

Aunt Bessie's Holiday (An Isle of Man Cozy Mystery Book 8)

Pages: 254
Format: pdf, epub
Language: English

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Aunt Bessie's Holiday An Isle of Man Cozy Mystery

Diana Xarissa

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For Kevin, for everything he does for us.
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Author's Note

It's hard for me to believe it, but this is the eighth book in the Isle of Man Cozy Mystery series. As ever, it can be read on its own, but I do think the series is best read in order (alphabetically by the last word of the title).

The first thing to note about this book is that I've used the word holiday in the British rather than the American sense. (In US terms, this book is about Aunt Bessie's Vacation.)

Otherwise, if you've read the other books in the series, you'll know all about Bessie's origins (in my romance *Island Inheritance*) and that I use British spellings and phrases, except where Americanisms sneak in, as I'm living in the US now and tend to talk and think in American English on a daily basis. I hope I've managed to find the right balance between the different English languages so that the book is enjoyable on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and anywhere else anyone chooses to read it.

This is a work of fiction and all of the characters are fictional creations. Any resemblance they may have to any real persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The story is primarily set in a fictional holiday park in the Lake District in England. When we lived on the island we frequently visited holiday parks, and the one in this story is a mix of several different parks with many fictional elements added. (If you want more information about holiday parks in general, please see the notes at the end of the book. As far as I know, there really isn't anything quite like them in the US.) Torver Castle is also entirely fictional.

Those of you who have read my romances will have already heard the story of the ghost in Castle Rushen who can help women identify their true love. That story is fictional. To the best of my knowledge, Charlotte de la Tremouille does not haunt the castle.

As ever, I love hearing from readers. My contact details are at the end of the book.

Chapter 1

"I didn't even remember entering the contest," Doona told Bessie. "So winning was a huge surprise."

"I don't think I know anyone who's ever won anything like this," Bessie replied. "A week's holiday is a wonderful prize."

The friends were sitting in the kitchen of Bessie's small cottage, enjoying tea and biscuits. Doona had rung less than an hour ago to tell Bessie that she had exciting news. At Bessie's invitation, she'd driven over to the cottage immediately.

"I know. Now I'm ever so glad I didn't take any holiday time in the summer," Doona said. "I can take a week off now and no one can complain."

"I'm sure John wouldn't complain."

"He might not, but Anna surely would," Doona retorted, frowning.

Bessie nodded, remembering what Doona had told her about the policewoman who had recently joined the staff at the small Laxey branch of the Isle of Man Constabulary. Anna Lambert had been hired from across to assist with the day-to-day operations of the small station. Apparently, this was to allow John Rockwell, who was in charge of policing for Laxey and Lonan, to spend more time in the field and on investigative work. From what Doona had said, Anna's arrival wasn't going as smoothly as everyone had hoped.

"So, which week are you going on your wonderful surprise holiday?" Bessie asked, hoping to distract Doona from complaining about her new boss and ruining her excitement over her unexpected good fortune.

"I'm supposed to travel on the 18th," Doona replied.

"Well, it all sounds wonderful," Bessie said. "I've never been to a holiday park like that, but the brochure looks tempting." She picked the glossy pamphlet up from the table where Doona had left it and flipped through it for a second time. "There's certainly a lot to do."

"Yeah, most of it for families and small children," Doona said with a sigh. "I wasn't sure I wanted to go at all, but on page six there's a list of activities for adults."

Bessie turned to the correct page and read aloud from the brochure. "Here we are, 'Coming to Lakeview Holiday Park without children? Try your hand at pottery, watercolour painting, or pencil sketching. Our heated, indoor water complex is open all day with special evening hours where selected pools are for adults only. We have aerobics and yoga classes, crazy golf, woodland walks and tours of nearby Torver Castle, one of the most haunted castles in the whole of the British Isles, also available for our adult guests.'"

"And there are a bunch of restaurants," Doona added. "Look on page eight."

Bessie turned the page. "Chinese, Italian, French and American," she read down the list. "With an Indian takeaway, pizza delivery and a grocery shop on-site, you certainly won't starve."

Doona laughed. "I'm sure I'll come back at least ten pounds heavier," she remarked. "I'm ignoring

the exercise classes. But did you see the French-style patisserie?"

Bessie looked at the photograph of éclairs and profiteroles piled on top of one another and dripping with chocolate sauce. "Maybe fifteen pounds," she murmured as her mouth watered.

"And it's all included in my prize," Doona added. "Anything and everything that I want to do and all the food. It's the greatest prize ever. It's almost too good to be true."

"It all sounds wonderful," Bessie said with genuine enthusiasm. "And I think you could really do with a break as well. I'll miss you, but I'm sure you'll have a lovely time."

Doona nodded. "But I was thinking," she said to Bessie. "Maybe you'd like to come along?"

Bessie sat back in her chair, feeling surprised. "But this is your special holiday," she said after a moment.

"And it will be much more fun with a friend along," Doona replied.

The pair were unlikely friends. Doona, with her highlighted brown hair and bright green eyes, courtesy of coloured-contact lenses, was twice divorced and in her forties. She worked at the front desk of the Laxey Constabulary. After having grown up in the south of the island, she'd only moved to Laxey two years earlier when she'd been in the middle of a very difficult divorce. At the time she'd hoped the change of scenery and the new job would help her get over her broken heart.

Bessie was probably twice her age. She'd lived in Laxey, in her small cottage right on the beach, for all of her adult life after a childhood spent in America. Over the years, Bessie had come to love her short grey hair, which matched her eyes. While Doona was comfortably plump, Bessie had always been slender and that hadn't changed with age. Bessie had never married and never held down a paying job. She kept busy acting as an honorary aunt to just about every child in Laxey and doing research at the Manx Museum into the history of the island she called home and loved immensely.

They'd met in a Manx language class just days after Doona had moved into her new home in the village. Their friendship was forged over shared struggles with the difficult Celtic language. Bessie provided Doona with the support she needed as she worked her way through the breakup of her marriage. Now the pair spent as much time together as their busy schedules allowed, with Doona being the one offering support to Bessie as the older woman found herself caught up in multiple murder investigations recently.

"As I said, everything is paid for," Doona reminded her. "I'm allowed to bring up to three guests. Our accommodation is in one of their lakeside cabins and we'll have two bedrooms and two bathrooms, so we won't have to share. I thought you might like a chance to get away for a week and just relax. Of course, you can also do as many of the activities as you like."

Bessie flipped through the brochure again, looking at all the glossy photos of families appearing to be having a wonderful time. She was very tempted.

"You can try rock climbing and inline skating if you want," Doona teased. "Or you can tour that haunted castle and try some pencil sketching. We can do things together or just meet up for the occasional meal and do our own thing, whichever you prefer."

"It's your holiday," Bessie argued. "You should do what you want to do."

"I intend to," Doona replied. "I'll make my list of activities and then you can decide which ones you'd like to do as well, if any. I don't plan to try rock climbing, but if you decide to try it, I want to be there to watch."

Bessie laughed. "I think watercolours and sketching are a bit more my sort of thing," she told her friend. "And I wouldn't mind touring a haunted castle, either."

"So you'll come?" Doona asked.

"If you're sure you want me to," Bessie replied.

"Hurrah!" Doona shouted. She gave Bessie a hug. "I didn't want to say this before, but I really, really don't want to go on my own," she confided to her friend. "I'm sure the whole place will be filled with happy families. I'm afraid I'd be quite lonely."

Bessie smiled and patted Doona's hand. "If you'd told me that in the beginning, I wouldn't have hesitated for an instant. I'm sure we'll have a good time."

"We are definitely going to have a good time," Doona said emphatically.

The days seemed to fly past, at least for Bessie, and she soon found herself packing and getting ready for her week away. The night before their early morning departure, John Rockwell insisted on throwing them a small going-away party. Bessie suggested they have the party at her cottage, as that was an easy place for everyone to gather.

"Bessie, are you all packed and ready to go?" he asked when he arrived a short time before the party was due to start. Bessie hugged the tall, dark-haired man, feeling relieved to see that he'd regained at least some of the weight he'd lost recently. His stunning green eyes were bright and his smile seemed genuine.

"I think so," Bessie told him. "At least as much as I can be. Some things will have to be added in the morning, of course."

"I'm glad you're going with Doona," he said in a confiding tone. "I think she'd get rather bored on her own."

Bessie shrugged. "I never get bored on my own," she said firmly. "But I've had a great many years to get used to being alone."

John nodded. "It does take some getting used to," he said ruefully.

"How are you coping?" Bessie asked, feeling as if she'd said the wrong thing. John and his wife, Sue, had only recently split up. Sue had returned to Manchester with their two children, leaving John on the island by himself.

"I'm getting there," he replied. "Some days are better than others, but the kids have a half-term break coming up soon, so they'll be coming over for a week. I'm hoping to be in the new house by then."

Bessie had helped John do some house hunting the previous month. John had been delighted when the owners of the property he liked best, a recently renovated bungalow in the same neighbourhood where he was currently renting, dropped their price. His offer had been accepted almost immediately and Bessie knew he was happy to getting settled into his new home.

"I'm looking forward to seeing it once you've moved in," Bessie told him. The house, when they'd seen it, had been deliberately neutral in décor. John had shown Bessie various paint samples for the colours he was planning to use for each room. The end result promised to be quite interesting.

"Yes, well, we'll see how it all turns out," John said, flushing. "Sue always handled painting and decorating, so this is all new territory for me. I have a feeling some of the colours aren't going to work as well as I'd hoped."

Bessie hid a grin. She had the same feeling, but she wasn't going to share that with John. "You'll learn more through trial and error than from having others tell you what to do," she said.

Before John could reply, they heard a car pulling up outside. Bessie opened the door to Hugh Watterson and his girlfriend, Grace Christian.

"Hugh, you've grown again," Bessie exclaimed as she hugged the young policeman.

He blushed and shook his head. "I think it's just these boots," he muttered, glancing down at his feet.

Bessie looked at the stylish leather boots he was wearing and pressed her lips together. Under the circumstances, chuckling would be inappropriate, but she couldn't help but smile as she looked at the rest of Hugh's outfit. Bessie had known Hugh since he was a child, and now, in his mid-twenties, he still looked little more than fifteen. The fancy trousers and collared shirt didn't really do much to help with that, but it was something of a surprise, as Bessie was used to seeing Hugh in jeans and tattered T-shirts when he wasn't in uniform.

Grace now joined him in the doorway and Bessie stepped back to let them both inside, giving Grace a hug as the girl walked past. There was no doubt in Bessie's mind that the pretty young schoolteacher was responsible for the changes to Hugh's wardrobe. She'd seen other changes in the young man as well, as he became increasingly dedicated to his difficult job. Now she could only hope that Hugh would get around to proposing before Grace gave up on him.

The guests all brought food with them, and within half an hour Bessie's small cottage was filled to overflowing with friends from around the island.

"Honestly, you'd think we were moving away or something," she remarked to Doona as they both refilled their wine glasses in the kitchen.

"Everyone was just looking for an excuse to celebrate something," Doona replied. "Mid-October is a bit of a quiet time for parties."

Bessie couldn't argue with that. "Hop-tu-naa isn't far off," she did point out. "Although that's more for the little ones, I suppose."

The night was cool, but dry, and Bessie soon found herself in her favourite place in the world, standing on the beach behind her home. She breathed in the salty sea air and sighed deeply.

"You're going to miss this," Hugh suggested as he joined her.

"I will, but it's only for a week," Bessie replied. "And all of the cabins are meant to be able to see at least one of the lakes on the property, so I'll still have a water view."

"Doona was showing us all the brochure down at the station. Do you think it would be a good honeymoon destination?" Hugh asked.

Bessie shook her head. "Save it for when you have little ones," she said firmly. "Take Grace to Paris for your honeymoon. It's known as one of the most romantic cities in the world for a reason."

"I suppose you're right," he said with a chuckle.

"And when are you going to ask her?" Bessie demanded.

Hugh flushed. "I was thinking Christmas," he muttered. "I want it to be really special, you know?"

"What you're asking will make it special," Bessie told him. "I wouldn't wait if I were you. If you want to spend the rest of your life with her, why not start right now?"

"I don't know," Hugh said with a shrug. "I'll think about it."

Bessie sighed. "Men," she said, shaking her head. She didn't get to lecture Hugh any further, though, as Grace joined them on the beach.

"It's such a beautiful night," she said.

"There's a bit of a chill in the air," Hugh replied, looking at her with concern. "Are you sure you're warm enough?"

"I'm fine," Grace told him, smiling brightly. "Although I'd probably be better with your arm around me."

Hugh grinned and slid his arm around Grace. Bessie smiled at the pair.

"I'm going to miss you two," she said.

"It's only a week away," Hugh said. "You'll barely have time to miss anyone."

"I hope we'll be too busy to miss anyone," Doona said. Bessie hadn't noticed her friend's approach, but now she turned and smiled.

"I feel like a small child," Bessie confessed. "It's silly how excited I am about our holiday."

"I know what you mean," Doona agreed. "I haven't been away since my last honeymoon and that doesn't exactly bring back warm memories."

"I can't remember my last proper holiday," Bessie said thoughtfully. "Although as I've never worked and I live on the beach, I suppose my entire life has been a holiday."

Everyone laughed and then Bessie headed back inside to spend some time with her other guests. Quite a few of her friends from Manx National Heritage and the Manx Museum had come to wish her well and she didn't want any of them to feel neglected.

Two hours later, the last of the guests were leaving. Bessie hugged everyone as they left, grateful that they'd taken time out of their busy lives to celebrate her upcoming trip.

"Well, that was fun," she said to Doona as she shut the door behind Hugh and Grace. "And tiring."

Doona nodded. "It was at that," she agreed. "It's a good thing we're going on holiday tomorrow. We can get some extra rest."

"I thought you had us booked in for all sorts of activities," Bessie countered. "Don't tell me we're just going to sit around all week."

Doona laughed. "I've signed us up for just about everything that is only for adults," she told Bessie. "But we should still have plenty of time to rest, relax and recover from tonight."

"We should have had the party at my house," John said from his spot at the sink as he finished the last of the washing up. "I did offer."

"But you're trying to get packed up to move," Bessie replied. "Besides, it's easier to park down here and this way guests could take walks on the beach if they wanted to."

"The only guests I saw walking on the beach were Hugh and Grace," Doona said.

John laughed. "Ah, young love," he said. "I hope those two make it. They seem perfect for each other."

Doona and Bessie were quick to agree with the man. Everyone liked Grace and thought she and Hugh were well suited.

"It would have been nice if Mary could have come to the party," Bessie said almost to herself. Her friend, Mary Quayle, was still across while Mary's husband, George, was being investigated by the police. Bessie missed the quiet and shy woman who had become a good friend.

"I think the investigation should be finished some time next month," John told her. "But that's all I'm prepared to say on the subject."

Bessie smiled at him. "I'm glad it's finally wrapping up," she said. "Remember that I still have that painting in my spare room. I'd love to know what I should do with it."

John nodded. "I haven't forgotten," he assured her.

Bessie had been given a painting of Laxey Beach by a man who was currently on the run from the police. She'd been uncomfortable accepting it at the time and now she felt strange about keeping it. Once the police investigation into the man's business affairs was complete, she was hoping someone would advise her on what she should do with the painting that she loved, but didn't feel she should keep.

Now the women joined in the clearing up and they soon had Bessie's cottage back to its normal spotless state.

"I hope you both have a wonderful time," John said as he stood on Bessie's doorstep, ready to leave. "You know I'm only a phone call away if you need anything."

Bessie shook her head. "We're going to go and relax and maybe paint a picture or two. We won't need to bother you."

"I hope not," John told her. He gave them each a quick hug and then he drove away, leaving Bessie and Doona to head to bed.

"Thanks for suggesting I just stay here tonight," Doona said as she headed for the stairs. "This will be much easier in the morning and it means I can't oversleep."

Bessie laughed. "You're too excited to oversleep," she predicted.

At almost exactly six o'clock the next morning Bessie opened her eyes and smiled to herself. She felt like an eager five-year-old, giddy with anticipation. She went to wake Doona and found her friend already awake and sitting up in bed reading the holiday park brochure yet again.

"Have you memorised it yet?" she teased.

Doona laughed. "Only the good parts," she retorted. "I can name all of the restaurants and tell you exactly which pools are only open to adults. Those are the things that matter most to me."

Bessie nodded. "I'll let you be in charge of planning our days. I'm happy as long as I can eat and take a walk every day."

"Neither will be a problem," Doona said confidently.

But there was no time for a walk that morning. The two women took showers and got dressed and then finished packing their bags. Doona carried the bags down the stairs and out to her car. They didn't even bother with breakfast, agreeing that they would eat on the ferry instead.

The drive into Douglas seemed short as the pair chatted about their itinerary for the week.

"We'll go over it properly on the ferry," Doona said eventually. "I have a complete list of everything I've signed us up for. I tried to strike a balance between keeping us busy and letting us relax."

"That sounds just about right," Bessie said happily.

"Of course, we haven't had to pay for anything, so if we decide to skip things we're signed up for, it doesn't really matter."

"But we might be stopping other people from doing that activity," Bessie said with a frown.

"I doubt it," Doona said. "When I rang to make our bookings the woman at the park said that we could probably have just waited and booked on arrival. Apparently the activities for adults are never over-subscribed, especially in mid-October."

"Maybe the park will be lovely and quiet, then," Bessie said.

"We'll have to see," Doona replied. "First, though, we have to get there."

They'd reached central Douglas and Doona drove them to the Sea Terminal. She followed the signs for cars travelling on the ferry. They turned around a corner and found a long line of traffic in front of them.

"Oh dear, I didn't expect this," Bessie said.

"I was warned," Doona told her. "I haven't travelled by ferry in years, but Hugh told me all about

his trip in August. Apparently there's lots of queuing."

"So I see. No one seems to be going anywhere, either," Bessie replied.

"They haven't started checking people in yet," Doona said, pointing to the two small booths at the front of the queue. "Once they do, it's supposed to go quite quickly."

A short time later they spotted several men walking towards the booths. It wasn't long after that the shutters on the booths were opened and the first cars were being checked in. Other men spread out and began directing the traffic, sending cars to each booth as the previous car pulled away. When it was finally Doona's turn, she handed their ticket to the man in the booth. He entered some information into the computer and then handed her a boarding card.

"Once you're on board you can get your cabin keys from the customer service desk," he told her. "Have a safe journey."

"Cabin?" Bessie asked as Doona drove away, following the slow-moving queue that was now snaking away from the check-in area and towards the ferry.

"It was part of the prize," Doona replied. "We get use of a cabin on board for the journey, both out and return."

"How very fancy," Bessie said. "I haven't been on the ferry in many years, but when I did travel across once in a while, I was always quite jealous of the people who'd booked cabins. In my imagination, the cabins were hugely better than the main seating area with the squalling children and the huddled masses."

"I've never been inside one," Doona told her. "But at least it's a bit of private space and they are all en-suite as well."

"What a nice surprise," Bessie said. "I didn't think this holiday could get any better, but it just has."

They'd reached the end of the new line of cars and Doona switched off her engine again. "I suspect we'll be here for a while," she told Bessie in response to the question she hadn't yet asked. "I'm told they load the freight on first."

For close to an hour the pair watched as huge container lorries made their way into the belly of the ferry. Some minutes later the front end of the lorry would emerge, leaving its container behind.

"This is quite interesting," Bessie said after a while.

"It isn't bad," Doona replied. "And at least we don't have children with us."

Bessie exchanged glances with Doona. In between watching the lorries, they'd both noticed the woman in the car in front of theirs. She was travelling with three small children. After the first fifteen minutes or so, she'd climbed out of the car and tried taking a short walk with the trio, but the oldest child, a small boy of four or five, kept running off and dashing in between cars. When she finally caught up to him, dragging his two small sisters after her, she'd returned them all to the car and shut them up inside. For a moment, she stood outside the vehicle with the three children shouting inside it.

"Do you think she's imagining just running away?" Bessie had asked Doona.

"I would if I were her," Doona shot back.

Instead, the frazzled woman went into the boot of her vehicle and emerged with a box of biscuits. Bessie and Doona could hear the tears turn to shouts of joy as she showed them to the children. While Bessie and Doona didn't mind the long wait, it was clear to them that the poor woman in front of them couldn't wait to get on board the ship so that she could let the children run around.

"I'm even more grateful for that cabin now," Bessie remarked.

"Indeed," Doona replied.

Eventually the long line of cars began to move slowly towards the ferry. Doona followed the car in front, making her way onto the ferry's car decks. Bessie looked around.

"It's not very passenger friendly," she remarked as several men directed Doona down the narrow corridor. The cars were packed together tightly, with barely enough room between them for people to get through.

Doona and Bessie climbed out of the car carefully. Cars were still making their way onto the deck, so the women had to move cautiously towards the nearest stairs.

"Help me remember that we're on deck 5A," Doona told Bessie when they reached the stairs.

"I'll try," Bessie promised.

They climbed several long flights of metal stairs before finally arriving at a door that said "Passenger Deck."

"Let's find customer service," Doona suggested. "I'm ready for a bit of peace and quiet."

Bessie couldn't have agreed more. The main passenger lounge looked completely full as groups of people claimed tables and chairs for themselves. In the small children's play area, it seemed as if twenty small children were fighting over half a dozen plastic blocks. A small sign that read "Quiet Deck" was only just visible behind a man who was shouting for everyone in his party to follow him.

The women made their way towards the customer service desk. It was located next to a small gift shop where queues of people were waiting to buy fizzy drinks and bags of crisps for the journey. The woman behind the customer service desk looked as if she was already worn out by the demands of the day.

"But we were told that we could all sit together," a tall man was shouting at her.

"All seating in the main lounge is 'first-come, first-serve,'" the woman said. "I'm sorry that you can't find seats together, but there's nothing I can do about it. There might be more seating in the quiet lounge."

"So if anyone complains when my six-month old twins start crying in the quiet lounge, I can tell them that you told us to sit there?" he demanded.

"Sir, if you'd just like to wait a few minutes," she said, "once everyone is on board the seating tends to sort itself out. I might be able to get a few groups to share to allow you and your party some

space. Unfortunately I can't do anything right now, though. I have to take care of our guests who've booked cabins or have other special requests."

"Oh sure, take care of them. They've paid extra for special treatment. Don't worry about the rest of us!" he yelled.

"Sir, as I said, once the ship is fully loaded, I'm sure we can do something, but you'll just have to be patient."

The man opened his mouth to shout again, but he was interrupted by the arrival of a very pretty young woman.

"Dan, come on, stop shouting at the poor woman. Your mother and I found some lovely people who are happy to share their space with us. It's all good," she said.

"I won't forget this," he said crossly to the woman behind the desk. "Next time we'll fly."

"I sincerely hope you do," the young woman behind the desk muttered as he stormed away.

The pretty blonde flushed. "I'm so sorry," she said. "Dan needs a holiday very badly. We both do, really. The twins haven't slept through the night once in the last six months and we're both exhausted. He shouldn't have taken it out on you, though. I'm terribly sorry."

"If you need anything, just let me know," the woman told her. "I hope you enjoy your holiday."

"We're going to spend a fortnight with my parents," she replied. "I intend to hand the twins to my mother and sleep for the first week."

"Good luck," the woman told her with a chuckle. "What can I do for you ladies?" she asked as she turned to Bessie and Doona.

Doona handed over their ticket and the woman gave her two keys to cabin 319. "You just need to go up the stairs on either side of the shop," she told them. "There are lots of signs, you can't get lost."

Having climbed what felt like five hundred steps to get out of the car decks, neither woman was excited by the idea of more stairs, but this was a much shorter flight and the stairs here were carpeted. The woman at customer service was right, there was no way to get lost. They followed signs down first one corridor and then another before they found cabin 319. Doona inserted the key and glanced at Bessie.

"I hope this isn't a disappointment," she said.

"I'd be happy with a small room with two chairs in it," Bessie told her.

"There is that," Doona agreed.

The cabin wasn't exactly a disappointment, but it wasn't quite as luxurious as Bessie had always imagined. There were four berths, with the top two folded against the walls. Doona folded them down and then found the small ladder that allowed easy access.

"I can't resist," she told Bessie. "I'm going to climb up."

She couldn't actually sit upright on the top bunk, but she laid down and put the small hard pillow provided under her head. "I suppose I could sleep if I had to," she said eventually.

Bessie had made herself at home on the bunk on the opposite side of the cabin. There was less than two feet between the two bunks and now she tucked her feet under her to allow Doona the necessary space to climb down.

"I imagine you don't want to climb up?" Doona asked.

"Not even a little bit," Bessie replied tranquilly.

As Bessie dug out a book and settled back into the cushions, Doona explored.

"The loo is nice," she announced when she returned from inspecting it. "There's even a shower if you feel as if you'd like one."

"I can't imagine why I would," Bessie replied.

"There are tea and coffee making things," Doona told her. She'd made her way between the bunks and was inspecting the small table at the end of the cabin. "And a few biscuits, as well."

"As it's your holiday, you should have them," Bessie said generously.

"We can share them, as it's our holiday," Doona replied. She tore open the wrapper and passed Bessie a biscuit.

"What can you see out the porthole?" Bessie asked before she took a bite.

Doona looked out the tiny window and shook her head. "Nothing much," she replied. "There are ropes and things hanging in the way. I can just about make out a bit of Douglas. Maybe, when we're underway, we'll be able to see the sea."

"I'm more interested in seeing Heysham," Bessie replied, referring to their destination port.

"Only four hours or so of sailing time," Doona told her cheerfully. "I'm sure you brought enough books to last that long."

Bessie patted her large handbag. "Of course I did," she answered. "And a few snacks, as well."

Chapter 2

A few minutes later, however, both women couldn't resist the temptation to go and stand on one of the outside decks. The ferry sounded its horn and began to move slowly away from Douglas. Bessie and Doona stood for a time watching the town behind them getting smaller and smaller.

"It's too cold to stay out here," Doona said eventually. "I should have brought a jacket."

"It's the wind," Bessie replied. As they'd made their way out of Douglas Bay the wind suddenly seemed to start coming at them from every direction.

"I think we should go back inside and have tea," Doona suggested.

A strong breeze blew Bessie's reply away. Instead of bothering to try speaking again, she simply

nodded. The friends were settled back in their cabin a minute later.

"I brought the list of everything I signed us up for," Doona told Bessie as they waited for the kettle to boil. "I think we're doing everything we agreed on when we had our planning session last week."

The pair had both been busy for several days with packing and making all of the little arrangements that have to be made before a holiday. They'd done little more than chat briefly on the phone for almost a week.

"That was a week ago," Bessie said with a laugh. "I can't remember what we agreed. Tell me what we're doing, then."

Doona dug around in her handbag, eventually pulling out a small notebook.

"That looks like one of John's little books," Bessie remarked. The police inspector always had a similar writing pad to hand for taking notes when he talked to people.

"He keeps giving them out to everyone at the station," Doona told her. "He's trying to get us all to be more organised."

"Is it helping?" Bessie asked.

Doona shrugged. "It was useful for planning our trip, anyway," she said.

"Maybe I should get one," Bessie mused. "I could keep track of all the books I've read and the series I enjoy. I read so much these days that I tend to forget titles as soon as I've finished a book."

"I have about a dozen of them at home," Doona replied. "I'll bring you a couple once we're back."

"I'd appreciate that."

"Anyway," Doona said, flipping back the cover of the notepad, "I thought we'd have a quiet night tonight. Maybe have dinner at one of the restaurants, or, if we're too tired from the journey, get some takeaway or something."

"That sounds good," Bessie agreed. "Although I can't see us being tired. All we're doing is sitting around and drinking tea."

The kettle picked that exact moment to boil, which made both women laugh. Bessie quickly made them each a cup of tea before the conversation continued.

"Tomorrow I've signed us up for an early morning walk in the woods. Their specialist forest rangers do a number of different walking tours, but the early morning one is the only one that is exclusively for adults. He or she will be taking us through the forest and talking about conservation and wildlife protection and what they do at the park in both those areas."

"That sounds a little serious for a holiday, but at least we get to enjoy a walk in the woods," Bessie commented.

"The woman who took our booking said that it's actually a really fun way to see the park and learn

about the different things they do to make the park a good place for people and for the animals who live in the area. We could see badgers, squirrels, rabbits and any number of birds."

"How long is the walk?" Bessie asked.

"It's meant to take two hours, but guests are welcome to stop at any time if they decide it isn't for them," Doona told her. "The only real downside is that it starts at eight, which is awfully early for the first day of our holiday."

"I'll be up," Bessie said with a laugh. She woke up right around six every morning without an alarm. Her body clock paid no attention to things like weekends or holidays.

"I thought you would be," Doona said with a grin. "But I do plan to have some very lazy mornings while we're there."

"Just not tomorrow morning."

"Yeah, just not tomorrow morning," Doona agreed. "Anyway, that's the only thing on the schedule for tomorrow. I thought we could explore the park and maybe try out the pools, if we get bored."

"Do we get busier then, later in the week?" Bessie asked.

"We have at least one activity booked for just about every day," Doona replied. "Tuesday afternoon we're trying pencil sketching. On Wednesday we get to attempt watercolour painting. Thursday I've left free so we can splash in the pool or even try crazy golf. I thought by then we might need a break from everyone and everything. We could always go out and do some sightseeing around the Lake District, if you want."

"Let's not plan anything now," Bessie suggested. "Let's see how we feel as the week goes on."

"Perfect," Doona replied. "On Friday we're doing the second half of the watercolour workshop in the afternoon and then, in the evening, we're taking that tour of Torver Castle that we discussed."

"I'm glad we could fit that in," Bessie said happily. "I'm looking forward to seeing it."

"I've booked us for something on Saturday that you don't know about," Doona said now. She flipped her notebook shut and sipped her tea.

"Really? What?"

"The woman I spoke to told me that they've just added a book club to their schedule, especially for adults."

"How on earth does that work?" Bessie asked.

"Apparently, when we check in we'll each be given the set of books, usually four or five titles. The book club doesn't meet until Saturday, to give everyone time to read at least one of the books."

"What about the people who arrive later in the week?"

"They only have check-in on Sundays and Fridays. The book club is only open to guests who come

for an entire week, not shorter breaks. It runs on Saturdays for guests who arrived the previous Sunday and on Thursdays for guests who arrived on the previous Friday."

"It sounds complicated," Bessie said.

"They just started it a few weeks ago, and apparently it's proving very successful. Some of the books are classics, so most guests will probably have already read at least one of the titles. She told me that Jane Austen is featured quite heavily, although they do try to include at least one book that is more modern, maybe a mystery or a romance."

"What if I don't want to read any of the books?" Bessie had to ask.

"You don't have to go to the club," Doona said promptly. "From what I was told, that hasn't ever happened. Apparently the sorts of guests who are interested in attending are also the sorts of guests who love to read and will happily read and discuss just about anything."

Bessie laughed. "That sort of sounds like me," she admitted. "Although as I've grown older I have less patience with books. I used to force myself to read all of every book I picked up. Now I'm quite happy to abandon a title after the first three chapters if it doesn't interest me."

"I read everything Jane Austen wrote when I was a teenager. If at least one of the books is by her, I won't have to read anything else," Doona said.

"I'm pretty sure I've read all of her books as well," Bessie replied. "I hope they might be able to introduce me to someone new, though. I love discovering new authors."

"We'll just have to wait and see," Doona said. "Anyway, that's our week. I'm hoping we can have a lovely and very fancy meal on Saturday night. Sunday we have to be out of our accommodation by midday if we're going to make it back to the ferry on time."

Bessie nodded. "Let's not talk about Sunday," she said. "I don't want to think about going home yet. We've not even gone very far away."

Doona stood up and looked out the porthole. "I can't see the island anymore," she said. "So we've gone some distance, anyway."

"But we still have at least three hours of sailing time," Bessie pointed out. "You did bring a book, didn't you?"

Doona shook her head. "I didn't think about the ferry journey," she said sheepishly. "I knew we were going to get the books for the book club once we arrived at Lakeview, so I assumed I didn't need to bring reading material. I think I'll go down and grab a few magazines from the gift shop."

Bessie thought for a moment. "I'll come as well," she said as Doona swallowed the last of her tea. "I brought several books, but right now a magazine sounds good. Something that doesn't require a great deal of mental effort."

"So a glossy celebrity gossip magazine," Doona suggested.

"Exactly," Bessie said with a laugh. She rarely bought those sorts of magazines, but lately she'd found herself picking them up a bit more often. They were the perfect things to waste an afternoon with when her mind was preoccupied with other matters. Today she just felt like indulging herself

by whiling away the long sailing by reading about the over the top wedding celebrations and extravagant parties that minor celebrities seemed to live for.

The ship's main deck was still cacophonously noisy and chaotic. The two women didn't waste much time selecting a few titles each and heading for the tills. They waited patiently behind a harassed-looking couple who were each holding a small wailing child. The woman who joined the queue behind Doona and Bessie had a crying baby of her own. She also had a toddler who was covered in something sticky attached to her leg. The girl behind the till rang them up on autopilot, muttering meaninglessly at Bessie when Bessie tried to start a quick conversation. Back in their cabin, the two women couldn't help but laugh.

"Now I know why I never had children," Doona said, wiping at the purplish mark the toddler had left on her trousers as he fell into her.

"Is it jam?" Bessie asked.

"I have no idea, but I'm hoping so," Doona replied. "To think I actually applied for a job with the ferry company a few years back. I wouldn't have lasted through my first sailing."

"School's in session, so nearly all of the families who are travelling are the ones with very small children," Bessie remarked. "Children are very noisy when they're small."

"And sticky," Doona added, shaking her head at the stain the little boy had made. "At least I was sensible enough to travel in old clothes," she told Bessie.

"I didn't even think about it," Bessie admitted. She'd worn a pair of trousers and a light jumper, nothing different from her normal attire.

"I was a little bit worried about being seasick," Doona told her. "I wanted to be as comfortable as possible."

"I didn't think about that, either," Bessie replied. "It's been years since I went anywhere on the ferry, but I never used to get seasick. The idea never even crossed my mind."

"I took a tablet before we left this morning," Doona said. "Although with all the waiting around we did before we boarded the ship, it's probably worn off by now anyway."

"Are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah," Doona answered, sounding surprised. "Actually, I feel pretty good."

The pair curled up with their magazines for a while, trading titles back and forth as they went. The only sound was pages turning for some time and then, suddenly, Doona's tummy rumbled loudly.

"Oh, good heavens, I am sorry," she exclaimed.

"I'm surprised mine hasn't replied in kind," Bessie replied. "We were going to get breakfast when we boarded and we never did."

"I can't believe I forgot about a meal," Doona said, laughing. "Should we go and see what they do for lunch?"

"Yes, let's," Bessie agreed quickly. "We still have over an hour of sailing time and I feel as if I'll starve if I don't eat until we dock."

Back down on the passenger deck, the pair wound their way through the crowd, heading to the small café in the back corner of the ship. There were only a few tables, and they were all full of large family groups.

"Let's take something back to the cabin," Doona suggested, nearly shouting over the noise.

"Definitely," Bessie agreed.

They studied the menu board for a moment and then Bessie shook her head. "Hot food sounds too heavy," she told Doona. "I'm just going to get a sandwich and a bag of crisps for now."

"That works for me," Doona replied.

The pair walked over to the large cooler and each selected a sandwich. Bessie added an apple and a bag of crisps to her tray and then selected a cold bottle of fizzy drink. Doona opted for a banana, crisps and a bottle of apple juice. They paid for their selections and walked as quickly as they could back through the throng.

The cabin felt blissfully quiet in spite of the noises of the ship's engines that hummed constantly in the background. Once they'd finished eating, Doona decided to take a walk on the outside deck.

"We aren't that far from Heysham," she told Bessie. "I want to see if I can see it yet."

While she was gone, Bessie tidied up the tea things from earlier, neatly stacking the dirty cups and spoons on one of the trays from the café. She set the tray outside their door, adding all of the rubbish from their lunch to it. Then she settled back in with her magazines.

"I would have helped with the tidying up," Doona told her when she returned a short time later.

"It only took a minute," Bessie said. "But what could you see?"

"Nothing much yet," Doona said with a sigh. "I'm starting to get bored."

Bessie laughed. "It is rather tedious," she agreed. "Did you explore the whole ship?"

"No, but I think I might if you don't mind being on your own for a while longer," she replied.

"Oh no, you go," Bessie said emphatically. She was quite used to entertaining herself and had plenty to keep herself busy with.

This time Doona didn't return until after an announcement had come over the tannoy.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are approaching Heysham and should be docking in about ten minutes. At that time, we will ask all car passengers to make their way to the rear staircases and return to their vehicles for unloading. I repeat, we will be asking all car passengers to return to their vehicles in approximately ten minutes. All foot passengers are asked to remain in their seats in the passenger lounge until further notice. Our guests who are occupying cabins are asked to prepare to vacate them as soon as we dock. Thank you.

Bessie was just gathering up all of her things when Doona opened the cabin door. She quickly

packed up her own belongings and then sat down on her bunk opposite Bessie.

"We only have a few minutes before we have to join the masses," she said.

"But we're here," Bessie replied, feeling a bit silly for being so excited.

"We are indeed," Doona said. "It will be nice to be on dry land again."

"You aren't feeling poorly, are you?" Bessie asked.

"No, I'm fine," Doona answered.

"Did you have a chance to see the whole ship?"

Doona flushed. "I saw the bridge," she told Bessie. "Passengers are allowed to walk around the front of the ship, and from there you can see into the bridge."

"That sounds interesting. Maybe I'll take a look on the way home."

"You should," Doona replied.

"Why are you blushing?" Bessie had to ask.

"I met the captain," Doona replied, not quite meeting Bessie's eyes. "He was, well, a bit overwhelming."

"In what way?"

"He's Italian," Doona said dryly.

Bessie laughed. While she hated stereotypes, some of them were well deserved, and she often thought that Italian men took great pride in living up to the reputation they had around the world.

"Did he show you around the bridge?" she asked her friend.

"He did, and then he offered to show me the captain's quarters," Doona replied.

Bessie laughed again. "That seems very direct."

"I think he was just being friendly," Doona said. "I'm pretty sure it wasn't actually a proposition."

"But you turned it down anyway."

"I would have, but we ran out of time," Doona told her. "It was time to start the docking procedures and he had to get back to work." *

Aunt Bessie's holiday is an unexpected treat.

When Bessie Cubbon's best friend, Doona Moore, wins a week's stay at an English holiday park, she's quick to invite Bessie to join her. Bessie isn't sure the destination, hugely popular with families with small children, is one she would have chosen herself, but with all their expenses paid, she's determined to make the best of it.

Aunt Bessie's holiday doesn't exactly provide the rest and relaxation she was expecting.

They've only just unpacked when Doona gets an unexpected and unwelcome surprise. The next morning the pair find a dead body and Doona's the prime suspect in a murder investigation far from home. Bessie needs to make new friends fast to help try to find a killer, but how can she tell her friends from her enemies?

Aunt Bessie's holiday won't be over until someone is arrested for murder.

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