PRAISE FOR

# DOLLY ALL THE TIME

"Beautiful, sexy, and escapist, *Dolly All the Time* is my new favorite Annabel Monaghan book. I adored it!"

—Beth O'Leary, bestselling author of *The Flatshare*

"Quick, witty, and an absolute triumph, *Dolly All the Time* is escapism at its very best! I laughed out loud and swooned at the chemistry. I can't get enough of Annabel Monaghan, she's a star storyteller."

—Paige Toon, internationally bestselling author of *Seven Summers*

"A fresh, funny take on the fake-dating trope that cements Annabel Monaghan as the queen of contemporary romantic comedy. Dolly is a heroine everyone will be rooting for, I loved her, and didn't want her story to end. Packed full of chemistry, and Monaghan's signature humour and charm, this is going to be the must read rom com of the summer."

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"I have fallen in love with Dolly. And with funny, fizzing Annabel Monaghan. And with love itself! This book is like a spicy margarita or a magic ice cream cone, the way it's sweet and a little salty and tart and hot and just the tiniest bit bitter. And then also deeply, surprisingly nourishing. What an absolute treat is what I'm trying to say. I wish I could read it again for the first time. (Lucky, lucky you!)"

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"I finished *Dolly All the Time* last night—I think I nearly died. It might be my favorite love story of all time. This book isn't just brilliant, it's exceptional. I loved it with all my heart."

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"Everything I want in a love story! Dolly and Stewart's chemistry is off the charts, and their summer romance grips you from the very first page and sparkles like the sun."

—Elle Kennedy, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Graham Effect*

"Another delicious story about falling in love and finding yourself from Annabel Monaghan. Annabel has such a tender way of crafting her characters. I couldn't help but tumble head over heels for Dolly and Stewart and their fake-dating-turned-very-real romance.

The perfect book to soak up the summer sun with."

—B. K. Borison, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Good Spirits*

"*Dolly All The Time* is so much more than a delicious, fake dating romance – though it is that too! – it is a book about cherishing yourself, learning to let other people in, the power of love and caring in all its forms. I finished it feeling uplifted, changed in some fundamental way, and desperate to read everything else that Annabel has ever written."

—Cressida McLaughlin, bestselling author of The Cornish Cream Tea series

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# DOLLY ALL THE TIME

ANNABEL MONAGHAN

*An Aria Book*

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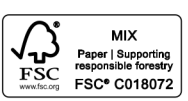


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For the caretakers. I wish I could bring you
each a cup of tea just the way you like it.

# One

Good Sports. This is a recorded line. How can I help you?" I tuck my phone between my shoulder and my ear, scoop a handful of shrimp off the bed of crushed ice onto the scale, and nod to Gus to let him know I'm going to need a sec. I step out from behind the counter and smile apologetically at the line of waiting customers. It's the three-o'clock rush and no one, including me, is thrilled that one of the only two people working behind the counter needs to step out to take a call. The brass bell tinkles as I swing the door open to Main Street, the briny ocean air mingling with the salt-sweet smell of the scallops we just unloaded on the dock.

I sit on the little cedar bench outside the store, and it feels great to be off my feet. "Yes, the weighted vest. Our best seller. Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. No, it will only improve your bone density if you put the weights in the vest. Otherwise, it's just a vest." I wince because this is a recorded line and they don't like sarcasm. "I'd suggest starting with the lowest level and working your way up." I wrap it up with my standard "Is there anything else we can do to be of assistance?" I stumble over the "we" every time. I am not in a big office building

with a team of trained fitness enthusiasts. It's just me out here, taking all the calls.

I take one more gulp of the fresh air before heading back into the fish house. "Dolly, you're home!" says Mrs. Holbrook, catching the door behind me and taking a spot at the end of the line. "I heard there was a fire." She's a good-natured busybody who lives at the top of Goose Lane. Ours is the kind of street where you can hear your neighbor's TV if you turn yours off; she wouldn't have missed the firetrucks.

"Yes," I say, looking up from the worn wooden floors, still damp from my midday mop. "I haven't seen it, but my dad says the damage wasn't too bad. Mrs. Goldberg called it in right away."

I was sound asleep in Boston this morning when the call came in that there had been a fire at my dad's house. It seems like a lifetime ago. The fire alarm hadn't sounded, which is on me. This is something I should have checked when I was here last month. It was on my list, but there was a problem with the kitchen faucet and there were flying squirrels in the attic. Precautions against problems he didn't yet have took a backseat, so I let the alarm battery slide. Thankfully, Mrs. Goldberg had her windows open to the June night air and smelled the smoke coming from the sleeping porch out back. She got my dad and my brother, Christopher, out of the house to safety and called to assure me that everything was fine. She was kind enough not to give me any more details about the rescue. In addition to his meds, Christopher has to be specifically reminded to wear pants.

The hours since that call have been a bit of a blur. Biking across town to get my car and then packing a summer's worth of clothing for Gus and me. Normally our monthly trips to

Rhode Island are just for the weekend. We leave Dad and Christopher with a clean house and empty laundry baskets and return in time to make sure nothing's at a tipping point. We usually stay two weeks in the summer, but this time I decided to pack for longer. I'll need time to repair whatever the fire has done and assess their overall living situation. I don't see any way to get that done in a couple of weeks.

I sent a rambling message to the Bad Teachers group text before we left. It's just my friends Kim and Layla from work, and none of us are actually bad teachers, though we do use that particular thread to unleash on our tyrant principal and make inappropriate comments about the hot new janitor. Between them they'll be managing my mail and my beast of a fern. I'll miss Kim's thirty-fifth birthday in July and Layla's daughter's dance recital. I'd planned to surprise my landlord by re-staining both front doors on our two-family house. The good thing about a surprise is that no one's let down if it doesn't happen.

Gus and I came directly to the store because my dad is short-staffed today. His one full-time employee has gone to Florida indefinitely to care for her mother. And Rikki Clark, his best bet for summer help, was a no-show. For today, we're all hands on deck. Gus is behind the counter, stacking salmon fillets onto butcher paper. He smiles a crooked smile at something a customer has said and, as lucky as I feel to be his mother, I can't help but think of how lucky she is to be a stranger. I haven't gotten a smile from Gus all day. He catches my eye and nods to the cash register in a *Mom, get back here and help me* kind of way.

I take my place next to him as he puts a credit card receipt under the cash tray in the register and slams it shut with that

familiar metallic snap. For a second, time folds in on itself until this regular day is like an origami bird. Gus at thirteen, me at thirteen, my dad, his dad. Four generations of Bricks in BRICK FISH HOUSE T-shirts pitching in for the summer rush. Daily rock-paper-scissors to divvy up chores. Loser goes into the back room to gut the cod.

My great-grandfather opened Brick Fish House in the fifties with an eye toward cornering the summer lobster roll and shrimp market and kicking back the rest of the year. We have a prime spot on Main Street with the back door opening up to the wharf. There's a single counter inside containing seafood brought in daily through the dock outside. We're basically a fish store, but we serve lobster rolls and crabcakes in the summertime. Don't ask for a salad or, God forbid, any kind of baked goods, or my dad will give you a stern "It's not that kind of place." I've stopped suggesting that it wouldn't kill him to serve a nice chopped salad or a homemade sourdough loaf because he looks at me like any act of expansion might actually kill him. He has been anti-progress since he tried and failed to open a second store farther down the coast when I was a kid. Expanding was my mom's dream, not his; he went for it to keep her believing he'd one day give her the kind of life she wanted. She ended up leaving, but he got to keep the debt on the failed new store. One thing I learned early—love is fickle, debt sticks around.

I slide my phone into my back pocket and grab a pair of gloves from the dispenser. "Who's next?" I call to the line.

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THE RUSH IS over at four, and I take a second to enjoy the Zen of it. The ceiling fan whirring slowly overhead, the hum of the refrigerated case. We usually get only one or two more customers before we close at five, so we spend the hour cleaning up and settling the cash register. My dad emerges from the back room, white-haired and sun-leathered in his faded blue apron and yellow rubber gloves. He places a fillet knife and two fully cleaned haddocks on the counter.

"You guys really saved me today," he says.

"Well, we're here for the summer," I say. "Happy to pick up some shifts."

"But I'm probably doing that lifeguarding camp," Gus says.

"Yes!" I say, too enthusiastic. "We need to look into that. Tomorrow. On my list." I mentioned it to him on the drive this morning, and it's the first thing I've seen him excited about since his social life took a nosedive in January. I wonder if a summer away is just what he needs to set things right. He'll have a few low-stress months with family, sunshine, and salt air. We'll head back to Boston before Labor Day just in time for him to start high school, where he will bloom socially. Just overnight, poof! Look at all these friends and that cool, easy confidence. He'll whiz through those four years, grabbing an apple from the fridge and polishing it on his shirt like happy teenagers do on TV. He'll give me an appreciative smile and a quick squeeze on his way to do something both meaningful and fun. At thirty-nine, these are my fantasies as I close my eyes at night.

Dad tosses his gloves onto the counter. "We've got the till, the mopping, and a delivery. Who wants what?"

"The till!" Gus says like he's calling shotgun. It's the only job you can do sitting down, and I'm sure he's beat.

"I'll do the mopping," my dad says. "Dolly on delivery. The Whitfields."

I roll my eyes. "Let me guess. A gross amount of shrimp and they want it before cocktail hour."

"On the west veranda, of course," he says with a smile.

"To catch the sunset," I say. You don't grow up in the town of Whitfield without knowing every detail of the Whitfields' precious routine. "I'll bike up there," I say. "Gus, maybe you can unpack the car when you get back. And I'm on Cook House. Hamburgers." My dad gives me a smile at our old joke. The Cook House is where circus performers take their meals, and we have long considered ourselves to be the ringmasters of our household circus.

"Cheese," Gus says.

"Promise," I say, and kiss the back of his head. A sneak attack.

I bike away from the fish house, down Main Street, through Whitfield. I pass bars and restaurants and the yacht club where I worked nights laundering linens as a teenager. The Whitfields' yacht is on display in perpetual drydock in front of the yacht club. It's its own kind of museum and people circle it, admiring the polished wood of the hull. I shake my head as I always do at the idea of people who have yachts they don't even use. Extra yachts.

I bike to the edge of town, away from the shops, to where the summer people live. Elm trees line the streets and touch in the middle, giving the roads the most delicious spattering of dappled light. My legs are a bit sore from my morning bike ride, but as I smell the thick salt air, it's hard to believe this is

still the same day. I ride my bike in Boston only when I need to pick up my car. I rent out the parking spot that comes with our apartment to a Boston College student for $200 per month and then park my car four miles away for $90. This life hack has been a highlight of my year. It pays for Gus's baseball and makes me feel like I'm getting paid to exercise. More than anything else, it reinforces my sense of self-sufficiency. I can pull resources out of thin air. Every time I get on that bike, I mentally pay myself for the Peloton I never bought.

My primary worry of the day is Gus's perpetually sullen mood, but my background worry is that I still need to email his Boston baseball league and ask for a refund for summer ball. I have about $1,200 in my checking account, and the lifeguard camp he wants to do here would cost $1,000. It's pretty tight, though I guess we'll be eating fish all summer for free. I picture Gus in a white T-shirt with the word LIFEGUARD stamped in red. When he's sixteen, it would be an actual paying job, probably better pay than the fish house. We could start coming back here for entire summers and sublet our apartment in Boston to students. I pedal faster with the excitement of having just pulled more money out of nowhere.

The houses start to get larger and farther apart as I approach the Whitfield estate, Eight Oaks. My younger sister, Patsy, and I used to do deliveries out here together because it was a fun ride at the end of the day. We'd laugh and play music off our iPods, until we got to Eight Oaks's gate at the end. Then we'd get churchly quiet. Theirs is a black iron double gate adorned with gold acorns. There are eight of them, intricately fashioned to have the exact imperfections of actual acorns, but each at least the size of my head. They

should be in a museum, not out here where birds can crap on them. I think of my mother and how much she loved the careless way rich people treat valuable things. If carelessness is aspirational, my mother nailed it when she walked away from us, easily her most valuable things.

I walk my bike through the open gates and gaze down the oak-lined driveway. I am a million miles from the fluorescent lights of the fish house now, and I have to admit there's nothing lovelier than Eight Oaks. At the entrance to the property, the land is still wide enough that I can't see the water on either side. I get back on my bike and pass the stables on the left, made of river stones, where an older man is leading a black horse through an old wooden door. On the right is a pool and two tennis courts, and in the distance there's a small white clapboard chapel.

It's not long before the house emerges in front of me. Gleaming white limestone. You could not knock it down. It would cost more to knock this place down than it did to build it, I think. Tall, impenetrable, like the Whitfields themselves. It's now that I can see the water on both sides, so I get off my bike again. The sounds of the Atlantic to the east and the bay to the west replace the crunch of gravel under my tires. I try to imagine all this white noise surrounding me all the time; it's all part of the ease. I'm standing in the circular driveway, staring at the ten-foot-tall black high-gloss front doors, when I remember that I am not a front-door person. The delivery entrance is around the side, so I wheel my bike through the formal gardens, where carefully manicured boxwoods alternate with giant blue hydrangeas, snapdragons, and lavender. Rich people are always worried about the bees, I've noticed.

I drop my bike at the side entrance and ring the bell

marked DELIVERIES. The woman who has been opening this door since my very first delivery at nine years old appears. She is rosy everywhere. Her cheeks, her lips, her pink top that looks like scrubs from a pediatric unit but is probably for cooking. She's in her late sixties now, which is not as shocking as the fact that I'll be forty in January.

"You!" she says with a bright smile. "I haven't seen you in years."

"Yes, I'm just back for the summer." I hand her the still-cool bag of shrimp. "Five pounds of shrimp."

"Perfect timing. I was just setting up for cocktail hour."

On the west veranda to catch the sunset, I don't say. Breakfast is served on the east veranda for obvious reasons.

She reaches into her pink pocket and pulls out a carefully folded ten-dollar bill. She hands it to me and says, "Which one of Freddie's daughters are you?"

"Thank you," I say, taking the tip. "I'm Dolly. Here helping out for a bit."

"I heard there was a fire."

"Yes, a small one. We were lucky."

"Well, I'm Gladys," she says. "Welcome back to Whitfield."

I TUCK MY ten-dollar bill into the front pocket of my shorts, always safer than the back, and I bike down the long driveway. I slow down at the chapel, white clapboard with a pristine steeple pointing straight up to heaven, as if the Whitfields have a direct line. It would actually explain a lot. When we were kids, Patsy and I called it the princess chapel. We imagined a princess in a bedazzled tiara and a gentle

man (we took this literally and pronounced each word—the man would be gentle, like our dad) helping her navigate her giant dress onto the back of a white horse. That she got to keep. We always added that clause because we were more interested in her getting to keep the horse than we were in the man with his gentle ways. I should call Patsy about the fire, but I haven't because I don't feel like doing our resentful dance. It's the one where I act like it's fine that I'm handling everything and she acts like I'm so lucky to be home. Which I am; I love it here. But I still don't think it would kill her to take a turn being the emergency contact.

I pedal back toward town, and the leafy streets are quiet. No mail delivery. No UPS truck. The day is catching up with me, and I am surprisingly sleepy when I see a brand-new black Range Rover come to a stop on the wrong side of the road twenty yards ahead. I keep pedaling in its direction and Stewart Whitfield gets out of the car. I know it's him before I see his face. It's in the way he stands. Tall, broad shoulders thrown back. As if he has a vantage point higher than mine so he can survey the vast expanse of all he owns. My best friend, Naomi—an avid Whitfield watcher—is going to flip. Stewart is generally considered the handsomest of the Whitfields, and is certainly the most powerful as the heir apparent to the role of CEO of Whitfield Industries. Unlike his playboy brother and his socialite sister, he's rarely spotted around here. He's about my age, and I used to see him sometimes in the summers when I was young. He'd come into the fish house (crabcakes, extra tartar sauce, no thank you to the plastic fork) or I'd see him as I headed into work at the yacht club. Stewart Whitfield is always winning—boats, horses, Yale—but, notably, I struck him out in summer Little

League when I was eleven years old. If you're a townie, you remember striking out a Whitfield.

I don't slow down as I pass, but he calls to me. "Excuse me!"

I stop my bike and turn, just my head. His dark brown hair is precisely cut. It's shorter than it was in the engagement photo that made the cover of *The Boston Globe* in February and was then reprinted three weeks in a row in *The Whitfield Gazette*. He's wearing a blue blazer, a white shirt, and the tan of someone who doesn't have three jobs. Just the idea of him annoys me. I get off my bike with a pinched smile and yank down my denim shorts where they've ridden up.

"I was wondering if you had a phone charger. For a car," he says.

"I'm on a bike," I say.

"Yes. I see that. I was just hoping you might . . ." He holds up his dead phone and nods to his car behind him. All sleek lines of Range Rover perfection, shining like it's been buffed by the soft bellies of kittens. The front left tire is flat.

"Your tire," I say.

"Yes. It just happened and I started to call my assistant when my phone died. It's been a hell of a day, workwise." He holds up his phone as if I can tell by looking at it just how hard it's been working. "All around, actually." He looks to the side like he's trying to remember why he's standing there, or maybe to give me a chance to admire his breathtaking profile. The straight line of his jaw, the slight bump on his nose that turns his perfectly symmetrical face into something more masculine. *We get it, Stewart. You have everything.*

"Do you want to use my phone?" I ask. I'm not even going to bother asking if he knows how to change a tire.

"Yes, thank you," he says, but his dark eyes don't soften

with any kind of real gratitude. He takes it from me, then lets out a frustrated huff. "I don't know his number."

"Who?"

"My assistant, Damion."

"I don't know it either," I say and shrug. "Do you want help with the tire?"

"From you?"

"Yes, from me. I'm Dolly," I say.

He extends a hand. "Stewart." It's a hell of a handshake.

"I know," I say. "You should really learn how to change a tire, Stewart." He definitely doesn't recognize me.

He looks away again. "Yes. Batting a thousand today," he says.

"I just delivered your shrimp." I gesture down the long leafy street in the direction I came from. This does not jog his memory back to the hundreds of crabcakes I've sold him over the years.

"Thank you?" he says.

"Let's just—" I start. "Come on." I am a person in service. To my family, to a bunch of little curious minds during the school year. To owners of weighted vests and Saturday-night Uber riders. But changing Stewart Whitfield's tire less than a mile from his house because his phone's dead and he can't reach his servants has got to be the most next-level bottom-of-the-food-chain moment imaginable.

I move my bike to the side of the road and make my way around to the back of his car, where he pops the trunk. There is a navy-blue blanket, folded by someone in the military, and not a single spot of dust. I wait for him to pull up the floorboard, but he doesn't move, so I do it myself. I reach for the spare tire, factory new, and he leans in to help. I edge a tiny

bit closer so I can smell him, because I know Naomi's going to ask. I breathe him in. He smells like something I want to wrap myself up in. Like leather and fresh cut grass. I take in the open collar of his shirt, the lines of his neck under tan skin. There's an unfamiliar current of electricity running under my chest, and I risk taking in another breath of him. Our eyes meet and color rises to my cheeks. Stewart Whitfield is definitely a person more safely admired from behind the fish counter.

"So how do we do this?" he asks.

For a second, I don't know what he's talking about, but then I remember where I am and why I'm here. "Grab the tire," I say, straightening up and taking a cautionary step away.

He pulls out the tire and places it on the ground. "What's next?" And those two words snap me out of it. This absurdly attractive man is a Whitfield. He knows all the rules for a polo match and probably has annoying things to say about wine, but he doesn't know how to change a tire. Classic ridiculous rich guy.

I hold up the jack and tool set and look him directly in his pretty brown eyes. "You've never seen a tire changed, have you?"

"Well, no. Not in person." He crosses his arms over his chest.

"Then on YouTube?" I cock my head to the side and wait. I don't know if it's because I'm tired or what, but I am getting a kick out of razzing Stewart Whitfield.

"Okay, never." He uncrosses his arms and gazes into the open car window. "Listen, I've had a pretty brutal day ego-wise. Having a tiny little woman change my tire is the icing on the cake."

"I'm five-foot-five."

"Why are you telling me that?"

"You called me tiny."

"You don't read the *Post*, do you?" he asks.

"I don't. And I'm also having a hard time following this conversation. How 'bout I loosen the lug nuts, and you just keep on with your random thought generating?" I sit by the flat tire and pull the lug wrench out of the tool kit. I can feel him watching me, and I can also feel his discomfort. This man is the heir to one of the largest real estate trusts in North America. He's worth more millions of dollars than I can even conceive of and recently had a heliport installed on the top of his Boston office building. But his face tells me he's equal parts shocked and humiliated by the way I've just jacked up the side of his car to remove his bum tire.

"It's a nail," I tell him. "Look." He bends over to have a look at where a large construction nail has pierced the tire, and a car stops next to us.

"Stewart," the driver calls, and we both look up just as he snaps a photo and drives away.

Stewart pops up and puts both hands on his head as he watches the car drive away. "This fucking day," he says.

"Who was that?"

"The press? The *Post*? Who knows. But someone just got a photo of me standing by while a tiny woman changes my tire."

"I am not tiny." I stand up to show him just how huge I am, and the top of my head is level with his chin. I give him another silent sniff.

He reaches through the open car window and pulls out a copy of the *New York Post*, folded back to Page Six. "I was

served this with my breakfast this morning," he says. The headline reads FEVER PITCH and there's a photo of his beautiful chestnut-haired fiancée, Audrey Mills, with her lips on the neck of a guy in a New York Yankees uniform. "That's my fiancée. And the relief pitcher for the Yankees."

"Ouch," I say. His expression reads more annoyed than hurt. I decide not to mention striking him out in Little League.

"Yeah, it's really been a day."

"So are you breaking up?" It's the stupidest question. I feel like I'm in high school, comforting a girlfriend. "I mean, it's none of my business."

He takes the paper from me and tosses it back into the car. "It's everyone's business now."

I sit back down and start replacing the lug nuts to secure the spare. I lower the car with the jack and then get up, wiping my hands on my shorts and then wiping my forehead with the back of my hand. And I know there's grease on my forehead; I can feel it before I see his eyes go there.

Stewart Whitfield pulls a handkerchief out of his inside coat pocket the way a sheriff in the old West whips a gun out of his holster.

I take it and wipe my forehead and then my hands. "Thank you," I say, and try to hand it back to him.

"Keep it," he says. "So now what?"

"We roll this tire to the trunk. You take it to get fixed. You're good on this spare for sixty miles, but not too fast."

When he's closed the trunk, he says, "Why were you delivering my shrimp?"

I laugh and gesture to my T-shirt. "I'm Dolly Brick. My dad is Freddie Brick of Brick Fish House."

"Ah, best crabcakes in town."

"Yep." I am out of things to say to Stewart Whitfield, so I give a half-hearted wave and say, "Drive carefully," and make my way back to my bike.

"Wait. How much do I owe you?" he asks.

I get on my bike. "On the house," I say. "Hope your day turns around." I pedal off toward town with his handkerchief in my back pocket.