made the first move. So unlike me, but I was a bit pissed from Jules's wine.

Free to meet up? I wrote.

Yes, his reply came. I'd like that, Bella. When suits you?

How about this evening?

There was a long pause. Then: You don't hang about.

This is my only free evening for the next few weeks. I liked how that sounded. Like I had better places to be. Fine, he messaged back. It's a date.

'What was he like?' Hannah asks, her chin in her hand. She seems fascinated, watching me closely.

'Hotter than his photo. And a bit older than me.'

'How much older?'

'Um ... maybe fifteen years?'

'OK.' Is she trying not to sound shocked? 'And what was he like? When you actually met up?'

I think back. It's hard for me to see him as he appeared at the beginning. 'I guess I thought he was hot. And ... he seemed like more of a man. He made Callum look like a boy in comparison.' He had broad shoulders, like he worked out a lot, and a tan. In comparison, Callum was a scrawny little pretty boy. Proper men were my new thing, I decided. 'But,' I shrug, even though she can't see me. 'I don't know. I suppose however hot he was, at first, a part of me would have preferred him to be Callum.'

Hannah nods. 'Yeah,' she says sympathetically. 'I get that. When you've got your heart set on someone Brad Pitt could walk in and he wouldn't be enough—'

'Brad Pitt is really fucking old,' I say.

'Um – Harry Styles?'

That almost makes me smile. 'Yeah. Maybe. Or Timothée Chalamet.' I always thought Callum looked a bit like him.

'But Callum probably hadn't thought about me for a moment, especially not while Ellie's stupid big tits were in his face.' I told myself I had better stop fucking thinking about him.

'And did this guy ... what was his name?'

'Steven.'

'Did he say anything? When you met, about you being so much younger?'

I give her a look. That sounded a bit judge-y.

'Sorry,' she says, with a laugh. 'But, seriously, did he?'

'Yeah, he did. He asked me if I was really twenty-six. But he didn't say it in a suspicious way, more like it was, I dunno – a joke we were both in on. It didn't really seem to matter to him, not then. And he was nice,' I say, though it's hard to remember that now. 'I was having a good time. He laughed at all my jokes. He asked me loads of questions about myself.'

I cast my mind back to that night. Being in that bar with the drinks going to my head – I was drinking Negronis because I thought that would make me seem older. 'My original plan was to get a photo,' I say, 'post it to my Instagram.' Let Callum see what he was missing.

'I'm guessing ...' Hannah looks at me, 'a bit more than that happened?'

'Yeah.' I take a gulp of vodka.

There was this moment, I remember, when I thought maybe he was going to say goodbye, but he opened the door of the cab and turned to me and said: 'Well, are you getting in?' And in the taxi (not even an Uber, a proper black cab), how this little voice kept piping up: What are you doing? You hardly know him! But the drunk part of me, the part of me that was up for it, kept telling it to shut up.

We went back to Jules's place, because he'd just moved house and didn't have any proper furniture. I felt a bit bad about it, but I told myself I'd wash the sheets.

'Wow,' he said. 'This is impressive. And it all belongs to you?'

'Yeah,' I said, feeling like I'd got a whole lot more sophisticated in his eyes.

‘And then we had sex,’ I tell Hannah. ‘I guess I wanted to do it before the booze wore off.’

‘Was it good?’ Hannah asks. She sounds excited. And then: ‘I haven’t had sex for ages. Sorry. I know that’s TMI.’

I try not to think of her and Charlie having sex. ‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘It was a bit – y’know. A bit rough? He pushed me up against the wall, pushed my skirt up around my waist, pulled my knickers down. And he— Can I have a bit more of that?’ Hannah passes me the bottle and I take a quick slug.

‘He went down on me, even though I hadn’t had a shower. He said he preferred it like that.’

‘I got a bit nervous,’ I said. ‘Especially of having to introduce him to Jules. And there were all these free drinks. I had way too many of them, to try and feel more confident. I made a total twat of myself. I had to go and be sick in the loos – I was a state. And then Steven put me in a cab back to Jules’s, and I couldn’t even ask him to come with me because she would be there later on. I remember him counting out the notes to the cab driver. And then asking him to make sure I got home safe, like I was a child.’

‘He should have gone with you,’ Hannah says. ‘He should have made sure you were all right. Not left it to some taxi driver.’

I shrug. ‘Maybe. But I was such a fucking embarrassment. I’m not surprised he wanted to be rid of me.’

I remember watching him out of the window and thinking: I’ve blown it. And thinking, if I were him, maybe I’d just go back inside and hang out with people my own age who could hold their booze.

‘After that he started ghosting me.’ In case she doesn’t know what that means I say, ‘You know, like not replying? Even though I could see the two little blue ticks.’

She nods.

‘I went back to uni. One night I got a bit drunk and sad after a night out and I sent him ten messages. I tried to call him on the walk to Halls at two a.m. He didn’t answer. Didn’t reply to my texts. I knew I’d never see him again.’

‘Shit,’ Hannah says.

‘Yeah.’

‘So was that it?’ she asks, when I don’t say any more. ‘Did you see him again?’ And then, when I don’t answer: ‘Olivia?’

But I can’t speak. It’s like I was under some sort of spell before, it was so easy to talk. Now it feels as though the words are stuck in my throat.

There’s this image in my brain. Red on white. All the blood.

When we get back to the Folly, Hannah says she’s knackered. ‘Straight to bed for me,’ she says. I get it. It was different in the cave. Sitting there in the dark with the vodka and the candlelight, it felt like we could say anything. Now it feels almost like we overshared. Like we crossed a line.

I know I won’t be able to go to sleep, though, especially not while all the blokes are still playing their game outside my room. So I stand against the wall outside for a bit and try to slow down the thoughts racing round my head.

‘Hello there.’

I nearly jump out of my skin. ‘What the fuck—’

It’s the best man, Johnno. I don’t like him. I saw how he looked at me earlier. And he’s drunk – I can tell that, and I’m pretty drunk. In the light spilling from the dining room I can see him give a big grin, more of a

leer. 'Fancy a puff?' He holds out a big joint, sickly smell of weed. I can see it's wet on the end where it's been in his mouth.

'No thanks,' I say.

'Very well-behaved.'

I make to go inside, but as I reach for the door he catches my arm, his hand tight about it. 'You know, we should have a dance tomorrow, you and I. Best man and the bridesmaid.'

I shake my head.

He steps nearer, pulls me closer to him. He's so much bigger than me. But he wouldn't do anything right here, would he? Not with everyone upstairs?

'You should think about it,' he says. 'Might surprise you. An older man.'

'Get the fuck off me,' I hiss. I think of my razor blade, upstairs. I wish I had it with me, just so I knew it was there.