

Package Deal

Tasha Harrison

H+CO

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For Chris, Ruby and Bonnie

CHAPTER 1

Saturday 1st

Sun, sun, sun. Dazzling, beaming, glorious sun. It engulfed the craggy mountains, tickled the cliff tops and skimmed over the beaches. It swept over tranquil green fields and gently swaying woods. It glinted off the sea and bounced off white-washed garden walls, casting pregnant shadows from the rotund terra cotta vases on every doorstep. Not a cloud in the sky. Not even a wisp of grey or a smudge of white. Just blue, blue, heavenly, everlasting blue.

Vibrant bursts of magenta bougainvillea punctuated the gleaming whiteness of the houses that dotted the hillside. Skinny cats lay asleep beneath olive trees and tables, not so much as twitching an ear as the coach heaved itself past on its way to Skala, squeezing between the houses that flanked the narrow winding road. Locals looked up and squinted. Some nodded. Some waved. An old man riding on a donkey gave a toothless grin and saluted them as they chugged past.

Mia shrunk back in her seat. The Brits were invading. How did these people stand it – and with such good grace? And yet just like everyone else on board the coach, she too yearned for the soothing warmth, uplifting colours and sensual textures of a Greek island. Two weeks of real summer to compensate for the stop-start misnomer of a summer that taunted Great Britain every year. Not that that was the only reason she had come here alone rather than follow her friends to Edinburgh for the festival – but it was reason enough.

“Hang on, did you just say that Tom Hanks lives ’ere? Bloody ’ell, Caz! We come to the right place, ain’t we? Hollywood stars an’ all that!”

“What’s it called, Babs?”

“What?”

“The place where ’e bought his house.”

“Dunno. ’ERE! Scuse me, love – whatcha say that place was called where Tom Hanks bought a villa?”

“Fiskardo, in the north of the island,” the plump, young rep purred into the microphone in a gentle Irish accent, her frizzy ginger hair bouncing as the coach bumped over potholes in the road.

“That’s it, Fistardo.”

“Fistarvo?”

“Fistardo. Just remember fist and ’ard. Shouldn’t be a problem for you, eh Caz?” The two women snorted with laughter.

Mia rolled her eyes. Could those two possibly talk any louder? She’d suffered them all the way from Gatwick – from the perfume section of the duty-free (“Ere Caz, smell this Obsession! Bloody gorgeous, innit?”), the ladies loos (“Oh would you Adam-and-Eve it? I got me bleedin’ period, Babs! Sod’s bleedin’ law!”), the departure lounge (“*Why are we waiting? We are suffocating!*”), and then of course they’d sat across the aisle from her on the plane (“*Ere we go, ’ere we go, ’ere we go!*”). She prayed they wouldn’t be dropped off at the same apartments.

“OK! Those of you with Hotel Sea Breeze on your envelopes, this is your stop,” the rep smiled down the aisle as the coach pulled over and the passengers reached for their hand luggage.

Mia tucked her wavy honey-coloured hair behind her ears and looked at her envelope. She was staying at Eleni Apartments. She prayed the birds-of-a-feather would get off.

“Babs, that ain’t us is it?”

“What’s the envelope say?”

“I can’t pronounce it, but it ain’t Sea Breeze.”

Mia sighed.

“Follow me everyone.” The rep led the passengers off the coach and after collecting their suitcases from the luggage compartment, ushered them along a path to a marshmallow pink building with white balconies surrounded by pine trees.

It looked charming, thought Mia. There was a pool and a café on a terrace next door. She hoped hers would be as picturesque. She was beginning to doubt her decision to opt for an allocation-on-arrival package, but it was all she could afford. Anyway, she had made it to Kefalonia, and that’s what

mattered – her exact location wasn't important. It was only a small island, a couple of hours' drive from north to south – less from east to west. It wouldn't be hard to get around.

"That looks bloody lovely, don't it Caz?" enthused the voice from behind.

"Yeah, I hope ours is like that."

Two stops later and there were just ten other people left on the bus. Mia cast a quick glance around her. It appeared she was the only person on her own. Not that she cared, but she didn't want anyone pitying her, thinking she had no friends.

"OK everyone. This is Eleni Apartments, our last stop," announced the rep.

A hum of approval echoed around the coach as it pulled off the road and into the drive of what looked like a newly built apartment complex bordering a small rectangular pool, perched on the hillside overlooking the sea.

"Look at the colour of the pool Babs! I ain't seen nuffing like it, 'ave you?"

"I told ya you'd love it, didn't I?" Babs replied smugly.

"Yeah but you wasn't to know the apartments was gonna be nice, you said so yourself. You said it's pot luck with vacation on arrival."

"*Allocation* on arrival, you silly tart."

"Well I dunno do I? I ain't been abroad before."

Mia waited for the other passengers to file past her before she got up from her seat.

"The caretaker's name is Dimitri, but you can call him Jimmy if you find that easier," the rep continued as the driver began to unload their suitcases. "It's a twenty minute walk into Skala, or you can call a cab from the Hotel Flamingo, which is just a five minute walk in the other direction. Hotel Flamingo has a restaurant and a bar, and every Wednesday they have a Greek dancing night which is always a real laugh. My number's on the noticeboard outside the caretaker's room if anyone needs me at any time throughout your stay. Any questions?" She paused and looked around the small group of pale faces.

“No? Well you’ll find your keys in your envelopes and I’ll be here for another five minutes or so if you need anything.” The rep pushed her overgrown fringe out of her eyes and trotted off towards the caretaker’s room as the new arrivals eagerly opened their envelopes.

“Number two!” squealed Caz and gripped Babs’ arm excitedly. Elbowing their fellow holidaymakers out of the way, they grabbed their luggage which had been deposited next to the coach and hurried down the drive, stilettos clacking, suitcases-on-wheels thundering along behind them.

“Last one in the pool is a ninny!” a middle-aged man called after them in a strong Mancunian accent. He nudged his wife and chuckled. “Those two are as excited as kids.”

“Let’s hope they don’t continue to be as loud as them,” the woman muttered under her breath. “What room are we in, Frank?”

Frank fished in their envelope for the key. “Boudoir number one, my sweet.”

The woman groaned, resting manicured hands on her wide hips.

“What’s up, love?” Frank sighed.

“Well those Essex bimbos are in number two,” she hissed.

“Oh get in the holiday spirit, Margaret. Let’s try and have some fun while we’re here, eh?”

Mia looked at her key as the group started to break up and head towards their rooms. She was in number three.

“Oh dear, unlucky!” Margaret whispered sympathetically as she brushed past, spraying herself with a bottle of Estée Lauder summer spritzer. Mia smiled and turned to get her suitcase.

The room was simple and sparse, yet tasteful. Cream coloured walls, white bed linen and a pine wardrobe in one corner, a kitchenette, table and two chairs in the other – and a pristine white-tiled ensuite bathroom. Mia pulled back the muslin curtains and opened the French doors onto her terrace. Light flooded in and a warm gust of wind sent the curtains into a spiralling dance on either side of her.

Outside, the pool twinkled in the bright sunlight. Fourteen white plastic sunloungers lay neatly around its edges, some in the shade of tall, white parasols. Everything seemed fresh and untouched, like a new bar

of soap. Mia leaned against the railings of her terrace and breathed in the sweet aroma of the flowerbed that lay between her apartment and the pool. She glanced around her. There were two apartments to her left, and four apartments to her right, all one storey with verandahs overlooking the pool. The vibrant and well-kept flowerbed lined the front of the verandahs, following the L-shaped layout of the complex around two sides of the pool. It was perfect – in fact, she couldn't have picked a more perfect place had she tried. At the foot of the hillside, the cobalt blue sea gently licked the rocks, while the soft jingle-jangle of goat bells wafted along on the breeze from somewhere above in the hills.

Mia closed her eyes and inhaled the tranquillity. This was heaven. A few more doors opened and people stepped out onto their verandahs, murmuring enthusiastically at the view.

Suddenly a blood-curdling scream followed by a loud splash made Mia jump.

“BITCH! It's b-b-bloody freeeeezing!”

Caz and Babs were in the pool.

“Oops, scuse me French!”

“Keep your voice down Caz! Everyone's looking at you!” laughed Babs, bobbing up and down in the deep end, her short spiky brown hair flattened against her scalp, her large white boobs bursting out of her camouflage-patterned swimsuit like balloons.

“A bit nippy is it?” teased Frank from his terrace, next-door-but-one to Mia's.

“It's alright once you move about a bit,” replied Caz, holding onto the side and trying to push a tangle of wet bottle-blonde hair out of her eyes. “Coming in?”

“Yes, in a minute or two. First things first though, ladies,” said Frank, taking a cup of tea from Margaret as she joined him on the terrace, her hair coiffed back into place and a fresh coat of fuchsia lipstick on her lips.

She smiled over at Mia. “How's your room, love?”

“Lovely,” she replied. “This is much better than I thought it would be. How's yours?”

“Yes, not bad at all. I'm impressed. I did want to go to Venice – it's our fortieth anniversary you see – but Frank's always loved Greece. And I must

say, it is a very scenic spot. Did you want a cuppa, love? We brought our own tea bags.”

“Oh no thanks. That’s very kind of you. I thought I might walk into town in a bit and find a supermarket.”

“Right you are, love. Let us know if you find somewhere decent, as we’ll be doing the same later, no doubt.”

“Sure.” Mia turned and went back into her room.

She would have a shower, put a nice summery outfit on and head into town. She walked into the bathroom and turned the shower on. As she kicked off her sandals there was a knock at the door.

“Only me,” smiled the rep. “Forgot to tell everybody not to flush anything down the loo. It’s a brand new complex – it’s only been open a few months – but the Greek sewage system is the same as ever. So even loo roll has to go in the bin provided I’m afraid.”

“Thanks for letting me know,” smiled Mia.

“You’re on your own, aren’t you?” the rep hovered in the doorway.

“Yup. Just me.”

“Well if you need anything, just give me a shout. But as it happens you’re not the only one – there’s two other singles staying here at Eleni. We hardly ever get singles – I mean, people coming out here on their own. It’s usually always couples – older couples at that. So this is quite a different bunch from usual. The lot that just left barely went in the pool. Couldn’t get their zimmer frames down the steps!” she chortled.

Mia feigned a laugh. “Well I’m not entirely on my own. I’ve come out here to see someone actually.”

“Oh yeah? Goodlooking is he?” the rep winked knowingly at her. “You’ve got to watch these Greek blokes. They’re not to be trusted. Take Dimitri for example – *I should know*. They’re all the bloody same!” She rolled her eyes. “Oh well, best get on and tell the others about the loo.”

“Sorry, I didn’t catch your name,” Mia smiled apologetically.

“Nikki. Call me if you need anything. Yiasou!”

Mia stood beneath the shower, the hot water pelting onto her head and flowing down her shoulders. She wondered what made people confess details of their private lives to virtual strangers. Or maybe it was a subtle

warning: Dimitri's mine, so don't go getting any ideas. *As if*. She'd had enough of men. The girl was right. They weren't to be trusted. Not just Greek men – any men.

“Corfu, Kefalonia, Crete – what's the bloody difference?” a male voice on the other side of the bathroom wall interrupted her thoughts.

“The difference, you ponce, is that one of them is where it's all happening – bars, clubs, pussy – and that one of them, HERE, is where it AIN'T,” came the angry reply.

“Craig, we've only just got here. Give the place a chance. We haven't been into town yet.”

“According to that ginga bird, there's only one nightclub in Skala, it's the size of a matchbox and it's usually half empty.”

“No way! What else did she say?”

“That Kefalonia is a top destination for the silver-haired generation who like to unwind with a bit of sun, ouzo and Greek dancing. In other words, Steve, our Target Ten Shagometer might as well go in the fucking bin right now.”

“Don't touch it! I spent hours making that.”

“Mate, you have *so* cocked up.”

“Oh lighten up – just cos there isn't much nightlife doesn't mean we're not gonna get laid.”

“How d'ya work that out?”

“I've noticed some talent already.”

“You're not referring to that Irish bint are you? I'm not into ginga pubes.”

“She's alright! Anyway, I'm not talking about her. Didn't you see the bird in the room next door to us?” He lowered his voice a fraction. Mia leaned her ear against the wall.

“Nah. What's she like?”

“Not fuckin' bad, mate. Blonde, nice legs. Nice little tits. Her arse is a bit big, but I quite like that.”

“Face?”

“Didn't get a proper look, mate.”

“Probably a dog.”

“There's no pleasing you sometimes, Craig. Anyway, I saw her first.”

“You can have her, mate.”

“Looks like I’m gonna be the first to reach number one on the Shagometer!” Steve bragged. “Anyway piss off, I’m ’aving a dump.”

Mia heard the bathroom door slam followed by a loud fart and a double guffaw of laughter. She turned the shower off, wrapped herself in a towel and tip-toed back into the bedroom. *Nice legs, little tits and a big arse.* They might as well have been describing a car: nice tyres, small hooter and a spacious boot. She looked at her breasts in the wardrobe mirror. They weren’t that little, were they? In fact, they had definitely got bigger, she observed.

“Caz, stick the kettle on!” Babs boomed outside.

Mia quickly pulled her towel around her. She’d forgotten she’d left the French doors open. She poked her head outside just in time to see Babs heaving herself out of the pool. God knows what crushing description Craig and Steve would assign her: chunky legs, fat bum, two spare tyres and huge melons. A second-hand people carrier with king-sized airbags? She closed the French doors as a dripping Babs sized up the verandah railings and flowerbed, thought better of it and decided to take the longer but more civilised route via the front door.

Mia opened her suitcase and pondered her summer clothes. The denim mini skirt or the short blue flowery dress? The magenta halter-neck top or the white tie-in-a-knot shirt? These precious items remained folded in a drawer for ten months of the year – the weather and the occasion never quite being able to coincide to give them a good airing. The joy of being able to wear them at last almost called for a celebration. In fact it did. The outcome of her visit to Kefalonia didn’t matter. She had come purely to gain some knowledge, some understanding of what had happened. Decisions about her future didn’t necessarily have anything to do with why she was there. None of it seemed real anyway.

In the meantime, she was there to have a holiday. She pulled on the white shirt and denim skirt and brushed the knots out of her wet hair while forming a mental shopping list: tzatziki, taramasalata, pitta bread, feta cheese, cucumber, lettuce, melon, coffee, milk and a bottle of wine. Perfect. She slipped on her flip flops, threw her key in her bag and stepped outside. As she pulled the door shut behind her she came face to face with one of her desperate-to-get-laid next-door neighbours, leaning against

their doorway smoking a cigarette. He wore nothing but a pair of baggy, knee-length swimming trunks, his tattooed arms folded across his skinny, sun-starved torso. Trendy Police sunglasses masking his eyes, he combed his fingers coolly through his David Beckham-style highlights.

“Alright?” he mumbled, fag in mouth.

“Alright,” she mumbled back and quickly hurried off up the drive. She could feel his eyes following her as she went, and as she turned onto the main road, she was sure she heard a faint wolf-whistle and a snigger of laughter.

CHAPTER 2

Mia rummaged in her wallet as the woman on the till put her shopping into a plastic bag. Struggling to distinguish Euros from Pounds in the dim interior of the shop, she dropped the change and sent coins rolling in different directions across the floor.

The couple in the queue behind her bent down and helped gather them up.

“Here you go,” smiled the girl who was as dark as her boyfriend was fair.

“Thanks,” said Mia, taking the coins from her and passing them to the shopkeeper.

“Don’t wanna go throwing your money away on your first day,” joked the girl.

“How did you know it was my first day?” asked Mia. “Oh, I know – because I’m as white as a sheet!” She examined the skin on her arms.

“No, it’s not that,” the girl laughed, “we’re staying at Eleni Apartments. We were on the same bus as you – same plane too.”

“Oh right. The apartments are OK, aren’t they? I wasn’t expecting them to be anywhere near as nice as that.”

“Same with us. I love the way our terrace overlooks the pool and the sea.”

The girl’s boyfriend tugged at her long black ponytail and nudged her to hurry up and pay for their lone bottle of shampoo.

“I’m Jo and this is my boyfriend Nath – short for Nathan,” the girl smiled warmly.

“I’m Mia. Nice to meet you.”

“You’ve done a lot of shopping,” Jo nodded to Mia’s two bulging carrier bags.

“Yeah. I thought I’d stock the fridge – I fancied some dips and stuff for supper.”

“Good idea. We should do that Nath.”

“I thought we were going out for a meal,” Nath grunted, running a hand over his blond crew cut and twiddling his gold stud earring.

“We are, but we could do with some stuff for breakfast tomorrow.”

Nath shrugged and headed out the door.

“See you later,” Jo winked and followed him out of the shop.

Back on her terrace, Mia poured herself a small glass of wine and crunched on a mouthful of cucumber and feta. As the sun set behind the hills, the moon hovered above the sea like a distant apparition. It was day and night. Mia flipped open her pocket pad and lazily sketched a couple of sunloungers and a parasol by the corner of the pool. It was a perfect spot. Whoever owned these apartments must be feeling very smug indeed. It was much nicer than any of the hotels she'd noticed in Skala. And although Skala was a pleasant enough little town with a decent sandy beach and a neighbouring wood of pine trees, it was nothing to write home about.

There was a main street that led down to the beach, lined on either side by a string of cheap, vine-roofed tavernas, all offering the standard Greek fare of moussaka, souvlaki, kleftikos and chips. There were a couple of bars – one on the corner with a paunch-bellied waiter with a thick moustache who tried to lure punters in with his jokes, and a trendy, open-fronted bar next-door to the mini-market. The trendy bar looked brand new with its curved chrome counter, mirrored panels, wall-to-wall illuminated optics and TVs tuned in to MTV. However, both were only half full. And instead of the usual swarms of scantily-clad teenagers staggering about arm in arm singing and screeching at the tops of their lungs, the customers were mostly middle-aged, sitting in orderly groups of two or four, sipping merrily on pints and cocktails, baring scorched leather flesh amid a sparse forest of M&S gold spangly twin sets, Next short-sleeved cotton shirts and BHS sandals. They played cards, read papers, marvelled at their knickerbocker-glories and guffawed at each others' jokes.

Yes, it seemed the oiks in the room next-door had indeed cocked up on their destination of choice. This was about as far removed from Ayia Napa as you could possibly get. They might as well have gone to the Outer Hebrides to get laid. Mia smiled to herself and took a sip of wine.

“What? All alone?” A young man with floppy brown hair and bright green eyes seemed to appear out of nowhere and leaned across the flowerbed to rest his elbows on her verandah railings.

She sat up straight and tugged at her skirt which had slyly risen to knicker level. “Er...”

“I’m Dimitri – the caretaker.” He held his hand towards her. She reached forward and shook it. “And you are?”

“Mia.”

“Well Mia, I’m going to the Bora Bora Club tonight. Why don’t you come with me?” he asked cheerily, flicking his hair out of his eyes.

“Er...well...” *Talk about forward.*

“Come and dance!”

“Um...I don’t really–”

“Come on!” he laughed heartily, “I’m taking some of the others – Caz, Babs, Steve and...I forget his name – oh yes – Craig.” He counted on his fingers.

“Where’s the Bora Bora Club?”

“On the main street in Skala. And when you arrive you get a free ouzo.”

“Oh right.”

“Will you come? Say yes – it will be fun!”

“Er...”

“Good decision! I’m gonna take a shower, then I come back to get you.”

And with that he strode off, leaped over a sunlounger and disappeared around the corner. Mia got up and went to look at her reflection in the mirror. She wasn’t really in a partying mood, and would have been quite content to sit on her terrace admiring the view or reading *Wild Swans* – a book that had been on her ‘to read’ list for about three years. Then again, it was nice to be invited out, to be included, not to be alone. And it wasn’t every day she got invited out by a tall, dark, handsome stranger. A *very* handsome stranger – probably the local Romeo who had slept his way through summer after summer of young female tourists – and holiday reps. Well he’d be wasting his time with her. Unlike her laddish neighbours, she wasn’t there with the intention of getting laid. It was the last thing she

wanted. The very thought of meaningless sex made her stomach turn.

She untied the white shirt and swapped it for the magenta halter-neck top. Then she applied some lipstick and mascara. No point making a huge effort. She didn't intend to stay out long.

"*Yiaaaaaaaaaaasas pethiaaab!*" yelled Dimitri as they sped past Craig and Steve on the road back into Skala. Mia held onto him for dear life and tried not to move a muscle, even though she felt she was about to slip off the back of the moped. "It was Craig and Steve! Did you see them?" Dimitri yelled over his shoulder.

"Yes," she gasped.

"Are you scared?"

"Just a little!"

"Are you so scared when I go like this?" he slowed the moped down.

"That's fine." She breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed her grip.

"And when I go like this?" he accelerated and Mia clutched onto him again. He laughed. "Just kidding, just kidding! I will go slowly I promise."

He pulled up outside the chrome bar with the big TV sets and Mia slid off the back of the bike and adjusted her skirt. That would be the first and last time she accepted a lift from him.

"Now where are those ladies?" muttered Dimitri as he kicked the moped onto its stand and smoothed back his hair. Mia looked around and spotted them propping up the bar, their large bottoms balanced precariously on tiny bar stools, their fleshy pink elbows leaning on the counter.

"Over there," she pointed.

Dimitri walked over to them.

"Yiasas ladies. You look very lovely tonight," he grinned, putting his arms around them and nodding at a stool for Mia to sit on in a gesture not dissimilar to The Fonz.

"Ooh, ain't he a gentleman, Caz? If I was ten years younger, I'd have you, darling!" cackled Babs, throwing her head back and revealing her large bosoms strapped firmly in place beneath her sparkly turquoise vest-top by a matching high control-factor bra. "It's so nice to be spoken to like that, innit Caz?"

Caz detached a straw from her lips and used it to stir the detergent-blue cocktail she was drinking. "Too right, love. It's a refreshing change to be

treated like a lady. English blokes have a lot of catching up to do. You're a lucky girl," she nodded sagely at Mia, discreetly pulling her chiffon leopard-print shirt out of the fold of her belly.

Mia laughed. "Oh, er, we're not together. I just arrived today – I'm in the apartment next to you."

"Course you are! Silly me," Caz rolled her eyes at her mistake. "I thought you looked familiar."

"Got a memory like a goldfish, that one," Babs nudged Mia and winked.

Dimitri roared with laughter. "That is very funny! I didn't ever hear that before. A memory like a goldfish – I like it!"

"Ooh, ain't we entertaining, Babs!" Caz giggled.

"So what's this Bora Dora place like?" asked Babs.

"It is fun. Good music. Good atmosphere. Let's go. I want to dance!" declared Dimitri, slapping the bar and babbling something in Greek to the barman.

"Whatcha say to him?" asked Caz, screwing up her face and straining her ear in an effort to understand.

"I say to him to give me a cigarette you bloody arsehole," explained Dimitri. "He said to me to fuck off you poof."

The barman tossed him a cigarette and grinned, revealing a missing front tooth.

"He is my friend Vasilis," smiled Dimitri, popping the cigarette in his mouth and lighting it.

"What was that – Vaseline?" asked Caz.

"Never mind. Come on ladies, drink up. Let's go!"

Dimitri hopped off his stool and ushered the three women across the road to a newspaper kiosk.

"Just got to buy some more cigarettes, my friends," he said, giving some change to the vendor and saluting him. "OK, let's party!" He hurried ahead of them up some steps between two tavernas and held open a narrow door below a broken neon sign which said 'ora Bora Club.'

Mia followed Caz and Babs towards the bar. The club was small, which was a good thing considering that apart from a few dimly lit faces around the edges, they were the only people in there. And yet the music was pumping, disco lights spinning, and smoke machine hissing out clouds of dried ice in

anticipation of the sudden arrival of a large crowd of ravers.

A young Greek barmaid with heavily charcoaled eyes and a tight pink T-shirt handed them each a glass of ouzo. Dimitri greeted her with a kiss on both cheeks and then caught sight of Steve and Craig poking their heads around the door like a pair of hesitant weasels.

“Ela ethó! Over here! Come and meet Marilena and have some ouzo.” He waved them over.

“Alright mate,” said Craig, pushing his Police sunglasses on top of his head and giving him a friendly pat on the back. “You drive like a nutter, you know that?”

Dimitri laughed. “I think Mia will agree with you.”

Mia smiled.

“You know each other? No? Let me introduce you. Steve, Craig, this is Mia. Mia this is Steve and Craig. You are next-door neighbours.”

“We met earlier,” said Mia, but they had already turned towards the bar.

“And this is Caz and Babs,” continued Dimitri, after Steve and Craig had claimed their free drinks.

“Alright lads!” boomed Babs. “Oh it’s the Macarena! I love this song. My littluns can do the dance to this. How does it go, Caz?”

“Don’t ask me!” said Caz, as Babs started wiggling her fleshy hips.

“Yes, come on, let’s dance!” cheered Dimitri, knocking back his ouzo and grabbing Caz around the waist. He propelled her into the centre of the dancefloor and twirled her around.

“Was that just me or did you feel the floor shudder?” Craig smirked at Mia.

“I didn’t feel anything,” smiled Mia, realising a fraction of a second too late that he was referring to Caz and Babs stomping on the dancefloor. She noticed a tattoo of a naked woman above his skinny bicep and cringed as she remembered the conversation she’d overheard earlier and the ominous wolf-whistle that had followed her up the drive. Oik number two looked more comic than tough with his thick brows, wonky teeth and Kangol woolly hat that was sending beads of perspiration down the side of his face.

“So, you been to Greece before?” asked Steve, adjusting his hat so that

the rim skimmed the tops of his eyebrows.

“A couple of times. You?”

“Nah. We usually go to Tenerife or Majorca. But Greece was supposed to be where it’s all happening this year,” said Steve.

“Really? What, Kefalonia?”

“Unfortunately not,” snarled Craig through gritted teeth.

“Young Steve here got his islands mixed up when he went to book the holiday. I told him Faliraki or Ayia Napa. I don’t know how he ended up booking Kefalonia, but there you go – that’s Steve for ya.”

“He’s a right whinger, this one,” sighed Steve. “Fancy another drink, Maria?”

“It’s Mia. I’ll just have a Coke please.”

“You’ve barely touched that ouzo. Don’t ya like it?”

“Not really. Here you have it.” She handed him the glass.

“Cheers.” Steve knocked it back in one go and turned back to the bar as Dimitri returned from the dancefloor.

“At last, some party people!” he grinned. “You know the last guests at Eleni were all in their fifties. Every single one.”

“How do you know? Did you ask them?” asked Craig, lighting a fag with a shiny silver Zippo lighter.

“Yes. I try to get them to come here, but they prefer the Greek dancing night at Hotel Flamingo – which is also fun, you must come to that too. But they don’t want to go to nightclubs.”

“You asked every single one of them how old they were?” repeated Craig in disbelief.

“Some I ask, some tell me. I talk with people all the time. I am always at Eleni and people like to talk to me and play cards with me. They tell me all about themselves. One woman told me she had slept with more than one hundred men. One man told me he couldn’t get it up no more. Another woman told me she lost twelve stones in two years.”

“Here Babs, did you hear that? A woman told Dimitri she lost twelve stone,” panted Caz, rejoining them and patting her fuzzy blonde perm into place.

“I lost weight an’ all,” announced Babs proudly. “Guess how much!”

“Two grams,” mumbled Craig into his ouzo.

“Eh?” Babs cupped a hand to her ear. “Whatcha say?”

“Ten stones!” guessed Dimitri.

“Six,” offered Mia.

“Nearly,” replied Babs. “Five stone, I lost. I weighed seventeen, now I’m twelve. That’s partly why I’m ’ere with Caz. My husband didn’t like the fact I’d got slim.”

Steve and Craig choked on their drinks.

“Why not?” asked Mia.

“Cos I got more confident, didn’t I Caz? When I was big, you see, I didn’t think much of myself. But now, I can wear all nice clothes, go out dancing...I get more attention off blokes, and he hated that. Pissed ’im right off. So one day I says, ‘Stuff ya’, and packed his bags for him.”

“We both did,” agreed Caz.

“You both what?” asked Steve.

“Chucked our ’usbands. That’s why we come here together – to celebrate.”
Caz and Babs clinked glasses.

“And did you say you have kids?” Mia asked Babs.

“We both do. They go to school together. Just like we used to. Me oldest Mark is fifteen. And her eldest Davey is fourteen. And our younguns are both twelve. My youngun’s a girl, Debbie. Hers is another boy, Ricky.”

“I don’t believe you have children so old,” gasped Dimitri.

“It’s true innit, Caz?” laughed Babs. “Here you’re pulling my leg, Dimtree. How old d’you think I am?”

“You are both thirty-three I think,” grinned Dimitri.

Caz and Babs squawked with laughter.

“Oh you aaaare lovely!” wailed Babs, giving him a hug. “I’m forty-one and she’s forty.”

“No!” exclaimed Dimitri, feigning outrage. “And you?” he turned to Mia.

“Guess,” smiled Mia.

Dimitri tilted her chin upwards to make an assessment. “Hmm...let me think...” He turned her face gently to the left and right. “You are twenty-five!” he concluded.

“Twenty-nine, I reckon,” piped Craig.

“Thirty-one actually,” announced Mia.

“No way – I’m losing my touch,” said Dimitri. “Usually I always guess right. OK, I guess Craig and Steve now.”

Craig and Steve stood side by side pulling silly faces while Dimitri sized them up.

“Eighteen!” he teased.

“Fuck off!” spat Craig.

“Relax – I’m just joking, malaka! You are...hmmm...you are both twenty-four.”

“Bang on, mate,” said Steve. “Craig, it’s your round. Buy the man a drink!”

“A beer please my friend,” said Dimitri. Craig pulled out his wallet and turned to the bar. No more offers were forthcoming.

“Oh well, what will you ‘ave, Babs?” asked Caz.

“Bloody Mary, darling. I’m gonna have another dance.”

Babs strutted back onto the dancefloor to join the three other lone souls gyrating to The Bee Gees’ Stayin’ Alive. Mia sipped her Coke and watched as Babs proudly wiggled her slimmed-down – and yet still rather ample – behind, clad in shiny black leather trousers that reflected the flashing lights like a beachball. Babs sang along merrily to the music, running her chubby fingers through her spiky brown hair.

“Who does she think she is?” sighed Caz, shuffling past Mia onto the dancefloor with two Bloody Marys.

Mia turned around to find herself face to face with a closer than expected Steve and Craig. She looked over their shoulders to see Dimitri leaning over the bar talking into Marilena’s heavily pierced ear.

“So how comes you’re on your own?” asked Craig.

“Mind your own business Craig, you nosy bugger,” snapped Steve, finally giving in to the heat and whipping his woolly hat off.

“I’m sure she can speak for herself. So how come you’re on your Jack Jones – if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Just fancied a break on my own for a change. Most of my friends went to Edinburgh for a summer holiday – for the festival a few weeks ago – but I wanted guaranteed sunshine.”

“So couldn’t you get no one to come with you?” asked Craig.

“Shuddup Craig! Stop asking personal questions! Sorry about that,”

Steve rolled his eyes.

“That’s quite alright. The truth is I didn’t really want anyone to come with me. I’m quite at ease in my own company. Unfortunately other people seem to have a problem with it.”

“Yeah but you’ve got to admit, it’s not really normal going on holiday on your own, is it?” continued Craig. “Most people go in couples or with mates.”

“Loads of people go off backpacking on their own – that’s acceptable – so why shouldn’t people go on a package holiday on their own? Why does everyone have to be coupled up? Since when did having a partner become a prerequisite of enjoying rest and relaxation?”

“Eh?” grunted Craig.

“What she’s basically saying, mate, is that she’s quite happy on her own,” explained Steve.

“Yeah, but don’t you feel a bit of a Nobby No-mates when you’re eating in a restaurant and you’re sitting all by yourself?”

“No. Why should I? I’ve got friends. They’re just not here, that’s all. And that’s my choice. I could have gone to Edinburgh with friends, but I wanted sun, sea and sand instead.”

“So how come none of your mates didn’t wanna come to Greece?”

Mia took a deep breath. “Some of them are serious theatre buffs and have friends who are performing in plays at the festival – so they were set on going to Edinburgh. Some of them couldn’t afford to go abroad, and the few who would have been willing, I didn’t really want to share an apartment with for a fortnight. OK?”

“Fair enough.” Craig turned to Steve and jerked a thumb towards the bar. “Your round, mate.”

“Mia, another Coke?” asked Steve.

“No thanks. I think I might make a move actually.”

Craig glanced at his watch. “It’s only twelve!”

“Yeah, I’m quite tired after the journey today. See you later. Enjoy yourselves.” Mia walked over to Dimitri. “I’m off now, Dimitri. Thanks for inviting me out.”

“What? So soon? But the night has not even begun!”

“I know, but I’m tired.”

“Let me get you another drink!”

“No thanks.” Mia edged away. Dimitri grabbed her wrist and pulled her back.

“Come on! What will you have? Maybe you should try Sex On The Beach. That’ll get you in the mood!” He winked at her.

She noticed Marilena eyeing her suspiciously from behind the bar and released herself from his grip. “I’m leaving now, Dimitri. Good night,” she said sternly.

“Then let me give you a lift back to the apartment – please.” He begged, stubbing out his cigarette.

“No thanks, I’ll get a cab.”

“I will drive slowly I promise – come on!”

“Good night, Dimitri.” Mia turned and headed for the door.

Dimitri shrugged in defeat.

As Mia reached the exit, she noticed a tall, lanky, fair-haired man with small round glasses hovering hesitantly in the doorway.

“Excuse me,” she said politely.

“It doesn’t look very busy in there, does it?” said the man, moving not quite enough for her to squeeze past.

“It might pick up later,” shrugged Mia.

“D’you think so?” The man still didn’t move.

“One can but hope.” Mia tried to get past but two girls squeezed in the door behind him, accidentally elbowing him out of the way. The man regained his balance and was about to ask Mia a further question when he realised she had gone.

CHAPTER 3

Sunday 2nd

“Morning my sweet!” Frank beamed as he strode onto the terrace, holding in his belly as he struggled to button up a short-sleeved shirt. Mission accomplished, he stretched his arms up in the air before attempting to wrap them around his wife.

“The kettle’s boiled. Help yourself.” Margaret barely glanced at him, but continued painting her long nails a deep merlot red to match the floaty Nicole Fahri dress she was wearing.

“Don’t I get a kiss? What’s the matter – didn’t you sleep well?”

“Not particularly.”

“Why not? Bed not comfy enough? I slept like a log.” Frank extracted a piece of fluff from his grey moustache, inspected it and blew it into the breeze.

“Yes, so you did.”

“What’s up love?”

“You know what’s up.” She tried to pat her new sandy-blond hairstyle into place without jeopardising her wet fingernails.

“Oh love, please. Yesterday was a long day. We were up at six.”

“You slept on the plane – and on the bus,” Margaret snapped. “You slept most of the bloody day.”

“Forgive me pet, I’ll make it up to you tonight.”

“Promises, promises...”

“Keep your voice down, Margaret. Or do you want the whole world to know our business?” Frank retreated into the kitchen, robbed of the smile he’d woken up with that morning. He’d been so full of joy – a great night’s kip complete with complimentary Carol-Vorderman-in-a-bikini dream, followed by waking up to a room full of sunlight and breezy warmth and realising it was the first day of his annual holiday and more importantly,

his retired life. Superb. No commute, no office, no grey drizzle, no washing up in the sink, no moodiness from the wife... You just couldn't have it all, could you?

"Fancy another cup, pet?" he called out to Margaret.

"Please," she replied tersely over her shoulder, screwing the lid back onto the pot of nail varnish.

Frank carried two small cups of tea out onto the terrace. "Bit small these cups, aren't they?"

Margaret ignored him.

"Brave, that girl coming out here on her own," he remarked, nodding towards their next-door neighbour-but-one's closed shutters.

"Yes. Just goes to show you don't need a partner to get on with life and enjoy yourself," said Margaret, taking a sip of tea.

Frank stared at the sea. What was that supposed to mean? Was it a hint, a threat? He decided to ignore it. "Isn't it beautiful here? Simply stunning," he breathed.

"Don't start."

"Don't start what?"

"Your retirement fantasy. It is lovely here, yes I'll grant you that, but it'd be deader than a morgue in winter."

"Like I keep saying, pet, it'd be our summer home. We'd spend the winter in Tunbridge Wells – or if you really want to up the budget of our summer home, we could sell up and buy somewhere back in Manchester near your parents to spend the winter..."

"I'm not moving back to Manchester, even if it is just for six months of the year," said Margaret defiantly. "Anyway, I'm sure we can find something affordable in Spain or Italy – somewhere a little more sophisticated."

"Somewhere where there's more shops and everything costs an arm and a leg, you mean."

"How about Capri? Our friends would be so envious." Margaret wrinkled up her nose in delight at the thought.

"Capri? Don't be daft woman! What do you think I am – a millionaire? If we bought a place in a location like that, we'd have to rent it out to friends, friends-of-friends and Joe Bloody Public for eleven months of the year to pay off the mortgage."

“You’d ask our friends to pay?” Margaret’s heavily mascaraed eyes stood out on stalks. “Over my dead body!”

“We’d have to – anyway, that’s what people do. It’s what they’d expect.”

“My friends wouldn’t expect to pay – they’d be mortified. They wouldn’t make us pay to stay in their holiday home.”

“If you’re referring to the Mansfields, I don’t recall ever being invited to stay in their holiday home.”

“They invited us to come out this summer!”

“That’s because they knew it was our fortieth anniversary and that we were more than likely to say no! Anyroad, I wouldn’t want to be renting it out all the bloody time – I’d want to be in it me bloody self!”

Margaret rolled her eyes and blew on her wet nails. Frank sighed and noticed the piece of fluff that had previously been caught in his moustache was now entrenched in his fingernail. The scraping of chairs and the clatter of cutlery being spilt onto a table echoed around the pool. They looked around. A few verandahs away, a couple were sitting down to breakfast.

“Union Jack swimming trunks,” observed Margaret dryly. “And you want to buy a house here...”

“Bush – top bloke. That’s what *I* think,” said Nath, scratching his stubble and turning the page of his Daily Star.

“Eh?” Jo took a mouthful of muesli and opened her magazine.

“George Bush.” Nath passed Jo a page of his newspaper. “He’s been voted number three in the World’s Greatest Wankers poll after Saddam Insane and Osama Bin La-la.”

“I’m surprised he’s not number one – how can you possibly think he’s a top bloke?” asked Jo, glancing at the page disinterestedly before handing it back.

“He was right to nuke Iraq and get rid of that nutter – who was butchering his own people anyway.”

“I don’t think Bush’s reasons were anything to do with liberating the Iraqi people.” Jo pushed her wispy black fringe out of her eyes.

“Course not, he got his mitts on some more oil for us lot while he was at it – good lad!” Nath joked, a dimple forming in his left cheek as he grinned at her.

“*Good lad?* He’s pure evil, Nath. That man is almost single-handedly responsible for global warming by turning his back on the Kyoto agreement. All he cares about is the American economy – he doesn’t give a shit if half the world is under water in a century’s time.”

“Well according to what it says in here,” Nath pointed at his paper, “we’ll all be living on Mars by then, so it won’t matter.”

Jo groaned. “Why don’t you read a real newspaper anyway, instead of *The Titty Times?*”

“I should think *The Titty Times* has got more news in it than *New Woman*.”

“*New Woman* is a magazine. It’s not supposed to have news in it. It’s supposed to have fashion, beauty, gossip and women’s issues.”

“Women’s issues! What does that mean – what kind of tampons should I use? Are my baps too big? How do I achieve orgasm?” Nath laughed, then lowered his voice. “Oy, you don’t fake your orgasms do you?”

“Ha, ha! Wouldn’t you like to know!” Jo stretched her arms above her head and yawned, pushing her 34C bikini-clad chest provocatively towards Nath.

“Honestly, Jo. You don’t, do you?” he asked worriedly, looking at her breasts.

“Nath, I know we’ve only been together for six months, but believe me, I wouldn’t waste my time with a bloke who couldn’t satisfy me. Faking is for martyrs.”

Nath sat back and grinned. “Shall I grab us a couple of sunbeds?”

Jo smiled. “If you think you’ve fulfilled your duties in the bedroom...”

Nath reached forward and slid his hand up her sarong. “This is just a trick to get me out of my Union Jack trunks, isn’t it?”

Jo giggled. “Oh look, there’s what’s-her-name... Mia!” She batted Nath’s hand away and waved. Mia waved back from her terrace and disappeared back inside her room.

“Quite a fit bird, that,” Nath teased.

“Shut up you. Get in the bedroom and get your trunks off!”

“Yes mistress. Be gentle with me.”

Mia put the kettle on and looked in the cupboard for a mug, but all she

could find was two small cups. What was the point in making cups that small? Three mouthfuls and it was empty. She tipped a teaspoon of decaf coffee into each one. She would drink them back to back, thus sparing herself the inconvenience of having to get up and get a refill. Strange the things you did when you were on your own. Strange, but liberating with no one to tell you're strange.

She thought back to the night before in the Bora Bora and Craig's barrage of questions. She felt quite irritated by his small-mindedness. Obviously Craig was the type of person who never did anything on his own. He probably spent twenty-four hours a day in the company of other people. How sad – especially for the poor sods who had to put up with him. And what about Dimitri? She hoped she hadn't offended him by refusing to stay. But if she had...well, that was too bad.

Stepping back onto her terrace, she exchanged greetings with Frank and Margaret and sat down at her table. She took a sip from one of her coffees. It probably looked like she was expecting someone to join her. Oh well. Not today.

She opened up the 'Welcome' leaflet she'd found on the bedside table and scanned it for information on car hire. Good, there was a place in Skala – she'd set off after breakfast. She looked at her watch and was surprised to see it was eleven o'clock already. There was, of course, a two hour time difference – but even so, she hadn't expected the morning to be nearly over already. It was time to get a move on. All of a sudden Mia felt her stomach churn. Could she do this? Should she be doing this? She didn't have to – just because she was here didn't mean she had to go through with it. She rushed to the bathroom and bent over the toilet bowl, but nothing happened. Gradually the feeling of nausea subsided and she returned to the terrace.

OK, here was the plan. She would hire a car, buy a map, find out where the town of Sami was and then make it part of a day trip. Once in Sami she'd look up the address, and if she couldn't find it or it turned out to be the wrong one, then so be it – she would go and find a nice beach somewhere – perhaps the pretty one in the leaflet. After all, she was on holiday. A holiday that just happened to be in Kefalonia. But deep down she knew she wouldn't be able to relax until she'd done what she'd come to do.