

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Because of You

Written by Helene Fermont

Published by Fridhem Publishing

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Because of You

Hélène Fermont



First published in 2016 by Fridhem Publishing

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Copyright © H  lene Fermont 2016

The moral rights of the author have been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those in the
public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or
dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,
or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission in
writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or
cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition
including this condition being imposed on the subsequent publisher.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Paperback ISBN 978-0-9954907-0-3

E book ISBN 978-0-9954907-1-0

Typeset by Elipsis Digital Limited, Glasgow
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

www.fridhempublishing.com

*I dedicate this novel to my beloved parents, who instilled
in me a passion for life and literature.*

Rest in peace — you're always in my heart.

H.

PROLOGUE

WOKEN BY THE persistent ringing of the phone at five o'clock on a bitterly cold morning, one glance at his face confirmed the voice at the end of the line delivered the news they had dreaded for so long.

"It's over – no more pain and suffering," he whispered, arms around her, adding, "We're all he has left; today's the start of the rest of our lives without her."

Later that day, while she was busy putting together a eulogy in the house holding such fond memories, a shadow of a man carrying a brown envelope suddenly appeared.

"She made me promise to give it to you after . . ." he mumbled in a broken voice, eyes sad and empty.

"What is it? Please stay!" she cried, clinging to his arm.

"You'll soon find out. Always remember how much she loved you." Feigning a smile, the frail figure squeezed her hand, leaving as quietly as he had entered.

Later still, seated in the semi-darkness of the room, letters scattered around her, her only thought: "He never ceased to love me . . . blaming myself won't change what I did."

Too distraught to focus on anything but the flashbacks in her head, she let herself drift off to a distant, happier time.

CHAPTER ONE

1978

BARRY WHITE'S DEEP tones echoed through the rooms of the Stein bungalow in Limhamn, an affluent suburb of Malmö in the southern part of Sweden. Close to local shops, harbour and beach, with large bay windows and glass doors leading onto a big garden, it was home to Zadie, Walther, Hannah and Peter. In her late thirties, tall with an olive complexion, brown eyes and jet-black hair, Zadie was a strikingly beautiful woman. She smiled fondly at the young girl sunbathing next to her in the heat of July. Recently graduated from college, she was the opposite of her mother: petite frame, red hair and green eyes, yet both shared the same vivacious personality and ability to empathise. Watching her firstborn, Zadie wondered what had happened to the mischievous, freckled tomboy always up to something.

"Your graduation party was the perfect end to college and that chapter of your life, sweetheart,"

Her gentle tone made Hannah smile in return. Reaching over, she kissed her mother's soft cheek. "I couldn't have done it without you and Pappa. You're the best!"

"We love you very much, sweetie." Reminiscing about the party, Zadie remarked on how pretty Hannah had been in the blue

satin dress they'd purchased in a boutique in Malmö. "The boys couldn't take their eyes off you!"

"You would say that, seeing as you're my mother," Hannah teased, completely unaware of her own beauty.

"You listen to me, Hannah Stein! There's a *je-ne-sais-quoi* quality to you *and* you're a nice person, indeed a rare combination." Pretending she wasn't listening, Hannah asked if they'd miss her. "Of course! It's only natural. But just imagine all the fun you'll have in London. Your grandmother's dying to see you." Zadie felt certain Peter would miss her too. Fair and blue-eyed like his father, with only a few years between them, he preferred spending time with his sister as opposed to hanging out with his friends.

Soon Hannah would depart for Golders Green, a Jewish suburb in North West London buzzing with activity, shops and restaurants. Despite not being religious, the Steins took pride in their heritage and culture, frequently joined by friends during the Sabbath, Chanukah and Passover. Accompanying her daughter, Zadie would be staying at her mother's flat in nearby Hampstead until Hannah settled and enrolled on an English course.

Momentarily uncertain she'd made the right decision to spend a gap year in London, far away from the people she loved, Hannah felt her mother's eyes searching hers.

"You'll be fine, sweetie! Besides, we're only a couple of hour's flight away. Did I tell you your grandmother called? She's arranged a meeting with Ella Rifkind as soon as we arrive. She wants me to tell you how nice she is."

"Really?" Hannah sighed. "If Granny approves, who are we to question it?"

"That's right – your grandmother and I have great intuition!"

BECAUSE OF YOU

In her mid-seventies, Zipporah Friedman left Stockholm for a new life in London. Having lost most of her friends, an acquaintance suggested she start afresh, leaving her old life behind. Widowed at a young age, Zipporah raised Zadie single-handedly, supporting her by working part time in a shoe shop. Her late husband, Julius, was the love of her life. Born in Russia, Zipporah kept her strong accent, had many – mainly Russian – friends, and a contagious zest for life. The moment Hannah was born, both shared a special bond. “Your grandmother knows you’re independent,” Zadie continued. “She won’t mind that you’re not staying with her.”

Listening to her mother, Hannah felt much happier. “Are you and Pappa planning on travelling to Lugano?” It was a favourite family destination in the Italian part of Switzerland, close to Milan.

“What with celebrating your birthday and travelling to London, we’ve simply no time,” Zadie replied, shaking her head. She and Walther had booked a trip to Paris in the autumn. The ‘City of Love’ came second to the house in Limhamn. Each time they travelled there, they’d bring back a suitcase crammed with lesser-known artists’ paintings discovered in galleries outside Paris, joking as the years passed that they were sitting on a fortune, seeing as most of the artists became famous and sought-after.

Renowned for their flamboyant parties, Zadie and Walther regularly invited friends to dinner, dancing to the likes of Sinatra and Bacharach, serving delicious food and tiny squares of pizza in the early hours of the morning. Content to be a housewife, Zadie long since formed a book and French conversation group, immensely proud of her husband’s law firm in Central Malmö. “I know how much you look forward to studying for a degree and teaching, Hannah,” she would frequently tell her daughter. “Just

remember this: however satisfying, a career's no substitute for a fulfilling personal life." Apart from a few crushes, Hannah didn't have a boyfriend and continually achieved top grades at school.

One week prior to departing to London, the Steins celebrated Hannah's eighteenth birthday at The Savoy, an elegant hotel and restaurant in Malmö. Eager to fuss over her, Walther announced he'd opened an account in her name.

"We'll send you a monthly allowance – it's our birthday gift to you."

"But what about Peter?" Hannah's eyes were wide. "Will he receive the same amount?"

Glancing at her husband across the table, Zadie replied, "You're very loyal – yes, if your brother wants to spend a year abroad, we'll match the amount."

The last days leading up to leaving everyone behind consisted of packing and saying goodbye to friends and Hannah's tearful attempts to memorise her bedroom: tiny red roses on the wall-paper, lace curtains and vanity table with framed pictures of ABBA. Back in 1973, Hannah, Peter and Zadie had attended an ABBA concert in The People's Park, Malmö, where, from her privileged position in the front row, Hannah watched her idols perform the songs she knew by heart. The following year the group entered the Eurovision Song Contest and the rest was history, making that night a special memory.

Bidding farewell to her father and brother was the hardest thing she ever did. They were at Copenhagen Airport, only a few hours before catching their flight when Walther held her close, whispering, "If for any reason you don't want to stay, all you have to do is call and I'll come for you." His little girl was embarking on a

new adventure and he knew he mustn't let her see how upset he was.

"Are you okay, sis? Keep in touch! I'll update you about what's going on in Linhamn." Giving her a bear hug, Peter wondered how he'd feel not having her there to talk to. Promising to call as soon as they arrived, Zadie and Hannah waved; the latter's eyes brimming with tears.

Putting an arm around her, Zadie smiled. "Stop worrying so much. They'll be fine – I'll make sure of it. The moment you've been waiting for is here: London, we're on our way!"

Arriving at Heathrow on a hot Sunday afternoon, collecting their suitcases and walking outside to queue for a black cab, both noticed the sky turning dark. The driver laughed, seeing their expressions as they seated themselves in the back.

"This is London! The city boasting four seasons in a day!"

Talking amongst themselves, they looked out the window, thinking how dirty it was outside in comparison with neat and tidy Malmö. It took almost an hour getting to the address, the driver announcing, "Here we are, luvvies! I've parked outside the number you gave me."

"My daughter's on a gap year – we're not sure if she'll be living in that house," Zadie murmured.

"A pretty girl like you – you'll have a great time! I hope you don't mind me saying, I can see where she gets her looks from."

Laughing, Zadie paid the fare, adding a generous tip. "You're very kind. Take care." The driver helped them carry their suitcases onto the pavement, then drove off. People were milling about everywhere. Zadie and Hannah's eyes fixated on a couple of benches oddly positioned in the middle of the street causing cars

to pass by with caution. Looking up, they spotted a sign: Rodborough Road NW11.

“Let’s get this out of the way – your grandmother’s awaiting us,” Zadie said, gesturing towards a building at the top of the road. “Look, there’s a cinema and Jewish delicatessen just around the corner. You’re in a good location – the station’s only a five-minute walk from here.”

But Hannah wasn’t listening. She felt butterflies at the pit of her stomach looking at the house in front of them; an old Victorian property quite unlike their modern house in Limhamn.

“I bet it’s seen a lot of changes,” Zadie said in a cheerful voice. “Are you ready, sweetie?” In summer frocks, both were anxious to get inside before there was another downpour. Catching her breath, Hannah pushed the doorbell.

After the distant sound of footsteps on the inside, the door swung open and the pair found themselves staring at the smallest woman they’d ever seen. Shorter even than Hannah, her hair was white as snow, and she had red lips and bright-blue eyes. Supporting herself on a stick, she looked them straight in the eyes.

“You’re Miss and Mrs Stein? I’m Ella Rifkind, please call me Ella – everyone else does. I’m sorry I can’t greet you properly; arthritis is such a nuisance! A sign of old age. Welcome to my home.” Talking in a melodic, soft voice, her accent and manner were impeccable.

Following her inside the room further down the dark passage, Zadie and Hannah noticed she walked with a limp.

“This is the dining room, it’s awfully stuffy this time of year but it’s my favourite place to relax and watch television,” Ella explained. Hannah took in the antique furniture and framed photos on the walls, just as Ella asked, “Can you cook my dear? As you can see, I’m fairly limited.”

BECAUSE OF YOU

Hesitating, Hannah looked at her mother. "A bit . . . Granny taught me how to make chicken soup."

"The 'Jewish penicillin' – splendid! By the way, you're very pretty, my dear. The young men around here will take a shining to you!" Blushing, Hannah was at a loss for words. It was the second time that day someone had commented on her appearance. "Would you mind terribly if I requested your help in getting tea ready?" Ella asked Zadie.

"Of course not! Kindly lead the way to the kitchen and we'll do it in no time."

Looking very pleased, Ella steered them into the small room adjacent to the dark dining room, the only furniture a small table and four chairs with hardly any space to move. Showing them where she kept the biscuits, it didn't take long to lay the table. There they sat, sipping their tea and munching on cakes. Watching them, Ella noticed how beautiful Zadie was with those big, brown eyes.

"I've a daughter but no grandchildren, Carmen and Jim, that's her husband, visit on Saturday mornings. At best not religious, I keep kosher. It's not easy changing one's habits at eighty!"

"Ours is a liberal family; proud of our roots," Zadie replied, raising her voice slightly when she realised Ella was also hard of hearing. As she helped clear the table, Ella mentioned her cleaner, Margareth Dudley, was coming in the morning.

"But I was under the impression that's my responsibility," Hannah interrupted, eyes confused.

"Certainly not. All I ask is that you keep me company from time to time, do a bit of cooking and shopping – anything above that's selfish. You're in London, my dear!"

Relieved to hear that, Hannah asked if she could view the room intended for her.

“Of course! Please follow me upstairs. There’s hardly much point showing you the rest of the rooms downstairs. My late husband dictated they’re finished almost identically.” Hannah and Zadie held their breath, climbing the stairs behind Ella, who took one step at the time. “Phew! This is quite a struggle for me,” she exclaimed, when standing on the landing, face red and flustered.

Spotting the separate bathroom and toilet, Hannah almost blurted out she’d never seen anything like it, thinking Ella’s large room at the end of the corridor quite lovely, with white lace curtains, armchair and light pink covers on the bed. Across the hall was her own room. As they entered, Ella pointed at the furniture. “Please feel free to move it around. I want you to feel at home, my dear.”

Pleasantly surprised, Hannah’s reaction was short and sweet. “I love it!”

There was a huge bed in the centre, an open fireplace on one side and a couple of cosy old armchairs by the window. The curtains, similar to those in her bedroom in Limhamn, and antique vanity table enticed her the most along with the view of the street outside.

Looking as pleased as her daughter, Zadie smiled at the old lady. “Hannah clearly approves! I too think it’s a wonderful room.”

“I’m pleased to hear it. Could you live here, my dear?” Ella’s voice trembled slightly.

“Yes, please!” came the immediate response.

“I’m so happy! It’s my daughter’s room . . . She has excellent taste.” When Hannah told her she’d enrolled on a course of English, the old lady frowned. “But your English is excellent, my dear. Better than most people’s around here.”

“She’s attending university next year, studying to become a teacher.” Zadie was unable to contain the pride in her voice. Ella couldn’t believe her luck; the girl wasn’t just pretty and mature, but clever too. Turning to Zadie, she asked, “Are you comfortable with the idea of her staying here with me, Mrs . . . Zadie?”

“Without a doubt. My mother’s right: you’re a lovely lady.”

Blushing with joy, Ella asked them to lock up on their way out, handing Hannah a set of keys. “I usually take an afternoon nap – today’s an exception.”

They arranged to talk a few days later with a view to Hannah moving in at the end of the following week. Bidding farewell, mother and daughter embraced the kind lady who so readily welcomed them into her home.

“I can’t tell you how much I look forward to having you living here with me, my dear. Please give Mrs Friedman my fondest regards.”

It was early evening by the time they left Rodborough Road, with the sun shining above them and the sound of birds singing. Carrying a suitcase each, they walked towards the station.

“What’s it like knowing this is where you’ll live for a year?”

Hannah beamed at her mother. “Wonderful! I’ve a feeling Ella and I will be the best of friends.” Catching a passing cab to Lytton Road and Zipporah, Hannah gazed out the window at the heavy traffic on the North Circular, cars hooting around them, thinking how she couldn’t wait to tell her grandmother about Ella and the house. As the cab driver parked outside the familiar block of flats, she felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DELICIOUS AROMA of chicken soup, chopped liver and freshly baked Challah filled Zadie and Hannah's nostrils as they waited outside the third floor flat. Opening the front door, Zipporah greeted them with open arms. "Thank God you're here – you must be starving!" Slightly plump with an ample cleavage, Zadie's brown eyes and Hannah's red hair – albeit tinted nowadays – she wore a black jersey dress, matching shoes and pearl necklace, making the effort to apply blue eye shadow and pink lipstick.

"You look wonderful – I don't know where you get the energy from!" Zadie exclaimed, kissing her mother's cheek. Laughing, Zipporah raised her hands in the air.

"My dear friends Katja and Tanya insist it's our duty to look our best, living each day as if it's the last . . . Oh, and staying out of the sun." She looked at least a decade younger than her years. "My face is as soft as a baby's bottom, I drink lots of water and use an inexpensive moisturiser. But don't just stand there – come into the kitchen, we've a lot to catch up on!" Speaking in a mixture of Swedish and English, Zipporah's Russian accent was as strong as ever. Barely pausing for breath, she informed them that Hannah would be sleeping on the couch in the living room and Zadie in

the guest room next to her bedroom. Too cramped to fit a table, the kitchen was heaving with delicacies. "You must help me carry everything into the living room!"

"It looks delicious. You went to all this trouble for us," Hannah said, taking the linen cloth, crystal glasses and porcelain to the dining room table adjacent to the couch.

"Only the best for my girls!" Looking extremely pleased with herself, Zipporah took a closer look at them. "You certainly don't take after me in the looks department! Unless my eyes deceive me, you're even more beautiful than I recall. You're his flesh and blood, alright!" she told them, nodding to a framed photo of her late beloved husband on the mantelpiece.

"Don't be ridiculous! Hannah and I have your hair colour and eyes!"

The cosy combined living and dining area was furnished with pieces Zipporah had brought with her from Stockholm, and her friend Tanya's paintings decorated the walls, colours so bright and bold they felt as if they were somewhere exotic. "She's had a lot of interest, even an exhibition in London."

Admiring the abstract splashes of colour, Zadie nodded. "They're certainly not like anything I ever saw before!"

Keen to sample the dishes they rarely ate at home, the minute Zadie and Hannah started eating they realised how hungry they were.

"This is by far the best meal I had in a long time," Hannah announced between mouthfuls. "I can't believe I'll soon be moving into Ella's house."

"Really? That's wonderful news. I'm glad you like her."

"Very much, Granny. You're right, Ella's a darling."

"We're pleased for you, sweetie." Leaning across the table, Zadie pinched Hannah's cheek, turning her attention to her

mother. “Walther and I wish you’d come and live with us. Are you okay living by yourself?”

Shrugging her shoulders, Zipporah smiled at them. “I’m blessed with good health and friends, something I thank God for every single day. Can you guess what we’re having for dessert?” she asked, eyes full of mischief.

Pretending she didn’t have a clue, Hannah replied, “Is it what I think it is?”

“Perhaps . . . It’s definitely your favourite!” She disappeared into the kitchen, returning a couple of minutes later with the cake Hannah had loved since she was very young. “It’s apple pie – I made it especially for you.” Between them, they finished the pie in hardly any time, leaving a tiny piece. “Tanya’s quite partial to it . . . She’ll be disappointed I didn’t bake one especially for her.”

“How come I never succeed in getting it right?” Zadie asked. Despite being an excellent cook, this was the only recipe she always failed at.

“The secret’s in the blending of sour cream and cinnamon. It takes a lot of practice – my friends keep asking me for the recipe but I tell them my lips are sealed. I once brought it with me to a restaurant in Swiss Cottage. Cosmo offers Eastern European cuisine – the supervisor tried to bribe me, but to no avail.” Hannah vividly recalled the food and ambience. “Anyway, are you determined to go to university, my darling?”

“Definitely! You know how much I want to teach. As soon as the year’s up, I’m returning to study.”

“I’m very proud of you, we all are . . .”

“But?”

“I want to see you married with a family of your own. Your mother feels the same. Perhaps you’ll meet a nice Jewish man?”

BECAUSE OF YOU

Shaking her head, Hannah started to giggle. “I’m too young to settle down. At my age all I want is to have some fun, I’ve plenty of time yet.” Wisely neither Zipporah nor Zadie pursued the matter, secretly hoping she’d make friends in Golders Green, conscious of the fact she was fiercely independent and would resent anyone interfering in her life.

After washing up, it was time to go to bed. After unpacking their suitcases, Hannah and Zadie immediately fell asleep, unlike Zipporah, who lay in bed reading until the early hours of the morning – a habit she’d adopted since relocating to London.

Time passed very quickly as the Steins visited nearby Golders Green and Lindy’s, serving Zipporah’s favourite dish, ‘chicken in a basket’ with coleslaw and fries, also the Italian bistro, Luigi’s, in Lyttelton Road close to the flat. The day Hannah moved into Ella’s flat arrived much too soon, yet after leaving her mother and grandmother, it wasn’t long before she adapted to her new home. She found her landlady easy to get along with, both falling into a comfortable routine. When Zadie declared she was returning to Malmö, it suddenly dawned on her this was it: her adventure was about to start.

“I’ll miss you terribly, sweetie. Between your grandmother and Ella, you’ll be fine. If for any reason you don’t want to stay, your father and I will book a return flight.” Holding her close, Zadie gazed into her eyes. “Be sure to look after your grandmother for me and remember: don’t let anyone talk you into doing something you don’t comply with. Listen to your head, not your heart.”

It was a sound piece of advice – she’d do well to keep it in mind.

Waving goodbye from the kitchen window in Zipporah's flat, Hannah held onto her grandmother's arm until Zadie and the cab were out of sight.

By late September Hannah attended her first English class, soon discovering how much further ahead she was than the rest of the pupils. She decided to join the advanced group, which would eventually enable her to pass with distinction.

Every Friday Hannah made Sabbath dinner of roast chicken with all the trimmings, her culinary skills extending to stews and omelettes. Afterwards, she and Ella would watch the latest dramas on television, feasting on a bag of vanilla fudge. Ella's daughter and son-in-law visited every Saturday morning, but it was clear to Hannah that they weren't in the least interested to get to know her, much less have anything to do with her and Ella's life. Sundays were usually spent having lunch at Zipporah's flat, where the three of them enjoyed Hannah's favourite food, with Ella too polite to ask for the recipe of the apple cake.

One Friday evening in late October, Ella looked at Hannah, asking, "Why don't you explore the neighbourhood? You're too young to keep me company – as much as it pleases me, it's not fair on you."

"But I don't want to leave you! Mrs Dudley told me your legs are getting worse. Her son Tommy saw you trip over something the other day. I'd never forgive myself if you had an accident." Her eyes welled up. Ella was as dear to her as her own family.

Whenever she took a nap, Hannah spent hours in her room watching the 'world pass by' outside the window. Apart from tending to Ella's needs, Hannah didn't have much to help pass the time. Margareth and Tommy were her friends but they had their own lives. After she finished cleaning the house, Margareth took

her young son to an activity centre then continued working to provide for them. Ella told Hannah Tommy's father had left when he was born and that they lived in a small flat in Temple Fortune, only a bus ride from Zipporah's.

"They're as fond of you as I am, my dear. Margareth agrees the idea of having a gap year is to make new friends. You're much too pretty and clever to hide from the outside world."

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" Hannah joked.

"Not at all. I just want you to be happy."

It was turning cold outside, late autumn was slowly making way for winter and Hannah couldn't help missing her family and life in Limhamn.

I have to start somewhere, she thought to herself. *Going for a walk is as good a start as any.* During the following weeks Hannah explored the local area and surrounding boroughs, venturing out to Hendon and the recently opened shopping mall at Brent Cross, and catching a bus into London, visiting her favourite stores, Selfridges and Fenwick.

One night, on the way home from one of her excursions, she noticed crowds of young people crossing the road to Ranch House, a local bistro in the high street only a few minutes' walk from Rodborough Road. She debated whether or not to return home, conscious of Ella spending the day with her daughter, eventually deciding to pop into Ranch House to see if it was to her liking.

Strolling down the street in her new green tweed jacket, Hannah's red hair tumbled down around her shoulders. A couple of men wolf whistled, making her feel attractive and sophisticated.

"Are you eating, Miss?" the short, dark haired waitress asked the minute she entered.

“Yes please.” Following her to a table in the centre of the room, Hannah could tell it was popular with the locals, everyone laughing and talking around her. Furnished in rustic, earthy colours with tables and chairs made of wood and wine bottles decorating the shelves around the walls, the place felt relaxed, oozing with ambience. After ordering a toasted tuna sandwich with crisps, Hannah asked the waitress from where she originated.

“I’m Iranian, although I’ve been living in this area for many years. My name’s Aziza, what’s yours?” Hannah informed her she was Swedish, also living in the neighbourhood and studying English. “You’re kidding right? Your English is perfect – I wish mine was as well.” Aziza was fluent yet spoke with an accent. “You made the right choice; our tuna sandwich is very popular – enjoy your meal.”

She was right, the toasted double decker with tuna, sweetcorn and mayonnaise served with crisps and coleslaw was delicious. *I’ll put on weight if I continue eating this way*, Hannah thought. Ranch House was much nicer than Lindy’s – packed with people of her own age, giving her a sense of belonging.

Back at the house, when Ella enquired if she’d had a good time, Hannah assured her she did.

“You ought to browse *The Jewish Chronicle*,” Ella said. “I’ve a copy upstairs in my bedroom. Take a look at the advertisements. It’ll do you good to socialise with people of your background, my dear.” Taking her advice, Hannah’s eyes fell on a young singles event the following Saturday at Hendon Hall Hotel, not far from where she lived.

“My concern is that it’s aimed at those wishing to meet a partner.”

“Don’t worry – it’s an opportunity to make new friends. But

you must book a cab to take you there and back; your mother expects me to keep an eye on you!”

After giving it some consideration, Hannah decided to give it a go. She made a special effort to look her best, choosing a green dress matching the colour of her eyes. *I could bump into my knight in shining armour*, she thought, kissing Ella goodnight.

“You’re certain you’ll be fine on your own, my dear?”

“Of course.”

“You look lovely, enjoy the party!”

As she arranged for the cab driver to collect her at midnight Hannah felt awkward, wishing she were at home, curled up with Jilly Cooper’s latest novel. There was a crowd of people waiting to get in, further emphasising the feeling of intrusion. As she stood by herself in a dark corner of the large foyer, a waiter passed, asking, “What’s your preference, red wine or Pimm’s, Miss?”

“Pimm’s, please” she replied in a shaky voice. Sipping the fruity drink, Hannah couldn’t help but feel embarrassed that she didn’t have the slightest clue who anyone was.

“Hello, my name’s Melanie Gordon, I’m the organiser of tonight’s event,” said a slim woman with dark hair. Shaking Melanie’s hand, Hannah admitted she’d never attended a Jewish do before.

“I come from Sweden,” she said nervously. “I’m over on a gap year. As soon as it’s over, I’m going to take a degree in teaching.”

Melanie studied her appearance, seeming to take in every detail. “I’m into Economics,” she replied, “which is just as well seeing as I’ve no patience with kids! You’re eighteen, right? I’m nearly twenty-five, celebrating it with a party in a few months. Why don’t you come along?”

“But we’re strangers!”

Shrugging her shoulders, Melanie burst into laughter. “Not anymore! I never knew there’s a Jewish community in Sweden, I guess one learns something new every day.” She proceeded to introduce Hannah to her friends. With Melanie by her side, Hannah found herself relaxing sufficiently to open up to them about herself and life back home.

“See those guys over there?” Melanie whispered. “They’ve been staring at you since you arrived.” She couldn’t help thinking this girl was different from the others. It wasn’t so much the unusual colour of hair and eyes as the way she came across; seemingly more mature than most girls her age.

Blushing, Hannah replied, “But you’re the attractive one – they’re probably looking at you.” Indeed, Melanie looked very feminine and smart in a blue trouser suit, matching her big blue eyes and olive complexion. If it hadn’t been for her hospitality, Hannah would have felt like a fish out of water.

Seating herself at a table at the centre of the large dining hall, she watched the guests piling delicacies onto their plates from the lavish buffet and toasting one another in wine and champagne. She admitted to herself that although the evening had been pleasant, not a single person apart from Melanie had made a lasting impression. *Prince Charming’s not turned up tonight*, she thought to herself, almost forgetting the cab awaiting her outside.

“Thank you for being so nice to me,” she said on the way out, giving the hostess a big hug.

“This is my number – let’s stay in touch.” Melanie handed her a card with her details. Scribbling Ella’s number on a paper napkin, Hannah nodded her agreement. “As soon as my final exams are out of the way, we’ll get together,” the older girl added. “Tonight’s not really your thing; you’re much too young to settle down!”

“How about you?”

“No way! I’m focused on my career – not match-making.”

“It’s been great meeting you, Melanie, good luck with your exams.”

Accompanying her outside to ensure the driver was genuine, Melanie called out, “See you in a while, kiddo!”

Hannah smiled. Melanie Gordon was different from anyone she ever met. A short cab ride later, she let herself into the warm, lit up entrance. Climbing the stairs to her bedroom, she was touched to find a note on the pillow:

I hope tonight was special. We’ll talk in the morning. Sleep tight. Ella.

Although they called one another several times a week, Hannah and Melanie kept postponing meeting up due to the latter’s exams.

“Will you be okay on your own?”

“Stop fussing! I’m fine – We’ll get together eventually,” Hannah assured her, secretly disappointed her friend couldn’t fit her into her busy schedule. But she had tests of her own to study for, and the time soon passed.

After Hannah received her English diploma, Ella and Zipporah invited her for a meal at a bistro in Belsize Park, treating her to *ABBA: The Movie* at the ABC Cinema in Golders Green, reminding her of the time she, Zadie and Peter watched them perform in The People’s Park.

One cold morning, Hannah ventured out for a morning walk, followed by a croissant and coffee at Bar Linda next to the station. She stopped off to buy a daily paper on her way back home when the man at the newsstand enquired if she had been to Great Expectations.

"I've probably passed it," she said, warily. "The name sounds familiar."

"It's a disco, next to The Refectory and an Italian restaurant called L'Artista. I work there most nights, tending to the coats. It's a fun and friendly place – you ought to try it out."

"But I've no one to take me!"

"You know me, don't you? I'm Ollie. I'll be happy to show you around. It's the perfect venue to drink, dance and make new friends." In his fifties, balding and with thick glasses, Ollie didn't really fit Hannah's vision of Prince Charming.

"Thanks . . . I'll bear it in mind." Truthfully, she didn't think it was for her. What on earth would she be doing in a place like that?

Prior to Christmas, Ella fell ill with flu. With no appetite to speak of, all she wanted was to stay in bed.

"There's not much point in just cooking for yourself, my dear," she told Hannah. "Why don't you visit that place you like so much? Just make sure you return before the streets are empty." She was referring to Ranch House, a few minutes' walk away.

"I think you're right. Will you be okay without me?"

Smiling, Ella nodded and closed her eyes.

Less than ten minutes later, a smiling Aziza led Hannah to a table by the window. "Let me guess: you're having the tuna sandwich, right?"

"You bet! This place is rather empty tonight."

"It's the weather. One inch of snow and everything stops."

"Really? This time of year Sweden's covered in it!" Tucking into her food, Hannah noticed a tall blonde girl in blue jeans, floppy belted t-shirt and knitted jacket walking by outside the

window. She'd noticed her in the area before because she looked Scandinavian, but hadn't approached her. Suddenly curious to find out if she was Swedish, Hannah put some money on the table, picked up her bag and signalled to Aziza that she was leaving.

Just as the girl was about to disappear around the corner of the street, Hannah shouted, "Please wait! I want to talk to you." Stopping in her tracks, the girl turned to look at her.

"I don't know you – what do you want? My bus is due any minute." Her accent was unmistakeably Swedish.

"My name's Hannah – I live a few minutes away from here. I'm Swedish too," she said, swapping to their language.

Laughing, the girl introduced herself. "I'm Sanna. I come from Stockholm but I've been here since July, working as au pair for a family at Henlys Corner, not far from Temple Fortune."

"That's close to where my grandmother lives. She's in Lyttelton Road, next to Market Place."

"I've seen you around – often sitting by yourself at Lindy's or Ranch House."

"Let's go there!" Hannah exclaimed, wanting to get to know the girl. "Don't you just love their Banana Split?"

"But you just came out of there! You're tiny – where do you put all that food? I gain weight just looking at it . . ." The girl burst into laughter, displaying a set of even white teeth.

Debating whether to stay or leave, Sanna said she might as well catch a later bus. It was Sunday, after all, and her day off.

Aziza looked up as the two of them entered.

"Did you come back for dessert?" she teased Hannah, then turned her attention to Sanna.

"I recognise you . . . you and your Scottish friend come here ever so often. I keep forgetting her name."

“Rosie? Oh, she’s at home nursing a cold. I told her she’d better get well or risk not coming with me to Great Expectations on Friday!”

Shaking her head, Aziza replied, “The two of you sure love that place.”

“Well, it is the only disco charging a pound to enter and handing out free sandwiches at midnight.”

Giggling, Aziza left them, returning a couple of minutes later with two enormous portions of banana split, ice-cream and whipped cream. “Enjoy!”

Over their desserts, Hannah asked her new friend if she liked being an au pair. Sanna grimaced.

“It’s okay . . . They’re kind of nice, yet expect me to do everything. Their kids are three and five, very spoilt. Despite the mother being a housewife, she’d not dream of coping on her own. Can you envisage a Swedish woman agreeing with that? My mother raised me by herself after dad left us when I was two.” Hannah told her about Ella and how fortunate she was to live with someone so nice. “I envy you – my salary’s £12 a week – it’s not exactly cheap around here, is it?” Hannah omitted telling her about her parents’ monthly allowance; the girl clearly struggled to cope. Feeling extremely privileged, she made a mental note to pay the bill.

Suddenly Sanna glanced at her watch and shot to her feet.

“I’d better leave – my bus is due in fifteen minutes!”

“Can’t you catch a cab? It’ll be my treat – we only just met.”

“No way!” Sanna shook her long hair. “Give me your number so we can arrange to meet in the near future.”

“Aziza mentioned you and your friend are regulars at Great Expectations – what’s it like?”

“Fabulous! Lots of fun, music and guys to die for.” Hanna smiled, thinking how different they looked physically. Sanna was the epitome of a blonde, blue-eyed Scandinavian woman with a curvaceous figure bound to make men drool over her. “I can’t resist anything in this place!” Sanna continued, licking a last bit of cream off her spoon. “You’d better finish that plate. Bread and candy taste better at home; it’s the burgers and fries I can’t resist!” She handed Hannah a piece of paper with her number.

“There. Now we’ve swapped numbers, you must join Rosie and me at Great Expectations. She’ll go mad when we speak Swedish in her presence!”

“Are you close?”

“Very – Rosie’s my best friend. Just like us, she’s on a gap year. We’re returning home in the summer. I’d better warn you, Rosie’s blunt – what you see is what you get.” Hannah couldn’t believe her luck; she’d already made two new friends in Melanie and Sanna. Perhaps Rosie would be the third? “Hey, I never told you my surname,” Sanna added. “It’s Göransson. What’s yours?”

“Stein.”

“That doesn’t sound Swedish?”

“It isn’t. We’re Jewish. My parents were born in Sweden, but both my grandmothers originate from Russia – my maternal grandmother moved here in the early seventies.”

“Wow – what an interesting background. Now I know why you’re so pretty – I love your red hair!”

When Aziza gave them the bill, Hannah refused to let Sanna pay.

“You refused my offer to take a cab but this is my treat. Once you get to know me better, you’ll realise I’m very stubborn . . .”

On the way to the bus stop they talked about their plans for the future. At nineteen, Sanna was determined to become a social