

Romance Set in Paradise: Book Two

Lover's Retreat

Kim Knight

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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Romance in Paradise – Lover's Retreat: Book Two

By Kim Knight

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Kim's Dedications

Thank you to every blog, Twitter and Facebook follower. Your support means so much.
Thank you to Kelly, you're such a pleasure to work with, and so motivational.

To all lovers of escapism I love it too, this series is for you! When I wrote Lover's Retreat I started a personal journey of self-development and growth. Any one travelling this road, this one's for you. And, of course thank you, yes you the one who bought this book. Thank you for supporting me. I hope you enjoy reading the story as much as I enjoyed writing it. Thank you for reading.

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

CHAPTER ONE: FORTUNE WHEEL OF LIFE

Yasmin sits uncomfortably on the stiff chair in her late mother's solicitor's office, in Victoria central London. Her hands are folded in her lap and her gaze fixes firmly on them. She can't believe the news she has just heard. She's rich, very rich. Her mother left her entire estate to her only daughter.

Yasmin's mother passed away in a restful sleep. She was diagnosed with lung cancer five years ago. It was a miracle to her and her family that her mother held on for so long. Mr. Daniels breaks the silence.

"Ms. O'Neil are you okay?"

Yasmin looks up from her lap.

"Oh yes, sorry I'm a little shocked. Have I understood right? Fifty thousand pounds cash and the four-bedroom house?"

"Yes, correct Ms. O'Neil. Your mother had the house valued just before she passed, you can include three hundred thousand pounds for the house also."

Mr. Daniels fixes Yasmin with a concerned look. He imagines a thirty something year old woman who receives news that she is more than financially stable, would be over the moon with happiness. Yet her body language is reserved and hard to read.

"Okay, thank you for the confirmation. So, what happens next?"

Mr. Daniels removes his round frame glasses and leans back in his chair.

"Well it's completely up to you Ms. O'Neil. You are the only beneficiary. Your mother was very clear in her will, you have access to the money. As for the house, you decide how you wish to proceed."

"Right, thank you. For now, I think I'll keep the house I'm...was I should say living there with Mum. I'd like to keep hold of it."

"As you wish, my secretary will give you a call by Friday with an update. In the meantime, here's your copy of your mother's will."

Yasmin reaches over the large oak desk as she nervously reaches for her mother's last Will and Testament.

"Thank you, Mr. Daniels. I'll see myself out."

"It's a pleasure, take care."

Mr. Daniels offers Yasmin his hand which she shakes timidly across the large desk.

Yasmin gets to her feet and smooths over her brown curls, slightly frizzy from the afternoon drizzle and damp air.

Once outside on the pavement Yasmin is greeted with the hustle and bustle of London. City workers and tourists spring from all directions. She feels dizzy and suddenly hot, even though it's December, and less than ten degrees today. For comfort she unzips her tattered old winter coat. Yasmin ducks her head under her coat, away from the light rain starting to fall again. Glancing around she quickly crosses the main road. Keeping an eye out for taxi drivers whizzing past the station. Once she is safely across the road, she heads inside Victoria station. Yasmin makes her way over to Starbucks for a latte. As she opens the door of the busy coffee shop she notices the Christmas cheer. The décor inside reflects the holiday season with tinsel and Christmas songs playing softly in the background. The warmth from the coffee machines and human bodies are welcome, in contrast to the crisp bitter December winds outside.

Joining the queue, she looks around and wonders what she will do for Christmas this year. *Is there much point in celebrating?*

“Hello madam, what can I get you today?” A tall, eastern European male smiles at Yasmin from behind the counter.

“Just a small latte please.”

“Coming right up, is it to have here or take out madam?”

“I’ll have it here please.”

“And your name madam?”

“Yasmin.”

“Thank you it’s on its way.”

Yasmin watches him write her name on her cup. She pays for her drink and stands by the side of the till. She watches the baristas make quick work of her coffee, handing over a steaming cup in no time. Yasmin spots a seat over in the corner by the window, she zig zags her way through the tables and crowds of people, careful not to spill her coffee. The warmth of her latte and the caffeine hit relaxes her, as her mind starts to race over the last five years of her life. She was married and divorced by the age of thirty two. After just three years of marriage her husband up and left her. He was heartless and blunt in his reasons for deserting her, for two and a half years the pair had tried to conceive a child. Test after test concluded that there was no fertility issue with either of them. Yasmin just could not fall pregnant. It put a massive strain on their relationship and marriage, their communication broke down and Yasmin became the nagging wife. Her and her husband’s lovemaking became a routine operation, with an aim of reproducing rather than for enjoyment. A month after he left her mother was diagnosed with cancer. It was a terrible time for Yasmin, she lost herself completely as she threw herself into her new role as sole care giver for her ill mother. Her work suffered, she disconnected with her friends, her appearance took on a life of its own. Most importantly her love and passion for dance slowly disappeared, she no longer had the time or desire to attend dance classes, or polish her ballet technique with a terminally ill mother.

On the odd occasion when she did somehow carve out the time or find the desire to attend the dance studio, she experienced blackouts of sound. This is what disturbed Yasmin the most, she feared she was losing her hearing.

Over the years her fear has materialised, she now is almost deaf in one ear. For five years, she has been hiding it as best as she can. Quite soon after her blackouts started she learned to pay attention to lip movement when spoken to. She made up every excuse in the book internally for not going to the doctors. She was too busy, work was demanding, her mother’s care was more important.

For five years Yasmin put her mother’s care and needs before her own, now it shows physically. She feels less confident than she was eight years ago aged twenty nine when she married David. Back then she was proud of her toned ballerina’s figure. Her petite five foot four frame would stand confidently, she wore the latest fashions, figure hugging dresses, sky scraper high heels and make up. These days she barely runs a brush through her hair, or puts on some mascara. Life took a toll on Yasmin in a mean way. She faced all her life changing experiences alone mainly out of choice, she did not want to feel as though she was a burden on her girlfriends.

Looking out of the coffee shop window Yasmin’s mind reverts to her mother’s funeral. The day was grey and overcast, it drizzled as she stood by her mother’s open grave as her casket was lowered into the muddy soil. She feels she has done her mother proud, by giving her a send off that she would have wanted. An intimate service at the local Catholic church her mother attended, each week, without fail for the twenty years she lived at the same address in south London.

The service then moved over to the local cemetery in Nunhead for her burial and final goodbyes. Close family and friends attended on the day, they did their best to comfort her as her mother's only child. Yasmin started to grieve heavily over her loss and lack of siblings to turn to.

"What am I to do now?" Yasmin whispers out loud to herself, in the corner as she sips her coffee and mulls over life.

Friday afternoon Yasmin stares at her laptop screen, she is now fifty thousand pounds richer than she was last night. Her mind boggles over why her mother never shared with her, how much she had in savings. She glances away from her screen to look around the large kitchen, her late mother was so proud of it. With modern tiled flooring, white work tops and fitted appliances. One thing her mother was known for is quality. Everything Mona did was done with style and flare, that was her mother. Yasmin's phone buzzes on the glass table next to her, she smiles as she places the phone to her good ear.

"Hi Sebrina, how are you?"

"I'm well Yas, but, how are you? I've not heard from you in a while."

"Yeah, I fine, just taking each day as it comes."

"Hmm, that's the best way. Some days will be harder than others but you will get through it."

"Thanks."

"You've got to look forward now. A lot has changed, what are your plans? You must have a bucket list of things you'd love to do."

"Funny you should say that, I've had a bucket list of things to do for as long as I can remember. I actually dug it out the other day."

"Wow, interesting what's on the list?"

"Well, travel, dance goals and motherhood stuck out to me."

"Great, there's two there from the list you can work on right away, with the motherhood part don't let the past turn you crazy."

"Oh, believe me I'm not! I don't even have a man to work on that part of the to do list with."

Both women chuckle down the phone.

"Yas I'm so glad you can see the bright side of life."

"It's either that or go crazy, I know which one I'd rather. But as it so happens I think I need a break, a long one too. The last five years I've been tied to London and the same routine. Not that I am resentful at all for caring for Mum."

"Absolutely, no one can ever say you are being selfish for taking a break, no matter how long."

"I'm thinking of going travelling for a while."

"Where too? Sounds great."

"I have no idea, that's what I'm trying to work out, the world is a big place! But I could do with a beach, some sun and relaxing. The December weather is doing nothing for my mood."

"So, you won't be around for Christmas?"

"I doubt it, who do I have to spend it with?"

"You've got me!"

"Thanks, Sebrina but you have a husband and family, you don't need a third wheel hanging on."

"No way, don't think that. You're one of my oldest and dearest friends."

"Aww, thanks all the same but I think I'll pass."

"Okay, your call."

"If you need anything Yas, anything at all you just call okay?"

“Thanks of course I will, but I should be okay once I know where I’m heading. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Excellent, I’m on lunch, I better get back to work. I’ll talk to you soon okay?”

“Perfect speak to you soon.”

Yasmin puts the phone down with a smile, *what does the future hold for me?* She contemplates the future fifty thousand pounds richer. Glancing at her bucket list she looks at the first point on the list, travel. Yasmin’s life has been more than isolated over the last five years, the last time she set foot on a plane was on her way to St. Lucia for her honeymoon with David. She smiles again, not at the honeymoon itself, anything to do with David is still painful, however her memories of the paradise she experienced in St. Lucia remain fond memories. The sounds, smells, feel and pace of the Caribbean makes her mouth water, as she recalls the ten days she spent on the island.

It had been her idea to visit this exotic island, to seek half of her heritage from this beautiful place. Her mother was born and bred in St. Lucia she came to the UK in her early twenties as a qualified nurse. A profession her mother loved to the core. Her father was a Scottish born doctor, he owned his own general practice in Hammersmith west London. The couple met while working in the medical profession, when her father moved to London. The pair had spent a wonderful twenty years together, through thick and thin regardless of the stares and racial slurs they experienced while out together. In her mother’s day back in the sixties and seventies it was rare, even frowned upon to enter an interracial marriage. Her father suddenly passed away following a serious heart attack. She was only young at the time, but she remembers her mother’s heartache as well as her own.

Yasmin opens a Google page and then types in “places to relax and discover yourself.” In the heat of the moment following her reflection on her life, failed marriage and death of her mother she realises just how much she has lost touch with herself. A list of potential links pop up, scanning through them she clicks on the third link “spiritual retreats in paradise rediscover one’s self.” The loaded webpage offers Yasmin a wealth of information on spiritualism, mediation and reconnecting with nature. She spends almost an hour reading through the information. She clicks on a link that directs her to a list of spiritual and self discovery retreats. The list is endless with locations in Thailand, Seychelles, China, and Sri Lanka all grabbing her attention. Her eyes settle on Sri Lanka, her mouth falls open as she gasps at the beauty of the island. The water is light aqua green with soft gold yellow sand, healthy green palm trees are scattered around the beach.

As she clicks again a second picture pops up showing a stream with a large grey elephant basking in the water, a local Sir Lankan sits on the back of the elephant smiling at the camera. A warm feeling comes over Yasmin as she smiles at the picture.

Pushing her chair back she heads over to the kettle and fills it with water, as she waits for it to boil she looks out the window. London’s weather has nothing new to offer this afternoon. The December weather is grey and dull, looking out at her mother’s pride and joy garden, there are no flowers in bloom and the grass is wet. Flashbacks of her mother pulling up weeds, neatening hedges and organising plant pots spring to her mind. It pained her mother whenever she was too ill to tend to her garden. All she could do was sit out and observe. Yasmin would watch as her mother made note of what needed to be done, as soon as she could get on her feet. Yasmin turns her back with a sigh and starts to brew her tea, then heads back over to her laptop on the kitchen table.

She clicks on the “about this retreat” page and starts to indulge in the island of Sri Lanka. Before long she has learned about the country’s diverse inhabitants, religions and rich Buddhist heritage. She’s drawn into the country’s potential as a place to visit. As she reads a link advertising self discovery retreats catches her eye.

Reconnect with yourself and nature at the At Peace with One's Self retreat, in Sri Lanka an island in south Asia. Voted one of the top ten wellbeing retreats for the last five years. The retreat is a spiritual heaven with a calm atmosphere, to stimulate growth and healing. There are twenty individual rooms facing the beach front. Guests will spend five days in Sri Lanka's small coastal market town Dikwella South, among a small group of twenty guests all on a spiritual journey to self discovery, to rest, reflect and reconnect with their inner person. You'll be surrounded by unspoilt nature. A major attraction located near the retreat is Kande Viharaya Buddhist Temple. A perfect place of worship and one of our optional excursion days. Dikwella is also home to one of the largest Buddha statues at one hundred and sixty feet tall. Guests will have a chance to visit, so please bring your cameras! During the retreat, you'll be introduced to the Buddhist practice mindfulness and meditation. With time to practice self awareness activities with your peers. Guests are free to spend their day however they wish, and make use of all the facilities in house to rejuvenate themselves. There will be time for fun and social activities. Retreat dates for the rest of 2016 are as follows:

1st - 5th December 2016- full

7th-12 December 2016- full

14th -19th December 2016- full

21st- 26th December 2016- limited spaces

28th -2nd January 2017- spaces available

Cost: £1500.00 per person which includes a spacious private room with ensuite, excursions, all meals and drinks included. However, guests are free to explore the local bars and restaurants. Free materials, books, DVDs and a tour of the market town. Please note this is an over eighteen's only retreat for single people. If you are a family or under eighteen please click [here](#) for other retreats. Contact the below email or number for more details on the At Peace with One's Self retreat. atpeaceretreat@gmail.com - John (retreat leader).

Yasmin can't believe her eyes a small price for such an amazing experience. She flicks back to her online banking page, to look again at the number of zeros on her balance. Smiling she grabs her purse from her bedroom and quickly rushes back to her laptop. She clicks on the 21st- 26th December 2016 date and books herself a place. She does not fancy a lonely Christmas. Over the last few days as she reflected on her new found fortune, and sudden freedom. It is time to rediscover herself and have some fun.

Her boss has been very accommodating over the past seven years, with her responsibilities caring for her mother. Yasmin often requested time off for doctor's appointments. Toward the end of her mother's illness she'd often called in with little notice and informed him she will not make it into work, as her mother was too unwell to be left alone.

Yasmin's job as a junior accounts manager for a women's retail store is enjoyable most days, but if she had her way she'd be a dance teacher or a dancer touring the world showcasing her skill.

Glancing back down at her bucket list beside her, she has a sudden urge to take advantage of her new freedom. A desire to travel more widely comes over her. Travel is the number one item on the list she wrote many years ago, as a fresh faced newlywed. After seven years' service with her employer she has the benefit of long term leave via a sabbatical or career break. Chewing the inside of her lip Yasmin picks up her cup of tea and ponders the possibility in more detail. *It is a work related benefit, I won't be asking too much of them.* Glancing at the calendar she has just seven days until she leaves for Sri Lanka. Her agreement with her boss on her return to work date, following a period of compassionate leave to organise her mother's funeral, and pull herself together is open ended. He simply

requested that she get in contact with an expected return date, once she has some time to adjust.

Yasmin firmly places down her cup of tea, glances outside the kitchen window at the rain starting to fall. With a small smile, she opens her Outlook account and starts to draft an email to her boss. She confirms she would like to cash in her work related benefit of sabbatical, and use half of it from the 16th December 2016 - 16th June 2017. Then return to London refreshed and ready to take on the world again. She apologises for the short notice, but given the circumstances surrounding her mother's death and five years as her sole carer she hopes that he would understand.

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

CHAPTER TWO: THE FIRST STEP

Friday 16th December

“Hi Yasmin, come in, take a seat.”

“Thanks Mat.”

Yasmin heads over to her boss’ desk and nervously takes a seat opposite him. Mat Davis looks Yasmin over from head to toe. Over the years he’s noticed a decline in her appearance. He remembers when Yasmin first started working in the finance department, for the women’s wear store, she was a picture of health and beauty. Her curly hair was always tame and glossy, her make up applied perfectly and she obviously kept up with the latest in women’s fashion. The Yasmin sitting in front of him is a different woman. Of late Yasmin wore no make-up, her hair is always a mass of frizzy curls and her clothes are never as carefully put together.

“Okay so I received your email, in many ways I’m really excited for you Yasmin. But I’m also sorry to see you go, I hope it’s not for good?”

“No, I plan to come back Mat, I just need a break and some time out. As you know it’s been one thing after the other, I just feel like now’s the time.”

“I totally understand.”

With a smile on his face, Mat leans forward on his desk and meets Yasmin’s eye.

“So, tell me, where are you off to? You lucky thing!”

Yasmin let’s out a genuine laugh. She feels a sense of relief that her boss will allow her to take some well deserved respite.

“Well, I’ll start off with Sri Lanka over Christmas and then... who knows but I think I’d like to travel around Asia, and possibly the Caribbean I need some warmth.”

“Sounds perfect, you must send us pictures while we’re all freezing ourselves to death here in London.”

Yasmin smiles a broad smile.

“I will I promise.”

“Okay, so, Yasmin I have been in contact with an agency regarding a replacement, she starts Monday. Are you free to come in and train her up before your departure?”

“Of course, no problems.”

“Great, well if that’s all I’ll let you organise your backpack and see you Monday.”

Yasmin stands and offers her hand to Mat, he takes it and squeezes it with kindness.

“Yasmin, you’re young enough to start again. Forget old what’s-his-name it’s his loss for leaving you. You’ll see. And as for your mother, I’m deeply sorry.”

“Thanks Mat, it means a lot.”

“Take care of yourself okay.”

Mat and Yasmin embrace in a brief hug, their working relationship has been more than perfect over the years. Mat Davis now in his fifties, losing his hair, slightly overweight and still single enjoys the company of the younger females in his department. He never makes any of his girls feel uncomfortable, he is more like a father figure to them all, rather than a sleazy boss.

Yasmin leaves Mat’s office feeling lighter, and slightly more at ease with her decision. She tries not to think about being a solo traveller, something she has never done before. In some ways, the thought of independence to do as she pleases, freedom to hop around the globe as she feels for six months excites her, but also frightens her. She has no idea where she will

head after Sri Lanka. She decides tonight she'll do a bit more research into potential destinations to travel that are safe for female travellers.

As Yasmin steps outside of the office building onto busy Oxford Street, she glances up and down at the shops, tourists and Londoners passing by. She takes a left and starts to walk in the opposite direction of her bus stop. She heads toward the John Lewis department store, she has just under fifty thousand pounds in her bank and she is in desperate need of some suitable clothing for Sri Lanka. Some retail therapy is in order.

Four hours later soaked to the bone, after shopping and a long bus journey home to Blackheath, Yasmin arrives home in the early evening. She orders a pizza, sets up her laptop and then opens a bottle of red wine. Out of curiosity she Googles "safe countries for female solo travellers". Rome, New York, Melbourne and Amsterdam pop up on a random list. From Sri Lanka, she could head over to Melbourne, then back west to New York. On her way home, she could stop off in Europe maybe Italy and Amsterdam. Yasmin pencils in the locations on her bucket list with a smile. Without any hesitation, she pulls up a site offering cheap flights to Melbourne from Sri Lanka. She books herself a ticket departing Sri Lanka on the 26th December. She will spend New Year's Eve in Australia.

The rest of Yasmin's evening passes by in complete bliss. The actions she has taken over the last two days have surprised her and thrilled her. She feels bold and in control. Emotions she has not felt in years. Once her laptop is packed away after all her research on Melbourne's sights and must see places, and her boredom with English soaps on TV kicks in, she heads to the large spare room upstairs. She has not ventured into this space for months, it's an open and airy room with dark wood flooring, a few boxes, a desk in the corner and her old dance clothes piled high in a cupboard.

Timidly she approaches the boxes, and then pulls out one of her soft black ballet dance shoes. Her leotard falls out onto the floor by her feet. Yasmin tries to recall the last time she danced, it was about two years ago. She had been right here in this very room practicing her twirls and spins to a beautiful piece of classical music. She had difficulty keeping in time to the music as the volume to her sounded low, she remembers turning the volume up on the CD player thinking that this will help. It didn't. In the end, her mother banged on the wall. She could not understand why the volume was so loud, she felt bad that she disturbed her mother's rest. That's when reality started to set in for Yasmin, the volume was not low, her hearing was the problem.

She shrugged it off, over the months that followed the problem developed. She did not hear the phone ring, or her co-workers calling her name. Slowly she admitted to herself her hearing was slowly disappearing.

Placing the memory to the back of her mind Yasmin focuses on the present day, she has been drawn to the spare room for a reason, she now has her dance shoes and leotard in her hands. There is only one thing to do to top off her day, before she showers and heads to bed ... dance, like no one is looking with the music as loud she needs it. Yasmin quickly removes her jeans, vest top and slippers before she changes her mind. Then climbs into her leggings and black leotard, on her feet she slips on her ballet pumps and laces the silk around her ankles and calves. The adrenaline in her body is building.

On the CD player she places a classical CD into the deck, and selects track ten *Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata*. As the slow soothing G# minor key kicks in on the piano Yasmin points her toes, and slowly she starts to find her rhythm, listening carefully to the music and each key change. After five minutes of dancing she stops to push all the boxes to one side of the large room, to make space for her to move more freely around the room.

For two hours Yasmin dances to several classical pieces. She is reduced to tears by how fulfilling it feels to dance, to be free. She is by no means in the same form she was years ago, her pique turns and pirouettes need work.

Her dance session is broken as she notices her mobile phone's light buzzing on the floor, she never heard it over the music. Yasmin picks up her phone and places it to her good ear, as she lowers the CD player.

"Hey Sebrina, how are you?"

"I'm good Yasmin, I know it's late but I wanted to call to see what progress you made with your travel plans?"

Yasmin smiles as she wipes the perspiration from her forehead. She takes a seat on the wooden floors and leans her back against the wall.

"Well, I've booked a trip, two to be exact. I'm off to a retreat in Sri Lanka for a week over Christmas then I'll head to Australia."

Sebrina gasps on the other end of the phone.

"What? No way! Oh Yasmin, I'm so proud of you for taking these first steps."

"Thanks, that's not all. I've danced tonight for two hours, I've impressed myself."

"Good for you. And the grief over your mum, is that any easier?"

"Right now, it doesn't feel like it will ever be easier. Each day it's like something is missing. The house is empty, I miss our chats and cups of tea together. It's hard, I'm not going to lie. But I'm taking one step at a time."

"Excellent news. So, I guess I'll cross you off my list as a guest for Christmas dinner then?"

"I guess so. Thanks all the same."

"No problems, I'm happy you'll be somewhere nice and warm with other people. Hopefully you'll make new friends."

"I hope so. I'm sorry I've been so introverted of late I just..."

"Yes, what are you saying sorry for? For caring for your ill mum, emotionally dealing with an idiot that wants to up and leave when problems arise. Don't be silly."

Yasmin sighs and smiles.

"Thanks Sebrina, for understanding."

"It's fine, I'm here if you need me. I'll let you get back to your dancing."

Yasmin laughs a happy content giggle."

"Thanks it feels so good to move again, I'll call you over the weekend."

"Okay, speak soon."

Yasmin puts the phone down and stares at her feet.

"One step at a time." She says and gets to her feet to dance.

On Monday Yasmin arrives at work bright and early. She meets her replacement and starts to show her the ropes of her job. Mary is bright and a quick learner, she's confident she'll manage the work load.

By 4:00 p.m. Yasmin arrives home and heads straight up to the spare bedroom, to finish off where she left off last night. Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* is calling her

CHAPTER THREE: COLD AS ICE

20th December, London Heathrow Airport

Dear diary,

So here I am. I can hardly believe it! It's the 20th December and my journey starts now. I'm at the airport sitting in the departures lounge. All around me are families and couples, it's buzzing with people all preparing to visit their loved ones abroad. I woke up early this morning (1:00 a.m.) to get to Heathrow for my 6.30 a.m. flight. The last few days have been a mixture of emotions for me, my head has been clouded with thoughts over Mum passing away, making such a big decision about globe hopping all on my own and of course what the hell I'm going to do with all this money? All these thoughts have been whirling around my head non-stop.

I spent quite a lot of time online reading about the retreat, the practices that we learn about and how to reconnect with yourself and life in general. So this is my first attempt to "find myself" by keeping a diary, I have never been much of a writer. I read a blog post from the retreat leader, John, he recommends keeping a journal to really unpick yourself, then hopefully place yourself back together. I stopped off at WHSmith once I checked in my bags to buy one. I'm now fully armed for the next five days, and the rest of my travels around the world with a wonderful gold diary. Here I go, on this new journey into the unknown.

John commented on his blog that we should practice writing down a gratitude list, one thing we learned today, and one thing we need to do as a starting point. This is meant to help you put things into prospective, also to have some kind of idea of where you're heading. It makes sense I guess.

I've been sitting here reflecting on these points. What am I grateful for? That I'm living and breathing I suppose. But other than this what else is there? Sure, I have a nice four bedroom house with no mortgage to pay on it, and money in the bank now, but life still feels empty. I even thought back to David. I've not heard from him since I lost all pride years ago and begged him to come back. I was at such a low point, frustrated with my body and its inability to conceive a child, and devastated over Mum's diagnosis. He left me when I was at my worst, how could he? I guess as simple as it seems my gratitude list for today should include.

- 1. I'm alive and breathing, regardless of the loss of direction I feel I'm alive.*
- 2. The past week I've danced and enjoyed the sensation of moving to the music, with what hearing I have.*
- 3. I've taken the first step, I'm going to find Yasmin again and what I want out of life.*

One thing I have learned not just today but over the last week is that I can do it, I can reclaim my life again. One thing I need to do is figure out what direction I'm moving in. My flight has just been displayed on the departures screen, in thirteen and a half hours, with one stop off I'll be half way around the world.

Thirteen and a half hours later at 4.30 p.m Sri Lankan local time, Yasmin makes her way through arrivals at Colombo Airport. The tiny airport is calm and relaxed during the late afternoon. A few locals stand by the arrivals exit waiting to greet loved ones and friends.

Loaded up with a backpack and small travel case Yasmin continues farther through the airport. She looks around her taking in the unfamiliar environment. Once outside she's surprised by the humid air. Locals are walking around in their shorts and T-shirts. Yasmin is covered up in her heavy winter coat and jeans. For Yasmin, it's hard to imagine any other

type of weather this time of year other than rain, wind and sometimes even snow. As she left her home in Blackheath in a taxi to make her way to the airport, London's roads were icy and the wind was bitter. On the early morning news, an amber alert for heavy snow around the capital was announced.

At the pickup point where Yasmin's bus driver is due to meet her, she removes her backpack and delayers herself. Packing away her coat and jumper, leaving only her fitted T-shirt over her jeans. She studies the details she printed out for the At Peace With One's Self retreat with excitement. A large white bus pulls up in front of the collection point, the driver jumps out and calls out her name.

"Hi, I'm Yasmin."

The driver looks over at Yasmin and smiles. He has deep golden tanned skin, a tall slim build, with long mousey brown hair and a scruffy beard.

"Hi, I'm John your retreat leader."

Yasmin takes in his appearance. More hippy than what she expected, with his long hair, faded jogging pants and flip flops. His T-shirt is faded black with a white peace sign on the front. He holds out his hand with wooden bracelets around his wrist. She takes his hand in hers to offer him a genuine handshake.

"Hi, John nice to meet you."

"Are you excited about the retreat?"

"Oh yes, very excited but also a bit nervous. This is all so new to me."

"Good glad to hear it, and you'll be fine. You're the last pick up for me tonight, so we'll head straight there."

Yasmin glances up at the bus behind John. It's full of all the guests, they wave and smile to her from inside the bus. Yasmin shyly raises her hand and returns a wave along with a small smile.

"Sounds great John."

"Cool let's get going then."

John offers her a wide smile and picks up her suitcase. He walks over to the side of the bus and opens the storage section. Once her case is loaded onboard he turns and ushers her into the bus. Yasmin nervously places a hand on the rail to steady herself. She climbs the three stairs into the air-conditioned bus. She glances up and down the aisle looking for an empty seat. The only one left is toward the back on the left-hand side. Next to a man who is engrossed in a thick novel, with a serious look on his face. His backpack takes up the only space Yasmin has to sit. Nervously Yasmin makes her way down the aisle offering small smiles to the other guests. Once she approaches the serious looking man engrossed in his novel, she clears her throat. He hardly notices her presence.

"Hi, excuse me is it okay if I take this seat?"

He looks up from his novel with a frown on his face. Yasmin's nerves increase tenfold as his intense gaze rests on her. The pair lock eyes for a moment too long. Yasmin breaks the intensity as she lowers her lashes. His deep voice breaks the silence between them.

"Yeah, sorry."

He moves his backpack from off the chair, and places it on the ground between his feet in front of him. And returns to his novel.

Yasmin's nerves turn to irritation. *How rude no consideration for others?* Runs through her mind as she lowers herself into the seat.

"Thank you." Yasmin responds. Contrary to what she thinks about this man's social skills. John's muffled but cheerful voice vibrates around the bus over the radio.

"Okay everyone this is it! We're on our way to Dikwella where our retreat is located. We have a nice meal and some drinks lined up to break the ice. In the morning, you'll be greeted with the beautiful beach we're based on for your time at the retreat, just south of the main

town. It's clean, quiet and has some friendly waves for all you surfers. In the meantime, sit back and enjoy the ride."

A round of claps echo around the bus, as Yasmin's fellow retreat goers express their excitement. Lowering her gaze to her lap she internally gives herself a high five. She's done it, she broke loose to take the first steps toward moving forward with her life. Now all she has to do, is try to integrate with her new found community of soul seekers, over the next five days. She takes a deep breath as she turns her attention to the man sitting next to her. She takes in his appearance once more, as she decides if he's approachable. He is in desperate need of a haircut. His jet black curly hair has out grown its tapered cut. He sports a tiny afro. His beard borders his square jawline which could also do with a shave. Against his mocha colour skin, his features are sharp. Behind his scruffiness his smooth full lips and almond shape eyes peek out. From his dress sense Yasmin guesses he's around her age. He wears dark denim jeans and a black T-shirt with the iconic Nike swoosh on the front. Around his left wrist is a beaded brown ethnic style bracelet.

"Hi, my name's Yasmin."

Yasmin offers her hand to the stranger. He looks up from his paperback and slowly looks her up and down. His expression appears to be one of surprise that she introduced herself.

"Hi."

Is all he says. He doesn't accept Yasmin's handshake, and lowers his eyes back to his paperback. Yasmin's breath catches in her throat as she sighs, he shrugged her off in a rather unfriendly way. She tries again to make friends.

"What's your name?"

He turns back to her and licks his lips, this time he fixes Yasmin with a friendlier stare.

"Michael."

"Nice to meet you Michael."

He nods again and reverts his eyes to his paperback. He does a double side glance as he notices Yasmin still watching him, and then shakes his head.

"What are you reading? Anything interesting?"

"Stephen King... If you must know."

"Oh wow, I love his books which—"

Michael cuts her off before she can finish her sentence.

"Don't you ever stop talking? Jasmin, I don't mean to be—"

Yasmin cuts in and meets his gaze.

"It's Yasmin."

There's a moment's silence between them as they lock eyes, with annoyed expressions on their faces. Neither of them refuses to back down with a blink, or releasing their gaze.

Yasmin is surprised at his harsh tone of voice, and how dismissive he is. Michael is impatient with Yasmin's attempts to make small talk, which he'd rather not have.

"Sorry, *Yasmin*. I don't mean to be rude but I'd rather be left alone, if that's okay with you."

Michael's response comes out more as a statement matter of fact, rather than a question or polite request. Yasmin pouts, nods her head and then lowers her lashes. She clears her throat.

"No problem." Is all she can say with slight embarrassment.

She pulls out her phone and places her earphones in each of her ears. She selects a complication of classical music by Beethoven and Mozart. The bus whizzes along the bumpy roads toward Dikwella, Yasmin tries her best to relax with her music, and not to take offence to Michael's rudeness. She stares out the window at the fast moving scenery with a scowl on her face. The sky is turning dusk, the tall palm trees stand still in the humid air. As John guides the bus through the rural areas of Dikwella, Yasmin hopes her fellow retreat goers are

friendlier than Michael. His unapproachable persona sends her into a state of panic. *Has she made the right choice booking this retreat? Will she be welcomed?*

After two and a half hours of riding along in silence next to Michael, Yasmin is glad to see the At Peace With One's Self retreat come into view. Removing the earphone from her good ear, she watches John the retreat leader stand up and announce their arrival over the microphone. Yasmin packs away her music and gets to her feet. Michael waits impatiently as she gathers her belongings. As Yasmin turns around she catches him staring at her from his window seat. With a look that could melt ice she looks down at him. Michael raises an eyebrow and watches in surprise as she makes her way down the aisle, joining the other retreat goers disembarking the bus. Shaking his head in disbelief Michael follows suit and gathers his belongings then heads toward the exit.

All twenty guests gather around the bus and look on at the retreat, and all its beauty. The retreat is a grand building set back from the beach shore. Across four floors, the wooden hut is lit up with lanterns around the entrance, leading up the stairs toward the front door. On each side of the banisters, leading up toward the entrance a stone statue of a Buddha in prayer position is placed, as if protecting the guests. Each room's deep oak wood shutters are open, letting the cool breeze in. Beside the hut on both sides a handful of lazy palm trees and exotic looking red flowers, with lush green leaves provide shade for the building. Outside on the porch are four tables with chairs arranged around them.

"Here we are folks, we're home." John announces proudly as he opens the bus storage compartment and unloads the luggage. Guests move forward and claim their bags commenting on the relaxed beauty of the retreat.

"Don't be shy ladies and gentlemen, once you have your bags make your way in. Rashmi will be there to show you to your rooms. Yasmin looks up toward the door. A petite Sri Lankan lady in her early fifties, with a long braid hanging over her shoulder is standing at the door. Her maid's uniform is crisp white, on her feet are low court shoes.

Yasmin nervously grabs hold of her suitcase and follows behind the other guests. As she approaches the steps of the entrance, Yasmin takes in the calm feeling surrounding her. The sky has now turned to dusk. The palm trees and exotic flowers make her feel at ease, as does the aroma of lavender incense sticks burning from within the retreat, which floats out and meets her on the top step. Rashmi greets all the guests personally as they enter the large hallway, and place their suitcases down. Candles light up the hallway with soft lighting. A large traditional rug is placed in the corner, for guests to remove their shoes. A large tropical Yaka plant is placed in the corner of the hallway, its healthy green leaves sprout out. Behind the reception desk a large motif is painted on the feature wall. Yasmin walks over to the motif and looks carefully at the detail in the artist's work. A majestic God is sitting on a highbacked gold chair, with an array of bright colours surrounding him. His elephant head dons a gold crown with jewels.

"Hello dear, how are you?"

Rashmi looks up at Yasmin with kind eyes. Yasmin smiles as she looks down at Rashmi's pretty face and slightly grey hair.

"Hi, I'm fine thank you. What's the meaning of this painting?"

Rashmi let's out a small laugh and places her hands in a prayer position.

"This one of the most important Hindu Gods, Ganesha. He is believed to be the God who removes all obstacles. He's the patron of arts and science, he represents intellect and wisdom. Throughout your time here in Sri Lanka you will get to know him, as well as the other Gods."

"I see, wow thank you." Yasmin responds, surprised with his significance.

Yasmin moves her eyes away from Rashmi and back to the motif painting of Ganesha. She takes a step forward to admire the God and his representation in Hindu and Buddhist beliefs further.

Rashmi leaves Yasmin admiring the artist's creation and heads to the centre of the room, where she rings a small bell to get everyone's attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you would please join me in the dining room. Here you'll find an information pack on the table by your name."

The guests speak in small whispers as they make their way into the dining room in single file. As Yasmin enters her breath is taken away. The room has two tables to seat all twenty guests. The tables are covered in gold table clothes with red candles floating in water, the heavenly scent of lavender fills the air. Behind each table is a highbacked gold chair, on top of the tables are gold place mats. At each seat is a gold dinner plate and delicate gold champagne glass. The cutlery is wrapped in a gold cloth tied with a red ribbon. Yasmin walks around the table looking for her name while everyone settles into their seat. She stops dead in her tracks. To her utter surprise and disappointment her name plate is next to Michael. He's sitting in his place to the right of Yasmin's place, with his elbows on the table as he fiddles with his own name tag. *Oh, great* Yasmin internally processes her feelings of disbelief that she would have to endure the evening and dinner sitting next to him. She walks over to her place timidly biting the inner corner of her lip, and takes her seat. Michael gives her a side glance and runs his hand over his beard.

Yasmin looks up at him and quickly looks away as they lock eyes. Inside she's full of nerves, but she tries to appear confident with her body language.

"Evening again ladies and gentlemen, lovely to have you here. As you know I'm John your retreat leader. I've been a leader for almost ten years now. I started off just like you an observer, someone who needed some sense of inner peace, to relax from life's stress. I ended up in China, that was my first Buddhist retreat then I came here. I never looked back."

All twenty guests look on at John standing at the end of the table.

"About three months after the retreat I gave up my job in London, as an investment banker, sold my house, packed a backpack and came back over to Sri Lanka. I've been here ever since. Welcome, I'm really pleased you're here."

A round of applause echoes around the room. Yasmin finds herself smiling at John's journey.

"The aim of this retreat is to arm you with the tools needed to de-stress, find inner peace, meditate, reflect and think about what it is you truly seek in life and how you will go about it. I also hope that you'll make some life long friends. On that note, I've taken the liberty of allocating you all a buddy. The journey you're about to go on is a personal one, however it's helpful to have someone else to bounce your thoughts off. And you can meet them right away, you're sitting right by your partner, they could be to your left or right. If you open your envelope on your plate you'll find a name. Consider this person your buddy for the next five days. All the group activities will be carried out with this person. Please open your envelope up and take a look."

Yasmin and Michael open their gold envelopes both holding their breath. They slide out the gold card, each of them sees the other person's name on their card. The pair slyly give each other side glances without making eye contact, then glance back at John beaming at the other end of the table.

"Okay everyone, first let's enjoy a light snack and some wine, take the time to get to know your buddy over dinner. Once we're done we'll head next door for a brief introduction on what to expect. I'll then leave you in peace to digest what we covered. As it's quite late we'll meet up again and discuss the information over breakfast. Enjoy your meal."

John takes a seat while the guests let off another round of applause. Michael and Yasmin aren't so enthusiastic.

"So, looks like it's me and you then *Yasmin*."

Michael pipes up emphasising her name.

Yasmin doesn't meet his eye, she stares down at her gold plate with a poker face. In a hushed flat tone, she responds.

"Yes, it appears so."

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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