

<Update: NewUser1 has added one new listing . . .>

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Chapter 1

dark tourism

noun

noun: **dark tourism**

1. tourism that involves travelling to places associated with death and suffering.

HANNA – Wednesday 7 p.m.

The unopened Christmas card watches me from the shelf. It does that a lot, sometimes shouting for attention, sometimes calling coyly. I should put the thing away in a drawer. Or burn it. Or maybe I should actually open it. It probably just says ‘Merry Christmas’. Or it’ll be one of those round-robin cards, detailing everything my family has been up to over the year, a bragging list of their achievements, a hollow reminder of all the things I haven’t been there for – *Look at what you’re missing!*

Or – and this is why I still haven’t opened it – it could be a personal message: *Why haven’t you . . . ? When will you . . . ? I wish you’d . . .* Or, if it’s written by my dad rather than my stepmother (highly unlikely but . . .), it’ll be: *How dare you? I should have known you’d . . . Typical behaviour from you . . . I should never have expected more . . .*

Why on earth should I subject myself to that? Bland message, round robin, screaming accusations – it'll hurt whatever it is, so the bloody thing can shout all it wants, I will *not* open it. But my resolve wavers as it always does when I go to grab it, to bin it, to hide it, my hand hovering in mid-air, like I think I'll be punished for daring to throw it away unopened.

My phone buzzes and I glance at it. It's Dee being telepathic again. *Okay?* the message says.

Am I? Another buzz – *I know what today is. We can rain check if you like.*

Not telepathic then, she doesn't know about the card. She's just noted the date. The irony is I'd forgotten. Haunted by a damned unopened Christmas card rather than the things I should really be haunted by. I catch sight of the tattoo I got last year – it's not like I could forget for long now I have that permanent reminder.

I turn my back on the card and tap out a reply to Dee. I won't cancel our night out, not because of a card *or* a date.

The sky is ominously dark when I step outside, so I head for my car even though the pub is only ten minutes away. To be honest, I probably would have taken the car even if the sky was clear. The quickest way to the pub skirts the park, along a quiet road popular with joggers. But it's also popular with joyriders, because it's long and straight with no speed bumps, and there was a nasty hit-and-run less than two minutes from my house a few months ago. The police sign appealing for witnesses is still there, but as far as I know, no one has come forward. Like I said, the road is creepily quiet. So, car it is, even though the one-way system means it'll take just as long to drive as it would to walk.

But I freeze, keys in hand, when I get to my car – my front tyre is flat. I could cry, I really could. Why do I bother? I should take this as the sign it obviously is, let today's date envelop me and coat me in a layer of darkness, go back in, cancel Dee, stuff myself with cake and cry myself to sleep.

I crouch to look closer – the tyre is not just flat, it's shredded. No way is this a puncture: it's been slashed. The urge to cry fades as I straighten up and the first drops of rain fall heavy on my head. Clutching my car key so tight it digs into my palm, I storm back into my house, swearing under my breath as I chuck the keys down and get out my phone.

'Liam – you fucker,' I say as soon as he answers.

There's a pause. 'Hanna?'

'You slashed my tyre, you shit, you absolute *shit*.'

Another pause. I hear muffled voices, hear him moving, a door closing. 'What the hell are you on about?' he says when he comes back on the line.

'My car – my tyre slashed to ribbons. Ringing any bells?' I say it through clenched teeth.

'Are you insane? Why the hell would I slash your tyres? Jesus, Hanna, you need to get a life and leave me alone. I've told you this before. If this is some crazy cry for help, I'm—'

'Oh, don't give me that shit. What is this, some kind of revenge? For all the delusional paranoid crap you spouted at me just because you saw me near your flat? I told you I had nothing to do with what happened.'

He snorts down the phone. 'Yeah – you keep telling yourself that, why don't you? Look, I haven't been near your car, or your house, or you. I'm with my girlfriend; I've been with her all evening. I've moved on – hell, I'd moved on before

we broke up. You need to let it go and stop calling me.’ He pauses. ‘Or I really will go to the police.’

I’m squeezing the phone so hard I’m amazed I haven’t crushed it to dust. ‘Oh . . . fuck off,’ I say and stab at the screen to end the call, wishing I still had a bloody landline so I could slam the receiver down.

I hate, hate, *hate* that he can still do this to me two months after we’ve broken up: make me so angry I’m shaking. He is such a bastard – I can’t even go to the police because he’ll no doubt get his new *girlfriend* to lie and say he hasn’t left her side, that it’s me harassing him and not the other way around . . .

It had to be him, right?

Oh God, have I just made a total tit of myself? I take a breath, try to let out the anger. It could have been kids, it could have been anyone. I can feel my cheeks reddening. Oh God, Liam is going to think I’m crazy.

No. No – I won’t do this to myself. It’s his own fault my mind automatically went to him, if he weren’t such a tosspot I never would have assumed . . .

I cringe again, remembering my rant. I’ll delete his number – delete all his bloody contacts off my phone. I’ll get the tyre fixed and that’ll be it.

I’m horribly late and of course the rain has got heavier since I came back in. I take another deep breath. No – no excuses. I’m going out. The walk to the pub will be good and perfectly safe – that rain will cool me off and I can forget all about it – the car, the unopened card, today’s date – before I meet my friends.

Wednesday night and our local is not busy. To be fair, though, it never is – that’s why we like it. We’re always guaranteed a table – like a bunch of nans, we can’t be doing with standing

all night, shouting to be heard. Yes, we're barely into our thirties, but I did my partying years starting at fourteen, sneaking out through my bedroom window, plastered in make-up with bad fake ID. Jaded and cynical before my fifteenth birthday, the year everything turned to shit. Dee and Seb have been coupled up since sixth-form college so they're as nan-ish as me when it comes to a social life, more keen on dinner parties and the kind of parties with quiet background music and lots of comfy chairs rather than clubs. Five minutes here and I'm already feeling soothed, Dee and Seb's presence like a warm blanket and a mug of hot tea. I don't mention the slashed tyre or my angry fit at Liam when I walk in half an hour late and soaking wet, just mutter I had a flat battery so had to walk.

Dee frowns, passing me her dry cardigan from the back of her chair to put on, while she sends Seb to the bar to ask for a pot of tea. Literally a hot blanket and a drink to go with their presence. 'You walked the park road?' she says.

I smile. 'Dee – the hit-and-run car isn't Christine. There isn't a possessed Plymouth Fury lurking around every corner waiting for unaccompanied women to flatten.'

'It's not funny,' Dee says. 'I heard it was no accident. That the driver deliberately mounted the pavement and hit her at sixty miles an hour.'

I wince and then shiver as someone opens the door to the bar and lets in a blast of cold air. 'No, of course it's not funny, but my point stays the same – whoever did it is not still lurking around, are they? I promise to always cross the road safely, Mother Hen.'

Dee glances round to check if Seb is still at the bar. 'Changing to a nicer subject – what are you doing on Friday night?'

I shrug. ‘Well, not going out walking, obviously . . . Netflix? Possibly a pizza if I’m feeling daring. Why, did you have a better offer for me?’

‘I might. How does a date sound?’

‘You want to take me on a date? Dee, I’m flattered, but what about Seb?’

‘Oh, ha ha, *very* funny. It’s one of Seb’s friends – Adam? I’m not sure if you’ve met him, but he’s been at parties we’ve all been at, so you may have run into him.’

‘A blind date? Oh God, Dee – really?’

‘What’s wrong with a blind date? He’s nice – really nice. Fairly recently single, I think. He and Seb were at university together. He moved to Wales a few months ago to work with Seb so he’s employed.’ She pauses and grins. ‘Better than your last few boyfriends already, right?’

I pull a face. ‘Come on, Dee. Me and a nice, employed, solvent man? That’s never going to work, is it? Besides, I’m *awful* at first dates. You’ve seen me if someone tries to chat me up—’

‘Stop it,’ she says gently.

‘Stop what? He wouldn’t be interested – unless you’ve told lies about me.’ I smile. ‘Which you probably have because if you gave him the real lowdown, he’d never—’

‘Stop it,’ she interrupts, less gently this time. ‘Stop punishing yourself, stop running yourself down. You do deserve a nice date, a nice boyfriend – someone sexy but decent who won’t cheat on you or try to swindle you or treat you like shit.’

Tell that to the Christmas card on my shelf, I want to say but I keep quiet – one more negative comment and Dee will get really mad.

‘Come on,’ she coaxes. ‘I saw you flinch at the word “date”. You can’t let your dad do this to you. It’s like he’s permanently sitting on your shoulder, putting you down.’

I don't know whether to shudder or laugh at the image of my dad in miniature form sat on my shoulder, but Dee's right. He is always there.

'And,' Dee continues, 'you can't let Liam the loser do this to you either. He's gone, over, out of your life. Forget him and move on. Forget both of them.'

I look down at the table, picture myself telling Dee about the tyre, about my phone call to Liam, about that ridiculous night outside his flat. Would she believe it was him? Or is she going to think as he did – as I'm beginning to worry myself – that I'm so screwed up I was just looking for a reason to ring him and torture myself all over again? Oh, sod it – maybe Dee's right. I should forget I ever met Liam and wasted six months of my life on him. Maybe I'll go home, chuck the Christmas card in the bin unopened and say yes to the blind date. Maybe Seb's friend Adam likes prickly women who socialise like his nan.

'What are you thinking – can I set it up?' she asks, as Seb returns with our drinks and I take a grateful sip of tea, warming my hands on the cup.

'I was thinking about Christmas cards, actually.'

'*Christmas* cards? Hanna – It's *February*. Are you sure that's just tea you're drinking?'

I don't agree to the date, not even when Seb joins in with Dee's coaxing, painting Adam as the perfect date. Dee frowns at my protest that me and perfect are not a good mix, but she lets it go after I promise to think about it.

And I do, I think about it the whole taxi ride home, indulging my imagination in a scenario of me and the perfect Adam hitting it off, falling in love, living a fictional happy-ever-after.

I laugh to myself as I unlock my front door because even solely in my imagination I can't do it. Even in my imagination, the perfect scenario won't play out – the happy-ever-after is flimsy, a cardboard cut-out I can't make real.

What is real is the reminder of that Christmas card – the reminder of who I am and what I've done and why I don't deserve any better than a man like Liam. I think that's why the Christmas card is still there, why I go through the almost daily ritual of should I open it, should I throw it away – and end up doing nothing at all. It's a reminder, and a warning, and a way to punish myself.

There's an envelope on the mat when I get in – a yellow Post-it note stuck to it: *Sorry – this was delivered to mine by mistake!* The note is from Ben, my half-house neighbour. The postal mix-up happens quite often because of the oddness of our flat layouts. It was what attracted me when I was viewing flats: after traipsing round a dozen identical uninspiring box flats in Cardiff Bay, this place was a breath of fresh air. It was more central, close to the park, and, for some reason, instead of splitting the house into floors, the developer had divided it into two flats vertically to create two maisonettes, both with a living room and kitchenette downstairs and one bedroom and a bathroom upstairs. It was like owning my own mini house with a one-bed flat price and it meant both Ben and I had a narrow strip of garden out the back. The two identical front doors, despite being labelled 27A and 27B, seemed to confuse the postman regularly.

I peel off the yellow sticky label and look at the envelope. My name and address are written on the front in a neat but unfamiliar hand, but the size and weight of the white envelope are so similar to the unopened Christmas card that I shiver, for a moment convinced that the card has found its

way back out into the world to be re-delivered. Especially when I walk into the living room and the Christmas card isn't on the shelf where I left it propped up. I almost throw the newly delivered post across the room before I spot the missing card, the envelope face down on the floor. The wind, that's all – the wind blew it off when I opened the front door.

I pick it up and try to calm myself down. Of course it's not the same card. This isn't Harry Potter with dozens of cards about to fly down the chimney until I open one. I rip open the new envelope and immediately wish I hadn't. It's a sympathy card. *Sorry for your loss*, it says on the front in swirly text above a picture of some lilies. I open the card with a shaking hand, but there's nothing written inside. It's not coincidental or accidental, the arrival of this card. Someone knows the significance of today's date. And the only person I can think of who knows the date Jacob died, and would send this card to me, is my father. But would he really be so breathtakingly cruel?

Of course he would. I blink tears from my eyes. It's stupid, so bloody stupid. Dee is right – I've let that Christmas card sit unopened on the shelf for over two months, allowing it to torture me daily, and in the end, it didn't matter – my father got in a sneak attack, swept aside all my defences with this new card.

I rip up the sympathy card, tear it into tiny pieces, crumple the envelope up into a ball. I reach for the Christmas card to do the same, but hesitate. My dad isn't in that envelope – it's just me, punishing myself, exactly as Dee said, but I'm not ready to open that one, or tear it up. I grab the card, open a drawer in the dresser and shove it inside, right to the back. I won't give it another thought, even if I'm too cowardly to actually either open or bin the bloody thing.

I double check all the doors and windows are locked before heading up to take a bath, still twitchy about my poor car. Now I'm calm, I really don't think Liam had anything to do with it. Furtive tyre slashing is not his style, but the thought that my ex is enough of a shit that my mind immediately turned to him is depressing.

Before I switch off the light to go to bed, I send a text to Dee, typing quickly and pressing send before I can start prevaricating: *Okay – set me up with a nice solvent non-cheating non-toxic man.*