

Daisy James

Suzie's  
Santorini  
Summer



Suzie's  
Santorini Summer

by  
Daisy James

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# Dedication

To Paige & Joseph Ezzard  
May you live happily ever after

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# Chapter One

‘Okay, everyone, that’s it for today. *Namaste.*’

‘*Namaste!*’ came the collective response.

The bubble of peaceful serenity, enhanced by the waft of soft music, early morning birdsong, and the scent of lavender oil, was immediately punctured by a burst of high-pitched chatter and the gathering together of yoga mats and water bottles as Rachel’s first *al fresco* yoga session came to an end.

‘Thanks for hosting us today, Suzie. I think it’s been a huge success,’ said Rachel, who had barely broken a sweat during what Suzie considered to have been a more strenuous class than she had been expecting and – judging by the glowing cheeks of her friends Poppy, Chloe, and Beckie – she wasn’t the only one. ‘The glamping site is the perfect place for an outdoor exercise class. What do you think about making it a weekly thing?’

Suzie took a quick glug from her water bottle to give herself an extra few seconds to decide whether she wanted to put herself through the same physical torment every week until the weather prevented them from using the decking area outside the tepee that she had called home for the last year. However, when she saw the hope in Rachel’s eyes, she realised there was only one response to her friend’s enquiry.

‘Sounds great, Rach.’

‘Fantastic. Okay, I’ll just go and say goodbye to my regulars.’



Suzie watched Rachel head towards a group of lithe, slender women, her stride controlled and graceful, perfectly showcasing the advantages of practicing yoga, Pilates and tai chi on a regular basis. Her “regulars” had clearly received the memo on appropriate attire – brightly coloured Lycra vest tops and figure-hugging leggings – their glossy hair secured into high ponytails that swung like pendulums as they hung on Rachel’s every word while exuding health and vitality from every pore. Suzie experienced a sharp twinge of guilt when she glanced down at her own choice of outfit for the early morning workout: a pair of drawstring trousers and a frayed tee-shirt that had seen better days. She knew she had let the side down, and not just in the sartorial stakes; out of the four of them, she had struggled the most with her downward dog pose, although Chloe had been a close second.

‘Hi, guys,’ said Holly, joining them from a sunny spot on the patio outside a very attractive log cabin where she’d been a spectator to their morning of torture, having told them that someone had to prevent Suzie’s dachshund, Archie, as well as her own beloved springer spaniel, Ariel, and her boyfriend’s westie, Max, from disrupting the proceedings. ‘So, did you have fun?’

‘I did,’ said Suzie, tucking her short, pink-streaked hair behind her ears before taking Archie’s leash from Holly. ‘Although, if that’s a beginner’s session, then I dread to think what an intermediate class is like, not to mention advanced! I’m relieved Rachel’s regulars came over, otherwise she might have been sorely disappointed with the calibre of her newest recruits. I thought Jules was going to have a coronary when he saw Rachel demonstrate a firefly pose!’

Poppy laughed. ‘Did you hear Elspeth snoring at the end? She looked so confused when I nudged her awake before Rachel caught her. I think she thought she was still asleep in that gorgeous shepherd’s hut she lives in.’

‘I had fun, too,’ said Beckie, stretching her arms above her head. ‘It’s been great to get away from the bistro for a couple of hours. I certainly feel like I have more energy, ready to face whatever the day might throw at me. You’ll have to join us next week, Holls. I’m sure Oscar won’t mind looking after Ariel and Max for a couple of hours.’

‘Not going to happen, Beckie.’ Holly grinned. ‘What about you, Chloe?’

‘Erm, yes, count me in. Oh, look, there’s Elspeth. She promised to let me have a peek inside her shepherd’s hut before I left. Catch you later.’

Chloe dashed off to where the fifty-something woman was waiting for her, the tiny mirrors sewn into her long flowing skirt glinting in the late September sunshine. They embraced before Elspeth led her to a peppermint-and-cream painted hut-on-wheels with a tiny wraparound veranda that played host to a set of table and chairs and several ceramic pots filled with a variety of herbs.

Suzie loved Elspeth’s quirky home, *and* Jules’ fabulous – and much more spacious – yurt, but she wouldn’t trade either of them for her beloved tepee. She tightened the cord around the waist of her loose cotton trousers – it wouldn’t be the first time they had unexpectedly fallen to her knees – and made a spur-of-the-moment decision.

‘Fancy a cup of chamomile tea before you head off?’

‘Actually, is it okay if I take a rain-check?’ said Poppy, hooking the handles of her gym bag over her shoulder. ‘I need to make another couple of batches of my red velvet muffins, and I’d also like to try out a gluten-free recipe that one of Rachel’s yoga friends has just emailed me. See you later, Beckie?’

‘Sure. Tell Aunt Kath I’ll be there in time for the lunchtime rush.’

‘Will do.’

As Poppy’s little red Mini disappeared from the car park, Rachel re-joined them.

‘Where’s Poppy gone?’

‘Back to the Boathouse Bistro,’ said Holly, hooking her arm through Rachel’s, her charm bracelet clinking softly at her wrist. Suzie was thrilled to see that the tiny silver westie she had made from the last of her silver clay had pride of place. ‘Come on, Rach, Suzie’s just offered to make Beckie and I a pot of her famous chamomile tea.’

Suzie cringed when she saw her friend’s hesitation and her heart sank. She knew exactly what Rachel was going to say, but that didn’t make it any easier to hear.

‘Are you sure we can all fit inside?’

She glanced across to her conical canvas home; a place where she had found solace since arriving in Blossomwood Bay with only a rucksack of belongings to her name. She would always be grateful to Rory, the owner of the farm, who, ten years previously, had allowed an old school friend who had fallen on hard times to pitch his tent in one of his fields, a

generous gesture that had been the catalyst for the eclectic mix of homes that had appeared since then.

Rory's friend had chosen his pitch well. Surrounded by wildflower meadows, the glamping site enjoyed the most spectacular view of the Devonshire countryside and the sparkling sea beyond. Over to her left was a stretch of woodland that Archie loved exploring on their evening walks, and to her right, a large paddock that was home to the six retired racehorses Rory had rescued from an uncertain future. As far as Suzie was concerned, it was paradise; a safe haven where she had found friendship and support when she had needed it most, for which she would be eternally grateful.

However, she knew it wasn't the *type* of home she had chosen that had caused Rachel to hesitate, but what it contained. Tepees might look small, but, in normal circumstances, there was more than enough room for a solo occupant – and her faithful dachshund – to live a comfortable life. A helix of discomfort started to wind its way through her chest, and she regretted her impulsive invitation.

What was she thinking?

Her fellow glamping site friends – Elspeth, Jules, Skye, Opal, and Quinn – had no issue with her propensity to surround herself with a kaleidoscope of random items she had amassed since arriving with only the clothes on her back. But, after their first visit, the friends she'd made since taking on the lease of her beach hut studio in Blossomwood Bay had not returned...

'It's okay if—'

‘It’s just that, there are four of us and three dogs. It might be... well, a bit of a squeeze,’ said Rachel, trying to justify her obvious reticence. ‘Why don’t we head to the bistro, and we can sample some of Poppy’s delicious orange and walnut cookies?’

‘Actually, I’d love a cup of tea before I head back to the pub,’ said Holly, her blue eyes filled with compassion, which only made Suzie feel worse. ‘And Ariel and Max could really do with a drink of water, too.’

With no other alternative, Suzie strode towards the entrance of her tepee and invited her friends inside, keeping her back to them as she filled a large silver bowl with fresh water so that she didn’t have to see the shock on their faces. She placed the bowl outside on the decking before returning to set the kettle to boil, and when she finally turned round, she saw that Holly and Beckie had made themselves comfortable on a couple of patchwork bean bags while Rachel was sitting cross-legged on a rug Suzie had found in a local skip. She scanned the room, and for the first time saw what her friends must see.

An emporium of clutter.

Every inch of available space was taken up with collections of woven blankets, hand-knotted rugs, tie-dyed cushions, and over-stuffed bean bags that she had picked up at charity shops and car boot sales, which, by themselves, would have made the tepee a cosy space to spend time in.

But she hadn’t stopped there.

She had added dreamcatchers, lampshades, crystal chandeliers, brass candlesticks, and scarred wooden shelving units on which she had crammed books, ornaments, vases,

photo frames, and a collection of mismatched crockery and glassware. When Archie had come to live with her – after being cruelly abandoned at Blossomwood Kennels by his owners – she had struggled to find a place for his bed and had ended up offering him one of her bean bags; the one Beckie was currently sitting on.

She realised that, to others, her home looked like a junk shop, but *to her* the things she had surrounded herself with were her comfort blanket. The more she had, the thicker the fabric, and the better the insulation from the trauma of the outside world. She knew what had caused her struggle with the clutter demons, but the battle to overcome them had intensified since her flight from London, followed only a year later by the Blossomwood Bay fire that had destroyed her jewellery design business, and she had nothing left in the tank to fight them with.

There was hope, though; her mum had suffered the same affliction when they'd lost her dad – worse even, as they'd lived in a three-bedroomed house – but she had conquered her obsession and was now living happily in a small hillside village in Bali where she taught English to teenagers wanting to work in the tourist trade. Suzie's sister, Amber, on the other hand, had always been a self-professed neat freak.

She splashed boiling water into an ancient china teapot, added four mismatched mugs to a tray, and set it down on the floor in front of Rachel, squeezing into the space between Holly and Beckie before pouring their tea. Archie returned from his sojourn with Ariel and Max, gave Beckie a look of disgust when he saw she had commandeered his bed, and

settled instead on a folded mohair blanket on top of an urn-shaped linen basket .

‘This tea is absolutely delicious, Suzie,’ said Holly, running the tip of her tongue along her lower lip.

‘It’s even better with a dribble of Jules’ honey. Help yourself.’

‘I’ve been meaning to ask you, Beckie,’ said Rachel, adding a spoonful of golden honey to her mug. ‘Has your Aunt Kath heard anything from Dexter? Wasn’t his business manager, Andrew, supposed to be flying over to Los Angeles last week? I don’t know about you, but funds are extremely tight at the moment, and the sooner he finds his errant rockstar client, the better. It’s disgraceful that we’ve had to wait for so long for the insurance on the beach huts to be sorted out.’

Beckie nodded. ‘Actually, she spoke to Andrew yesterday.’

‘And?’

‘Well, he’s arrived in LA.’

‘I sense a “but”.’

‘He told her he had some important business he needed to attend to before heading out to the Pacific Crest Trail to locate Dexter like he promised. I checked his Instagram account last night, and it seems the “business” he was talking about involves dining at a Michelin-starred restaurant, attending a swanky party in Beverley Hills, and scoring front-row seat seats at an awards ceremony.’

‘So he hasn’t even set off for the trail yet?’

‘No.’ Beckie sighed. ‘You know Aunt Kath, Rach, she *never* raises her voice for anything and she’s the calmest, most easy-going person I know. But yesterday she couldn’t stop herself from explaining a few home truths to him.’

‘I suppose it’s not his fault that Dexter needs to escape from the razzmatazz of showbiz life,’ said Suzie, her heart giving a nip of empathy, followed by an uncomfortable shiver down her spine. ‘It must be so stressful to have to keep looking over your shoulder all the time in case someone is hiding in the bushes with a long-lens camera pointed in your direction, ready to snap a photo of you at your most vulnerable, before splashing the image across the tabloid press.’

Suzie saw Holly flash her a sympathetic glance and heat whooshed into her cheeks.

‘Okay, thanks for the tea, Suzie,’ said Rachel, unfurling her legs and pushing herself up to standing. ‘I’d better get going, I’ve got another class in an hour; this time it’s a hen do.’

‘Who books a yoga session for a *hen do*?’ asked Holly, horrified.

‘Lots of people, thankfully.’ Rachel laughed. ‘Then I’ve got a baby shower.’

‘Oh my God, don’t tell me they’re doing a yoga, too?’

‘No, it’s just a party – my *third* this month. It seems as though every one of my friends is either getting engaged, planning a wedding, or having baby showers at the moment.’ The pain in Rachel’s eyes was plain for all to see.

Beckie scrambled up from her bean bag, pulling down on the hem of her Boathouse Bistro logo-ed tee-shirt to cover her



curves. 'I'd better head off too. The lunch rush usually starts at eleven o'clock on a Friday. I wouldn't mind a lift if you're going back to the pub, Holls?'

'Sure.'

'How are the pub's renovations coming along?' Suzie asked Holly, as they all sauntered out of the tepee to collect Ariel and Max before making their way to the car park where Holly had left the rust-blistered Volvo she shared with Oscar, Max's owner, whom she'd met whilst on a dog-sitting assignment in Hawaii.

'Swimmingly! We've scrubbed the place from top to bottom, polished the floorboards, then painted every wall in a coat of brilliant white, and now Oscar's having the time of his life choosing the commercial kitchen appliances, as well as all the other culinary paraphernalia a high-end restaurant needs. I never knew deciding on a toasting fork could be so important.'

Holly laughed and Suzie couldn't help but smile at the sparkle she saw in her friend's eyes. She deserved her chance at happiness after the loss of her dog-grooming business in the boardwalk fire, as did her friends Tilly, who had settled into a new life in Tuscany, and Freya, who was running an aromatherapy studio in the grounds of a château in the south of France.

'What about the kennels?'

'Oh, Suze, I can't tell you how excited I am about opening my luxury hotel for dogs. It's a dream come true, and I've got lots of fantastic ideas, but for the time being we've got to concentrate on getting the restaurant up and running.'

‘Need any help?’ asked Suzie, unable to keep the hope from her voice.

Since the loss of her business, along with most of her jewellery-making tools and raw materials, there had been very little for her to do apart from walk Archie, and unless she kept busy, her demons would start to poke their noses above the parapet to taunt her.

‘Always grateful for another pair of hands,’ said Holly, stopping next to the Volvo and turning to wrap her arms around Suzie, followed by Beckie. ‘Okay, I’ll see you—’

‘Hey! Who’s that!’ cried Suzie, pointing to the woodland on her left.

‘Where?’

Holly drew Ariel and Max’s leashes towards her as they had started to bark, either from sensing a stranger in their midst or from Suzie’s sudden and unexpected exclamation.

‘Over there, behind that oak tree.’

A whoosh of alarm, mingled with a soupcon of fear, flooded Suzie’s chest and her heart crashed painfully into her ribcage, causing her breath to catch in her throat.

‘I’m sorry, Suzie, I can’t see anything,’ said Rachel, shielding her eyes with her hand.

‘I thought I saw the flash of a camera.’

‘It’s probably just a rambler who took a wrong turn. I’ll go and check it out.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ said Holly.

Holly produced a couple of home-made dog biscuits from her pocket and gave Ariel and Max one each. Their barking ceased immediately, and she followed Rachel through a wooden gate to the footpath that separated the glamping site from the horses' paddock, taking care to secure the gate behind them.

'Are you okay?' Beckie murmured, linking her arm through Suzie's.

'I definitely saw someone, Beckie.'

Suzie swallowed down hard in an effort to stem the rising panic. After inhaling a few steadying breaths, she felt her anxiety start to subside and she realised that – once again – she'd overreacted. It was something she had been working on, but so far, she'd not had much success, which was one of the reasons she preferred to keep herself to herself in her little tepee on a glamping site for long-term residents at the end of a rocky farm track.

'I'm sure you did, but...'

'But what?'

'Not every stranger is filled with malicious intent,' said Beckie, her voice gentle. 'You can't go on like this, Suzie, hiding away up here because you're frightened that some random paparazzi will snap your photograph. What happened in London last year wasn't your fault.' Beckie paused, clearly deciding whether to continue. 'And you can't keep surrounding yourself with more and more *stuff*; it's people you need to share your life with, not belongings. Maybe if you—'

'Beckie! Suzie! *Look out!*' Rachel shouted.

‘What the—’

‘Run!’



## Chapter Two

Suzie looked across the wildflower field to where Holly and Rachel were waving their arms frantically in the air, jumping up and down like a pair of over-caffeinated Tiggers, except their faces were filled with alarm.

‘Run! Now!’

She glanced at Beckie who wrinkled her nose in confusion, then she turned to look over her shoulder, and to her horror she saw six former racehorses galloping towards them. Their heavy hooves pounded the ground, kicking up clumps of grass and soil as they thundered through an open gate and into the glamping site before separating; half of them making a beeline for Jules’ yurt and the rest heading straight for Suzie’s tepee.

‘Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God!’ Suzie cried.

‘Come on, Suzie, let’s go!’ Beckie released Suzie’s arm and started to run for the safety of the gate where Holly and Rachel – and now Jules, Elspeth and Chloe, and a couple of the other residents from the glamping site – were all calling for them to make a run for it before they were trampled to death. But Suzie spun round on her heels and sprinted in the opposite direction.

‘Where are you going?!’ shouted Beckie.

‘Archie! He’s in the tepee! I can’t—’

Suzie covered the twenty or so metres back to her tepee in record time and scooped a still-sleeping Archie into her arms.

Whispering soothing words in his ear, she then dashed across the field to where her relieved friends were waiting for her, just in time to watch the rampaging horses collide first with Jules' yurt, and then with her beloved tepee, wrenching the guy ropes from their moorings and tearing the door flap from its stitching.

The structure collapsed immediately, her precious belongings flying in every direction; her blankets torn, her crockery smashed, her clothes trampled by pounding hooves. Whinnying with delight at the destruction they had caused, the horses then heading off to assist their equine friends to complete their demolition of Jules' yurt, followed by Opal's bell tent, but thankfully they chose to spare Elspeth's shepherd's hut and the little wooden cabin Quinn had spent months building.

Beckie and Chloe moved forward in unison, sliding their arms around Suzie's waist as she stared slack-jawed at the carnage in front of her. Hot tears gathered along her lashes, and she was barely able to compute what her eyes were telling her to believe. It was like she was watching a scene from a movie – a *disaster* movie – except there was no mistaking the reverberation of the ground beneath her feet, nor the rich, earthy aroma permeating the air.

She clutched Archie to her chest, his heightened heartbeat reflecting her own, and she saw that Holly had done the same with Max who was also clearly distressed by the commotion. Thankfully, Ariel seemed to be taking the incident in her stride and remained on protective duty next to her owner, emitting the occasional low growl of warning.

‘Oh, thank God!’ said Rachel, pointing to her left. ‘Look, there’s Rory!’

They watched as the owner of the farm and glamping site, along with two members of his staff, stepped bravely into the melee, settling the horses with well-practised techniques, whispering soft platitudes until the animals acquiesced to being led back to their paddock after their mid-morning antics, without even a backward glance at the trail of destruction they’d left in their wake.

For several minutes, a heavy silence wrapped its tendrils around the gathering as each one of them tried to come to terms with what had just happened; shocked at how the ambient peace and tranquillity created by their early morning exercise class could have been disturbed in such a violent way.

‘I... I wonder what spooked the horses?’ said Suzie.

‘Could have been anything,’ Rachel mused.

‘Do you think it has anything to do with the person I saw lurking in the woods earlier?’ Suzie ventured.

Suddenly, she was gripped by an uncontrollable bout of trembling as her thoughts cleared enough for her to realise that, for the third time in the space of a year, she had lost everything she owned; all the wonderful treasures she had hand-picked and found the perfect place for. Tears trickled down her cheeks, but she brushed them away, clenching every muscle in her body as she tried to prevent the cruel demon on her shoulder from muttering the words she had heard repeated so many times since her life had imploded on that fateful day in London.



*It's your fault.*

Fortunately, before she tumbled down that particularly bleak and painful rabbit hole, Holly came to her rescue by suggesting they regroup at the Fox & Fiddle. Before Suzie knew what was happening, she and Archie were bundled into the back seat of Oscar's Volvo and they were heading to what had been Blossomwood Bay's cosy village pub before difficult trading conditions, coupled with poor management, had forced it to close its doors to thirsty patrons.

As Suzie watched the picturesque Devonshire countryside flash past her window, she felt strangely numb, as though the events of that morning had happened to someone else, and that she had simply accepted her friend's kind invitation to have coffee – and maybe one of Oscar's home-made ginger cookies – with her, along with Rachel, Beckie and Chloe, who were following on behind in Rachel's bright yellow 4X4.

Ten minutes later, they pulled into the weed-strewn car park between the Fox & Fiddle and Blossomwood Kennels, whose previous owner had fled to Spain after a catalogue of health and safety breaches had been discovered. Holly jumped from the driver's seat, hooked her arm through the handles of her over-sized sports bag, and unclipped Ariel and Max from their restraints.

'Why don't you go grab a seat on the patio over there while I let Oscar know we're here? I'll rustle up a cafetière of coffee for us, and a bowl of water and some doggie treats for Ariel, Max, and Archie.'

'Okay.'

Suzie eased herself slowly from the back seat, feeling as though she'd been hit by a runaway juggernaut. However, despite the turmoil swirling through her head, when she saw the pub's freshly whitewashed façade, she couldn't help but smile. It seemed Oscar had made a flying start on turning the abandoned building into the restaurant he'd dreamed of owning since he was a child, one which he was determined would "utilise the freshest of ingredients, sourced locally, and cooked to perfection".

She knew the restaurant would be a huge success, the kind of place discerning diners would flock to, not only to sample the amazing food prepared by a celebrity chef with his own TV show, but also for the sweeping views of Blossomwood Bay. She dropped onto one of the weather-blistered benches in what had once been the Fox & Fiddle's beer garden and switched her gaze to the collection of ramshackle wooden buildings in front of her.

Her heart gave a nip of sadness. What a sorry sight.

It wasn't just the broken roof tiles, the doors hanging from their hinges, and the general air of abandonment, but also the discomfiting absence of the cacophony of yipping, yapping, and barking that had always accompanied her previous visits. All she could hear now was the rustle of the leaves on the sycamore trees that concealed the entrance to the "secret" driveway that led to Blossomwood Manor – the house Dexter Hawkins lived in when he was in the UK – and a lone bee bouncing amongst the tangle of clematis that clung to the sides of an old gazebo.

‘Suzie, there you are! Holly’s just told me what happened. I’m *so* sorry!’

Oscar placed a tray containing a large glass cafetière and six coffee mugs – along with a plate of just-from-the-oven biscuits – onto the table and drew Suzie into his arms, the acerbic aroma of paint stripper winning the battle for supremacy against the spicy ginger of the cookies and the richness of the freshly ground coffee.

She opened her mouth to say something, to thank Oscar for his concern, but no words ensued, and she was forced to swallow down hard on the lump that had formed in her throat. Thankfully, she was saved from having to come up with a suitable response to his solicitude by the timely appearance of Rachel’s Land Rover in the car park. To Suzie’s surprise, only Rachel and Beckie alighted and made their way to the former beer garden where they too were treated to a welcoming embrace from Oscar before he excused himself to rendezvous with his paintbrush.

‘Hey guys,’ said Holly, appearing from inside the pub with Ariel and Max in tow. She set down a bowl of fresh water in front of a very grateful Archie, then slid onto the seat next to Suzie, and picked up the cafetière. ‘Okay, who wants coffee?’

‘Me, please!’ Beckie beamed.

Holly poured their drinks, adding milk to Beckie and Suzie’s mugs, then removed a handful of doggie treats from a Tupperware box and gave one to each of their canine friends, receiving appreciative licks for her thoughtfulness.

‘Wow! I think this could be *the* best coffee I’ve ever tasted!’ said Beckie, closing her eyes to better appreciate the

flavour.

‘It’s Kona coffee,’ said Holly with a smile. ‘Oscar brought it back from Hawaii, and if there’s any left, he plans on serving it in his restaurant.’

‘Then I *know* it’s going to be *the* best restaurant in the whole of Devon!’ said Rachel, draining every last drop from her mug before her expression grew more serious. ‘Okay, now that we’ve replenished our caffeine reserves, I think we need to make a start on helping Suzie write a to do list. Suzie, how long do you think it will take Rory to get the site back up and running again?’

‘I... I don’t know. Not long, I hope.’

The ever-present knot in her stomach tightened as she contemplated what the next few weeks would hold, but before she could succumb to the siren call of her anxiety monsters, her phone started to buzz. She pulled it from her pocket and glanced at the screen, her heart lurching when she saw who was calling her.

‘Hi, Jules, is everything okay?’

She could feel her hand shaking as she clutched her phone to her ear. Her friends had paused their conversation and all eyes were on her, each one filled with apprehension as they waited to find out what Jules was going to say.

‘There’s really no easy way to say this, darling, so I won’t beat about the bush. I’ve just spoken to Rory, and while he’s happy to repair Opal’s bell tent, he doesn’t think he’ll be able to reinstate my yurt, or your tepee, until the new year.’

‘The new year! That’s almost four months away! What are we supposed to do until then?’

‘He did offer to help us find somewhere else to live. He mentioned a cousin who’s just finished converting a couple of shipping containers into Airbnbs in Exeter.’

‘Exeter!’

‘I knew you’d say that. I’m sorry, Suzie. Do you think one of your friends might be able to put you up? If not, let me know. A pal of mine owns an ancient camper van that he uses to tour the festivals during the summer months. It’s bit scruffy – actually, it’s *a lot* scruffy – but I’m sure he’d be happy to lend it to you until you can find something a little more... salubrious. Look, stay in touch, and let me know what you want to do, eh?’

‘I—’

‘Oh, and Rory’s lads have already made a start on clearing up the chaos the horses have left; they’ve promised to save what they can – which, to be honest, isn’t very much – and they’ll store it in one of the barns for as long as you want. Your insurance should cover what’s been damaged beyond repair.’

‘Thanks, Jules.’

Suzie’s heart sunk to her toes. She didn’t want to admit to Jules that after losing her beach hut studio in the fire, she hadn’t been able to afford to renew her insurance on the tepee. She gulped down on a sharp upswing of despair; not only did she not have a business – or a means of earning an income – she now didn’t have a home. Panic threatened to overwhelm

her, and she experienced a sudden urge to run away and hide, to hibernate somewhere, anywhere, until the new year arrived and she could start again with a new tepee and, hopefully, a new beach hut studio.

But did she want to start again?

Before she could explore the answer to that thorny question, Beckie reached out to lace her fingers through hers and give them a gentle squeeze. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Rory isn’t going to replace the tepee, or Jules’ yurt, until next year.’

She saw the shock on her friends’ faces, and for some unfathomable reason, she experienced a wave of guilt; guilt for adding yet another layer of distress to their already heightened anxiety levels because of what they’d all been through in the aftermath of the fire.

‘I’m sorry, I—’

‘You can stay with us!’ Holly declared. ‘There’s plenty of room in the pub... if you don’t mind a few flakes of paint and plaster in your morning coffee instead of a sprinkle of cocoa powder. In fact, all four of Oscar’s sisters were over here at the weekend, and they had a competition to see who could come up with the quirkiest design for the bedrooms. They took one room each and what they created was amazing, although you might want to steer clear of the one Zoe did; it’s supposed to be a seaside theme, but I slept in there last night and it feels like you’re inside an aquarium, which is a little disconcerting.’

Suzie smiled at her friend, her heart ballooning with affection and gratitude.

‘Thanks, Holly.’

‘And, of course, it goes without saying that Archie is welcome to join the gang.’

‘And I can lend you some of my clothes,’ Beckie offered, then glanced down at Suzie’s bare feet. ‘And a pair of shoes, until you get yours back.’

‘And there’s still that job going at the White Swan,’ said Rachel, ever the practical one. ‘If you’re interested, that is. I know it doesn’t pay much, but it’ll keep Archie in dog food until you find something else.’

A wave of emotion swooped over her, and all Suzie could do was nod and attempt a watery smile. She had considered Rachel’s suggestion after the boardwalk fire, but the thought of working behind a bar terrified her. Whilst she was desperate for an income, a job that involved dealing with members of the public on a daily basis was just not possible for her. Even a year later, she still woke up in the middle of the night with palpitations, bathed in cold sweat as she re-lived vivid flashbacks of the day her life changed forever.

‘I’ll think about it, Rach.’

She wasn’t surprised to hear that her voice held a tremor. Holly had noticed it, too, and took pity on her by changing the subject to divert attention away from the nightmare her life had become to something she also wanted to know the answer to.

‘By the way, where’s Chloe? I thought she came over with you two in the Land Rover?’

‘She said she had an appointment in Sidmouth,’ said Beckie, helping herself to a second ginger biscuit. ‘We dropped her off at the bus stop on the coast road.’

‘Really?’ said Holly, her brow creasing. ‘When I spoke to her before the yoga class this morning, she told me she had nothing planned today. She even offered to help me clear out one of the sheds at the back of the kennels that I’m hoping to turn into an office. There’s a treasure trove of old spirit bottles left over from the pub that she said she could repurpose for when she starts making her artisan gins again.’

Rachel shrugged. ‘Maybe she forgot?’

‘Mmm, maybe,’ Holly murmured, fondling Ariel’s silky ears. ‘I hope she’s okay. I’m worried about her.’

‘Me too,’ said Beckie, her face filled with concern. ‘She was also supposed to call into the bistro yesterday to pick up a couple of travel books from the reading nook, but—’

The thunderous rumble of a powerful engine interrupted their conversation, and all four women turned in unison to watch a white Audi Cabriolet with blacked-out windows make its way, at speed, into the Fox & Fiddle car park. A thirty-something man in a trendy leather jacket, dark jeans, and mirrored sunglasses emerged from the driver’s seat and, after taking his time to survey his surroundings, he withdrew his phone and proceeded to take a number of photographs of the pub’s spruced up façade, and then the picturesque view out to sea.

Suzie’s stomach curdled; there was something familiar about their newly arrived visitor. While she couldn’t be one hundred per cent sure that he was the man she’d seen lurking



in the woodland just before the horses had bolted from their paddock, he certainly had the look of a member of the dreaded paparazzi who had made her life a living hell before she'd fled from London to Devon.

If she was right, what was he doing here?

She couldn't bear it any longer. She leapt from the bench, mumbled the word "bathroom" and, trying not to sprint from the beer garden like an Olympic runner hoping for a gold medal, she made her way to the back door of the Fox & Fiddle. She found herself in what had clearly once been the pub's snug, and with a sigh of relief, she dropped down onto a mouldy old sofa to wait for her heartbeat to slow and her demons to release their stranglehold on her churning emotions.

Snippets of conversation floated through the open window. Straining her ears, Suzie heard the man introduce himself as Josh Carrington from Carrington & Goodman, a PR agency based in Islington. Her panic escalated, and just as she thought she was about to combust from an overload of stress, she heard him mention Oscar's name and remembered that he was a *celebrity chef* with his own prime-time TV show and a new restaurant business to promote. Josh Carrington was clearly here at Oscar's invitation to help with that, and not to craft another painful exposé on her recent flirtation with notoriety.

Her anxiety immediately deflated, and heat flooded her cheeks. After giving herself a stern talking to about her constant skittishness – not to mention her presumptuousness – she was about to head back outside when her phone started to buzz again, and this time her spirits soared when she saw who was calling her.



## Chapter Three

‘Hi, Amber. How’s Santorini?’

‘Wonderful, as always. You won’t be surprised to hear that it’s another glorious day. There isn’t a cloud in the sky, and now that it’s almost the end of September, the temperature has finally fallen below thirty degrees and there’s a lovely breeze in the evening. Oh, and the gallery was really busy this morning. I sold one of Katerina’s larger sculptures to a French collector, which she’s going to be very excited about, and a couple from New York promised they’d call back tomorrow to buy a pair of hand-blown glass vases that, and I quote “will match our kitchen cookware perfectly”. I’m not joking!’

Amber giggled and Suzie’s mood lifted further. Five years older than her, her sister had always been the sensible, no-nonsense one. Nothing fazed her; she had an answer for everything, and a way of saying exactly the right thing, at the right time, without causing indignation or offence.

However, Amber also possessed an eerie – and sometimes inconvenient – sixth sense of being able to sniff out distress, especially where Suzie was concerned. She didn’t know how her sister did it and she hoped that, as they were on a phone call and not a video call, she would be able to hide her recent brush with disaster from Amber’s intuitive radar. In order to give herself the best chance of doing that, she decided to steer their conversation to a subject close to her sister’s heart – her current love interest.

‘So, how’s Tom?’

‘Ah, well, yes, I...’

To Suzie’s dismay, she heard an uncharacteristic wobble in her sister’s voice before she paused to inhale a steady breath.

‘Amber? What’s wrong? Is everything okay?’

‘Don’t worry, everything’s fine. Actually, it’s *more* than fine.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Last night, I invited Tom over to the studio for dinner – nothing fancy, just one of Stefanos’ moussakas and a huge bowl of Greek salad – but he told me he had something else arranged for us. It turned out he’d borrowed a boat – well, it was more of a yacht, really – from one of his friends, and he took us out on the caldera for a romantic sunset cruise, something I’ve been wanting to do since I came over here. We cracked open a bottle of Champagne and watched the sky morph from pink to apricot to mauve as the sun disappeared behind the horizon. It was one of the most beautiful evenings of my life and... and the perfect way to say goodbye.’

‘Say goodbye? What do you mean?’

Amber expelled a long ragged sigh, her despondency evident even though Suzie couldn’t see her face. ‘Tom’s leaving.’

‘Leaving? Why?’

‘Because it’s time for him to head off on the next leg of his big “round-the-world” adventure. We both knew from the

outset that our relationship wasn't going to be a permanent thing, just a bit of "fun in the sun". Neither of us expected to... well, to fall in love.'

'Where's he heading next?'

'Santorini was the last stop on the European part of his tour, so he's now off to Thailand, stopping at Bangkok and Koh Samui, before taking the train to Malaysia and doing Penang, Langkawi and the Cameron Highlands, followed by a week in Singapore before finally ending up in... guess where?'

'Where?'

'Bali! Oh, Suzie, what I wouldn't give to go with him. I could see Mum! It's been over two years since I last saw her, and I really miss her. Did she tell you what she's doing? When she's finished teaching her kids to speak English with a distinct Norfolk accent, she's heading off into the jungle to spend her time volunteering at a tiger sanctuary! I mean, wow! That would be a dream come true for me. Tom's planning to stay on the island for a month, hiking, surfing, and learning how to play the rindik and cook the local food, just trying to get under the skin of the place. Would you believe that he's promised to call in and introduce himself to Mum!'

The effusive excitement in Amber's voice melted away the last fragments of anxiety that lingered in Suzie's chest, and she couldn't help but smile. Her sister had endured her fair share of relationship disasters, the worst one being the catalyst to her leaving Norwich to take up a spur-of-the-moment job a friend had told her about in Santorini, and she deserved to find someone who made her heart sing.

Unfortunately, the delight Suzie felt at her sister's new-found romance was short-lived when she was reminded of the reason Amber hadn't seen their beloved mum for so long. Amber had been planning to go to Bali last September; her flights were booked, her bags were packed, and her colleague Katerina had found someone to cover for her at the art gallery while she was away. She had been about to leave for the airport when Suzie's world had exploded, and, without a murmur of complaint, she had changed her plans immediately, re-routing from Bali to London to help her little sister navigate the grenade-strewn landscape she'd found herself in.

'Anyway, enough about me,' said Amber, the habitual cheerfulness back in her voice. 'Did you have fun at Rachel's yoga class this morning? I bet she put you all through your paces!'

'Yes, yes, she did, but...'

To Suzie's horror, despite her best intentions to keep that day's catastrophe to herself, her emotions bubbled over, and she burst into huge, racking sobs, hot tears trickling down her cheeks as she gulped in deep lungfuls of air to try and regain control of her swirling thoughts.

'Suzie? Oh my God, Suzie, what's wrong? What's happened?'

The panic in her sister's voice brought her to her senses and the whole sorry story about the rampaging horses and the loss of her tepee – and all her precious belongings – came tumbling out in one long sentence, culminating with the news that Rory didn't intend to replace her home until the new year.

‘Oh, Suzie, that’s awful. I’m so sorry. Where are you going to live?’

‘Holly and Oscar have offered me one of the bedrooms at the Fox & Fiddle, but...’

‘But what?’

‘I’m not... I don’t...’

‘Do you want me to come over to Devon? I can speak to Katerina, grab the next flight out. I can be with you by tomorrow night, the next morning at the latest.’

Her sister’s generous offer caused Suzie’s tears to flow once again. Despite the imminent departure of the man who’d brought the smile back to her face over the last three months – someone she was *in love* with – here was Amber, offering to drop everything and rush to her side to provide her with a shoulder to cry on.

Again.

She really was the best sister a girl could ask for.

But the guilt smouldered. It was *her* turn to be there for Amber, to repay the kindness and the non-judgemental support she’d received the previous summer, without which she knew she wouldn’t be where she was now.

Irrespective of her current setbacks, and even the devastating Blossomwood Bay fire, things could have been much, *much* worse. As their mum had been unable to fly back from Bali, it had been Amber who had sat by her side as Suzie had endured the interviews and lengthy meetings that had inevitably followed the event that had changed her life. It had been Amber, too, who had dealt with the increasingly invasive

media interest with her special brand of straightforwardness. Whereas Suzie had fallen apart, unable to perform even the simplest of tasks, like dressing, bathing, or making something to eat, without the gentle coaxing of her older sister. Her brain had turned to mush, her thoughts ricocheting from one thing to the next until she became completely disorientated, clutching onto her sanity by her fingernails.

Those two months had been the worst of her life, and that was from a woman who had lost her father at the tender age of eleven! But so had Amber – who had been in the middle of her GCSEs – and now was the time for Suzie to step up and return the favour, to be there for her sister when *she* needed *her*. After all, what did she have left in Blossomwood Bay? So, before she could change her mind, she inhaled a deep breath and blurted out her suggestion.

‘Why don’t I come over to Santorini and look after the gallery for you while you go travelling with Tom? You’ll be able to visit Koh Samui – I know it’s on your bucket list – and then you can spend some time with Mum in Bali.’

There was silence at the other end of the phone and Suzie wondered if the line had been cut.

‘Amber?’

‘Oh my God, Suzie! Are you sure?’

‘Yes, I’m sure. When is Tom leaving?’

‘The day after tomorrow, but you don’t have to—’

‘Okay, I’ll see you then,’ she said firmly.

‘Really?’



‘Really!’

‘And you don’t mind working at the gallery every morning?’

‘Not at all.’

‘And you won’t fill my studio with a bunch of random Greek paraphernalia?’

‘What? No!’

‘And you promise to water my plants?’ She laughed.

‘Of course.’

‘Oh, Suze, this is absolutely a dream come true! And you never know, you might find your own Tom while you’re here! Santorini has a reputation as an Island of Romance.’

‘You know that’s not going to happen, Ambie.’

‘Not everyone is like Adam, Suzie,’ said Amber, softly.

‘I know, I just—’

‘Oh my God! Oh my God! I have to call Tom!’

The shriek of joy rippling down the phone line left Suzie in no doubt that she had done the right thing, and her heart filled with love as she said goodbye to her big sister and promised to call her later to finalise the details. However, no sooner had she slotted her phone back into her pocket before the positivity bubble burst, and she came back down to the earth with a painful bump that sent a sharp zip of regret through her chest.

What on earth was she thinking?

She couldn’t go to Santorini!

What if someone recognised her?

But that was ridiculous!

Katerina's art gallery-cum-boutique was on the outskirts of Oia, a small town in the north of the island overlooking the spectacular caldera, with labyrinthine streets paved with cobbles and lined with a myriad of whitewashed shops selling a wide range of artisan products, and pretty tavernas with the most spectacular views in the Aegean, if not the whole of Greece.

How likely was it that someone would remember something that had happened over a year ago? Or the identity of the people who were caught up in it? Anyway, she looked different now; not only had she lost a great deal of weight through the stress of it all, but her pale blonde hair – which she had always worn in an elegant up-do while living in London – was now cut into a choppy pixie style with a smattering of pink highlights that she loved.

She had also ditched the smart designer suits, the expensive jewellery, and the crippling four inch heels her employers – and her ex-boyfriend, Adam – had expected her to wear, and replaced them with loose, drawstring trousers and tee-shirts in natural organic fabrics and, wherever possible, walked around in bare feet. She was much more her authentic self in Blossomwood Bay than she had ever been during her time in London, which was one of the few positives to have come from what had happened.

Another positive was that she didn't have to worry about packing – she had nothing left to take to Santorini. She hoped that Holly still had the tee-shirts and summer dresses she'd bought during her recent trip to Hawaii, and maybe Rachel

could lend her one of her yoga outfits and Beckie the promised pair of shoes. She didn't need much; she had learned that.

An unexpected whoosh of confidence swept away her fears.

She would go to Santorini!

Maybe the change of scenery would give her creativity coffers a welcome injection of inspiration. Maybe the beauty of the Aegean landscape would reignite her passion for designing the quirky jewellery she had made in her beach hut studio before the fire. Or maybe she could explore a whole new direction – painting, ceramics, photography – so that when she came back to Blossomwood Bay she could resume her quiet, unobtrusive life with a new way of earning a living under her belt.

She pushed herself up from her seat and was about to leave the snug to tell Holly, Beckie, and Rachel what she was going to do when she was struck by a thunderbolt of realisation, and she chastised herself for her lack of consideration for the most important thing in her life.

Her plan had a fatal flaw!

How could she have forgotten?

There was no way she could go to Santorini!

'Hey Suzie, are you in here?' Holly called from the back door.

'I'm in the snug.'

'What are you doing in here? Is everything okay?'

'Everything's fine. I was just talking to my sister.'

She waggled her phone in the air, its silver charm clanking against the screen.

‘How is she?’ asked Holly, sliding onto the sofa next to Suzie.

‘She’s doing great. Actually, I’ve offered to fly over to help out at the gallery so she can go travelling for a few weeks with Tom, but now I realise that I can’t. I’m just about to call her back and let her down, which won’t surprise her. I’ve been doing it for most of my life.’

‘What do you mean? Why can’t you go?’

‘I’m ashamed to say that I completely forgot that I now have responsibilities.’

‘What kind of responsibilities?’

‘Archie! I can’t go swanning off to the Greek islands whenever it suits me. What was I thinking?’

Holly held Suzie’s gaze for a beat, then smiled broadly as she reached out to lace her fingers through hers, her soft blue eyes shining. ‘Archie is welcome to stay here with me and Oscar. In fact, he can be our first VID guest at Holly’s Luxury Hotel for Dogs! It’s a perfect solution for both of us, and I know that Ariel and Max will do everything they can to make him feel welcome. As you know, Archie spent several months at the kennels before he came to live with you, so he’ll be right at home, and I promise to give him the deluxe package; long walks through the woods and on the beach, regular grooming, home-made treats, safe doggie toys.’

Suzie stared at Holly. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course.’

Words failed Suzie so instead she leaned forward and wrapped her arms around Holly's shoulders, giving her an extra tight squeeze to let her know how much her offer, and more importantly, her friendship, meant to her.

'Thank you, Holls.'

'No problem.'

'Can I ask you for another favour?'

'Fire away.'

'Can I borrow a pair of shorts and maybe a swimsuit?'

Holly giggled. 'What about a cute Hawaiian shirt?'

'Sure.'

It was decided.

She was on her way to sunny Santorini.



## Chapter Four

Suzie knew Santorini was promoted as one of the jewels of the Aegean Sea; an island famed for the beauty of its architecture, its multi-coloured beaches, its impressive caldera, and its awe-inspiring sunsets. She had seen the photographs on the front covers of glossy magazines, in travel companies' adverts, and on Amber's Instagram feed, but nothing had prepared her for seeing the real thing.

She was grateful that she'd been gifted with the slowest taxi driver south of Athens so she could feast her eyes on the whitewashed villages whose sugar-cube buildings seemed to tumble down the rugged coastline and into the shimmering turquoise waters below. Their doors, shutters and window frames were painted in the same azure blue as the sky, their eaves draped in floral frills of pink bougainvillea, and their windowsills adorned with blue and white ceramic pots crammed with scarlet geraniums.

No matter which way she looked, there was an image worth savouring, something to enliven her hitherto sluggish senses. A trio of cats snoozing in the shade of a fruit-laden lemon tree, a picturesque church with blue-domed roof, a flotilla of sailboats bobbed jauntily on the smooth-as-glass bay to her left. She removed her phone from the pocket of her crumpled linen trousers and took a bunch of photographs to send to Holly and Beckie, then tipped her head back and inhaled the intoxicating scent of jasmine that floated through the window

on the warm afternoon breeze, along with a surprising top-note of exhaust fumes.

She hadn't expected the roads to be so busy!

However, despite the fact she seemed to have arrived during rush-hour, her driver tootled along as though he was taking his elderly grandmother on a Sunday afternoon jaunt around the island. Completely oblivious to the lengthening tailback behind them, his leisurely trundle caused a constant stream of cars, scooters, delivery vans, and on one occasion a couple riding a tandem bicycle, to overtake them. Several tooted their horns in exasperation, some shook their fists and shouted expletives, but still her driver showed no inclination whatsoever to increase his speed to accommodate their impatience. Suzie had never been more relieved when they glided to a smooth, controlled stop in front of an impressive stone archway, and the driver announced that they had arrived at their destination.

Oia.

She thanked him, hooked the handles of her canvas carry-on bag over her shoulder, and slid from the back seat onto the pavement, before being forced to chase down the road after him, flaying her arms in the air because he'd forgotten to take her luggage out of the boot.

'Erm, can I ask you which way I need to go?'

The taxi driver stared at her as though she'd asked him to perform a jig naked, but to her relief, he pointed through the archway and into the narrow street beyond, waving his hand to the left to indicate she should head in that direction, then



climbed back into his car to re-join the Santorini version of the Greek Grand Prix... at safety car speeds.

Sighing, she entered the throng of tourists who were also making their way along the cobbled footpath, her suitcase bouncing erratically behind her. Shops lined both sides of the street, their windows and facades displaying their eclectic wares: brightly coloured beachwear, trendy sunglasses on carousels, high-end leather goods, local wines and spirits, and a whole kaleidoscope of indigenous souvenirs. There was even a jewellery shop that she made a careful note to pay a visit to when she had a free afternoon.

Just as she was starting to suspect the taxi driver had been having a joke at her expense, she spotted the art gallery where Amber worked and above which she rented a tiny studio that would be Suzie's home for the next month. To her surprise, the gallery was closed, but that didn't prevent her from appreciating the hand-painted ceramics in the window: vases, bowls, jugs, plates, basins, lamps. She couldn't wait to get settled in and explore what else the gallery had to offer.

She found the blue-painted gate that Amber had told her to look out for, then climbed a short flight of roughly hewn steps and stooped down to collect the key from a coded metal box. With a sigh of relief, Suzie unlocked the door and found herself standing in a bright airy room containing a generous sofa-bed upholstered in soft cream fabric, a coffee table devoid of any unnecessary clutter, and a small dining table with a pair of wooden chairs. Further investigation revealed a miniscule kitchen, housed in what could only be described as a niche in the wall, and a bathroom that wasn't much bigger, but there was everything she would need for a comfortable stay.

Smiling, she abandoned her luggage in the middle of the room and walked across the glossy white floor tiles to the French doors, flinging them open to dissipate the stuffiness, then gasped when she saw the view from the surprisingly expansive terrace. Directly in front of her – almost within touching distance – was a whitewashed building, its shutters sealed tight against the weakening sun, its balcony home to a very inviting hot tub which, thankfully, was currently unoccupied. To her left was another villa, this one boasting its own plunge pool, sparkling like an aquamarine gemstone against the eye-scorchingly white masonry.

From her elevated position she could see a maze of cobbled streets, each one bustling with visitors, all of whom seemed to be heading in the same direction. She checked her watch and realised that sunset was approaching, and she understood their eagerness to claim the perfect spot to watch the spectacular show that nature provided on a daily basis. She was disappointed to miss it, but she knew there would be plenty of other opportunities over the coming weeks.

She returned to the studio, unsurprised at the minimalism of the décor. She adored her sister, and they agreed on a lot of things, but their tastes in soft furnishings were housed at opposite ends of the interior design spectrum. What was wrong with a knitted emerald throw, or a cerise sarong, or a hand-tied saffron rug? Maybe a few paintings or photographs on the wall? The place looked like a hotel room; clean and welcoming, but bland and devoid of personality.

However, this was Amber's home, not hers. She would respect her sister's choices and make a concerted effort not to scatter her belongings across every inch of the available space.

She wondered how long *that* would last.

Suzie set the kettle to boil and, finding no coffee in the cupboards, made herself a mug of peppermint tea – Amber’s favourite – and took it over to the sofa. Sipping her refreshing beverage, she thought back to the conversation she’d had with her sister the previous night as Amber sat in the airport in Dubai waiting for her connecting flight to Bangkok to be called.

She’d never heard her sister so happy, chatting away about her trip, enthusing about all the places she hoped to visit, the activities she wanted to experience, the food and drink she wanted to sample, and how much she was looking forward to seeing their mum in Bali. But it was when she spoke about doing all those things with Tom that her voice became really animated, and only a person with a heart of stone would be oblivious to the fact that Amber was in love, and Suzie couldn’t be more delighted for her.

She intended to do her sister proud by being the best gallery assistant Katerina had ever had. She would turn up for her morning shift on time, employ the customer service skills she’d learned whilst working at a high-end establishment in London to sell all the amazing works of art in the gallery, and more importantly – something her sister had mentioned more than once during their thirty minute conversation – ensure the gallery remained a clutter-free zone.

Oh, and water Amber’s beloved plants!

As most of her afternoons and evenings were free, she planned to use the time and space to relax, to stop constantly looking over her shoulder for something that wasn’t there, and,

hopefully, start to heal. She hoped to persuade Katerina to teach her new skills such as glassblowing, painting, photography or how to throw a pot, even, and she experienced a frisson of excitement as she thought of what fun projects awaited her, if only she was brave enough to step out of the shadows and into the Santorini sunlight.

The likelihood of encountering anyone from her former life was low, and she intended to take the opportunity to work on eradicating the nugget of fear that still smouldered deep in her abdomen from the second she woke up in the morning to the moment she fell asleep at night. When her father had passed away, her mum had been devastated, but amidst her grief, she had found the courage to change her life, not just making a few tweaks here and there but by resigning from her job as a primary school teacher in Norwich and accepting a position in a country she had never visited before.

If her mum could do that, then Suzie could embrace what Santorini had to offer. Amber had been happy here for five years. Maybe she could enjoy a little slice of that elusive pie, too.

She finished the last dribble of her peppermint tea and was about to make a start on her unpacking when her eye snagged on a blue door in the corner of the room that she hadn't noticed before. Tentatively, she turned the brass handle to discover a varnished staircase with open wooden treads that she suspected led downstairs into the gallery.

Smiling, she padded down the stairs, her bare feet noiseless on the steps, and found herself in a bright airy space with marble floor tiles and smooth white walls, which provided the

perfect backdrop for the stunningly beautiful objects that were on sale. Of course, the place was pristine; there wasn't a speck of dust anywhere and a fresh lemon-infused fragrance circulated through the cool air.

Suzie grinned; she had expected nothing less.

The generously proportioned room was split into three distinct zones, in the middle of which stood a glamorous glass desk upon which rested a sleek silver laptop, a card reader, and nothing else. No baskets filled with correspondence waiting to be filed, no pots filled with pens, paperclips, and post-it notes, no abandoned coffee cups like the ones that had cluttered up Suzie's desk at her beach hut studio at Blossomwood Bay.

She strolled into the first zone; a large space encircled with floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with the colourful ceramics she'd seen on display in the window when she arrived. There were bowls, vases, plates, oil & vinegar sets, and decorated tiles and plaques. Every item was a work of art in its own right, worthy of a place in the most elegant of homes, and she spent a few minutes inspecting each one, familiarising herself with the stock for when she started her first shift.

After all, she *was* there to work.

Satisfied with her "stock-take", she moved on to investigate the gallery's second zone. It was home to various sculptures and intricate glassware objects, which she knew were Katerina's handiwork. Amber's colleague was clearly very talented, and Suzie couldn't wait to meet her, to chat about all-things artisan, to hear about the techniques she used to create her artwork, and to consider whether she could apply any of them to her own jewellery design business.

The final zone was where the paintings were displayed – exquisite watercolours of the panoramic Santorini landscape, many of them featuring the famous vista of the white sugar-cube-esque buildings set against the deep blue of the Aegean Sea and the endless cerulean sky above. Glorious sunsets had been captured in pastels, oils, and photographs, all of which had been sympathetically mounted and framed to enhance their beauty and, hopefully, catch the eye of potential buyers.

Suzie sighed; she couldn't think of a better place to spend her time while in Oia. It wouldn't be like work at all, and there would be no need to vet everyone before she allowed them through the door, like she did back in Devon where she insisted that clients who wanted to discuss or commission a piece of bespoke jewellery made an appointment.

She spun on her heels and was about to head back up the stairs to Amber's studio when she caught sight of a small alcove just beyond the picture gallery. Expecting to find a storage area, she was surprised to discover that its white walls were also adorned with paintings, but these paintings were so at odds with the rest of the artwork displayed in the main gallery that she couldn't prevent a gasp of surprise from escaping her lips.

She stood and stared at them, trying to work out what the artist was trying to depict or to say, but she came up blank. In contrast to the vibrant colours used in all the other items for sale in the gallery, these paintings had been created using a much more sombre colour palette – black, brown, charcoal, pewter – and featured unusual shapes, decorated with random splashes and smudges of dark grey paint. They were flat, dull,

lifeless, and more than a little disconcerting, and the longer she looked at them, the more her mood dipped.

No wonder Amber had consigned them to the back of the shop.

Were these Katerina's handiwork as well?

Looking at the rest of the collection, she doubted it; the composition was just so different. Maybe they belonged to a friend, or a family member, whom she had agreed to support or mentor?

As a jewellery designer, Suzie was aware that when it came to hand-crafted articles, beauty was in the eye of the beholder, and while the paintings didn't float her boat, she knew there would be others who would wax lyrical over them. Nevertheless, she was relieved they were hidden away at the back of the shop so that their melancholic vibe didn't detract from the ambient cheerfulness that permeated through the rest of the gallery.

She glanced at her watch and was shocked to see that several hours had passed since her arrival and it was now almost midnight.

Tiredness clawed at her bones, so she decided to call it a night and head back up to Amber's studio, shelving her earlier intention to unpack her suitcase. She converted the sofa into a bed and within moments of her head hitting the pillow she was floating down sleep's superhighway.





## Chapter Five

The next morning, after rinsing away the final cobwebs of her journey from Devon to Santorini in a lukewarm shower, Suzie took her mug of peppermint tea onto the balcony to watch the sun peek its nose above the horizon. She was used to seeing the sunrise – Archie had made sure of that since coming to live with her – but it seemed different here. The sky was a deeper, richer blue, the landscape was picture-postcard perfect, and, of course, it was warmer. But unlike the melodic dawn chorus at her glamping site in Blossomwood Bay, the early morning soundtrack in Oia was a cacophony of crashing and banging as the shop owners in the street below prepared for another day of trade, and the whine of scooter engines.

She rinsed her mug under the tap and returned it to its place in the cupboard above the sink, giving herself a metaphorical pat on the back for her tidiness. Next, she checked her hair in the mirror, smiling when she saw her ruby nose stud glint in the sunshine that streamed through the kitchen window; that tiny red gem – along with the silver rings she wore on each of her fingers – was the only jewellery she owned after the fire had robbed her of all her stock.

She didn't think Katerina would appreciate her turning up in harem pants and bare feet, so for her first day at her new job, she had chosen to wear one of Holly's plain white t-shirts, a pair of tailored navy-blue shorts, and the comfortable-yet-smart leather deck shoes that Beckie had lent her. She added a spritz of the perfume Freya had made for her using her

favourite fragrances – the rich, earthy aroma of patchouli mixed with a dash of lemongrass – and inhaled a deep breath before heading down the stairs to the gallery, excitement – and a little trepidation – zipping through her veins.

No sooner had Suzie set foot in the gallery than the front door burst open and in walked an attractive thirty-something woman balancing a takeaway coffee in one hand and a large painting-sized parcel – wrapped in brown paper and tied up with string – in the other.

‘Here, let me help you with that,’ said Suzie, rushing forward to grab the parcel before Katerina spilt her drink on the pristine marble floor. ‘Wow, that’s heavy!’

‘Suzie! It’s great to meet you at last! I’m Katerina Loukas.’

Dressed from head to toe in black – black long-sleeved tee-shirt, figure-hugging black jeans, and a pair of sky-high black stilettos – Katerina was a couple of inches taller than Suzie, her makeup carefully applied, her manicure perfect, and her wavy shoulder-length hair so glossy it shone. A patent leather handbag dangled from her wrist by a thick gold chain, its zip wide open to reveal a cornucopia of random items – a pair of over-sized sunglasses, an engraved silver compact, a large roll of sticky tape, a collection of paintbrushes, and, weirdly, a small, paint-splattered hammer – which, along with her takeaway coffee, she dumped onto the gallery’s glass desk so she could envelop Suzie in a warm, Chanel-infused hug.

‘It’s great to meet you, too, Katerina,’ said Suzie, stumbling a little as she was released from Katerina’s unexpectedly tight embrace.

‘Oh, it’s Kat. That’s what my friends call me. Have you settled in upstairs?’

‘Yes, I have, thanks.’

‘Before we go any further, can I just say a huge thank you for agreeing to cover for Amber while she goes travelling with Tom. She’s told me *so* much about you, I feel I know you already!’

Suzie groaned inwardly, praying that her sister hadn’t told her friend and colleague *everything* about her, otherwise any hope of building a friendship with Katerina would be over before it began.

‘It’s no problem,’ she said quickly, anxious to avoid the conversation straying into the reason she had nothing else to do but fill in for her sister, so early in the day. ‘By the way, you speak really good English.’

‘That’s because I spent a year at art school in Brighton after finishing university. I had such a wonderful – and productive – time there, I’d love to go back one day. Okay, are you ready for a tour around the gallery so I can answer any questions you may have about what we sell here before we’re inundated with customers?’

‘Absolutely.’

Suzie spent a most enjoyable hour following in Katerina’s fragrant slipstream as she explained the layout of the gallery, where to find the various price lists, and how to use the card reader to take payments. They then moved on to the best part of the tour; discussing the wonderful products that were for sale, most of which Katerina had created herself, and the rest

by a select group of artists, sculptors, painters, and photographers who lived and worked on the island, from whom she took a small commission when the item was sold.

‘I work with a variety of raw materials; clay, wood, glass, sometimes marble, but I also get a great deal of pleasure from reusing, repurposing, and upcycling. This, for example’ – Katerina picked up a beautifully carved representation of a dolphin – ‘started life as a piece of driftwood that I found when walking on the beach. And this here, is made from recycled plastic bottles, would you believe.’

‘Wow, they’re so tactile.’

Katerina beamed as she casually set the driftwood dolphin down on a different shelf to the one where it had previously formed the handsome centrepiece to an eye-catching display featuring items with a clear sea-based theme, before moving on to select a graceful, long-necked cat with mesmerising blue eyes from the shelf showcasing an eclectic mix of animals from the feline fraternity, which had also been grouped together in an artistic way.

‘I enjoy what I do, and I love seeing the expression on people’s faces when they find something that I know will take pride of place in their home. I can definitely see this Grecian cat sitting on someone’s mantelpiece, surveying all the domestic drama being played out in front of her, or this cute little glass cat being kept in someone’s pocket to bring them luck in their exams. But I’ve got so many other ideas, too, like expanding into printed fabric. I adore the way I can take one of my watercolours, or hand-painted water jugs, and transfer the

same design onto cotton, silk, linen, or hessian, and then turn that into bags, hats, or maybe even clothing! I adore fashion!’

Suzie couldn’t prevent her eyes from straying to the all-black outfit Katerina was wearing and she was mortified when Katerina noticed.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean...’

Katerina laughed, her dark brown eyes sparkling with amusement. ‘Don’t worry, everybody reacts the same way. I love cerise, and emerald, and vermillion, and saffron just as much as the next person, but when I’m at the gallery I prefer to wear black, cream or white so that my sartorial choices don’t detract from the real beauty that’s on display here. First impressions are everything, and I want those to be about the *art*, not the artist. Do you understand what I mean?’

‘I do, I absolutely do.’

‘Amber tells me you’re a jewellery designer. I’d love to learn how to make a ring, or a bracelet, or a pair of earrings.’

Suzie smiled. ‘And I’d love to learn how to create stained glass or throw a pot.’

‘Then we’ll teach each other! It’s a deal.’

They continued their stroll around the gallery, pausing frequently to discuss a particular painting or sculpture, sharing anecdotes about the origins of their inspiration for the designs they had created, and realising how much their respective fields had in common. Finally, they completed the circumnavigation of the space and came to a standstill in the ceramics part of the gallery where, amidst the hand-painted

crochery and tiles, was a small glass shelf that Suzie hadn't noticed when she'd conducted her recce the previous night.

'Did you make these, too?'

She indicated the menagerie of colourful knitted creatures – cats, dogs, mice, fish, dragons, and unicorns – along with a selection of what looked like fruit and vegetables; lemons, oranges, tomatoes, aubergines, and something small, green, and spherical that she didn't recognise.

'Is that a sprout?'

'No, I believe it's an olive.'

'And this?' Suzie picked up a larger, oval-shaped object whose outer "skin" sported a thick layer of pointed spikes that looked like they'd been cut from a sweeping brush. 'Is it a coconut?'

'No, that's a durian fruit; you know, the tropical fruit that smells like the bottom of a gym bag.' Katerina giggled. 'What you are looking at is my friend Heidi's most recent project. She's a budding entrepreneur but doesn't seem to be able to decide in which direction she wants her undoubtedly sparkling future to go, so she tends to flit from one ingenious idea to the next. Last week it was wine glasses decorated with glitter paint, and the week before that it was tiaras made from olive branches and brown string, and don't get me started on the combed wool tapestries she made last month. However, while she's waiting to make her first million, she's working as a waitress at *Taverna Giorgos* on the outskirts of town. I can't wait for you to meet her; you're going to love her. Okay, that's the full tour. Do you have any questions?'

Suzie hesitated. She wondered whether she should ask about the dark, moody paintings in the anteroom at the back of the store, just so she was armed with any necessary information should a potential customer enquire about them. However, Katerina had omitted to include them in her “whistle-stop tour” of the gallery, and she didn’t want to get into a conversation about what she thought of them. She knew her expression would give her away and she didn’t want to offend her new friend.

‘No, I don’t think...’

Katerina caught her eye and burst out laughing. ‘You’ve been in the back room, haven’t you?’

‘Yes, I...’

‘Don’t worry they’re not mine.’

Suzie expelled a sigh of relief.

‘I’m pleased to hear that. They are a little...’

‘Off-brand?’

‘Yes, that’s what I was going to say.’

‘They are the complete antithesis to the bright, uplifting atmosphere I strive to create at the gallery.’

‘So why are they here?’

Katerina sighed. ‘Unfortunately, they’re a non-negotiable condition in the lease I signed when I took over the shop. I tried to ask for it to be removed, explaining my vision for the gallery, but the real estate agent informed me that the artist is a relative of the person who owns the building, and they insist on the paintings being on public display, or something like

that. Anyway, Amber refused to have them on show in the window, frightening away any passing trade, so she moved them into the back room. I only hope that the artist, whoever it is, doesn't decide to pop in and visit their beloved creations, and I'm pleased to report that we've been lucky so far.'

'How long have you had the gallery?' asked Suzie, picking up the knitted durian fruit Katerina had carelessly discarded in one of the painted ceramic bowls and replacing it on the glass shelf with the rest of the fruit.

'Just over five years,' said Katerina, dropping onto the white-leather-and-chrome chair in front of the gallery's stylish glass desk. 'Feels like I've been here for ever, though.'

'Did you grow up in Santorini?'

'Oh no, no, my family are from Thessaloniki.'

'So what made you relocate to Oia?'

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Suzie knew she'd strayed into a taboo subject, and she chastised herself. What was she thinking? For a woman who valued – no, *neurotically protected* her own privacy – why had she asked someone she had only just met such a personal question? Heat flooded her cheeks.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—'

'It's fine, but do you mind if we shelve that story for another day? Suffice to say that I love it here; it's like I'm *starring* in the movie of my life, instead of being forced to take the role of "background extra". I can honestly say that my creativity has blossomed ten-fold now that I'm free to pursue my dreams in whatever way I wish, without judgement or



criticism.’ Katerina gave Suzie a meaningful look before saying, ‘And I hope you will be able to do the same.’

Katerina picked up her takeaway coffee to take a sip and wrinkled her nose in surprise when she discovered that the cup was empty.

‘Oh my God! I can’t possibly get through the morning without more coffee! I’m going to head over to the taverna. Giorgos makes *the* best coffee in the whole of Santorini. Can I get you one while I’m there?’

‘Yes, please, I’d love one. There’s only peppermint tea in Amber’s cupboards.’

‘Okay. Oh, and while I’m away could you do me a favour?’

‘Of course.’

‘Are you okay with heights?’

‘Erm, yes, I think so.’

‘Great! I get dizzy climbing the stairs! Would you mind hanging the new sign for me?’ Katerina pointed to the parcel she had brought with her. ‘Spyros came round yesterday, and he’s fixed the metal bracket I commissioned from him for above the front door, so all you need to do is attach that sign to the two hooks. There’s a stepladder over there in the storeroom. Good luck!’

Before Suzie could ask any questions, Katerina had left the gallery, her stiletto heels clickety-clacking on the cobbled street as she made her way to the taverna, leaving a waft of Chanel N°5 and an apprehensive Suzie behind her.



## Chapter Six

Suzie dragged the heavy parcel across the floor and laid it carefully on the glass desk. After trying and failing to undo the carefully tied knots, she liberated a pair of scissors from a blue ceramic jug on the windowsill and snipped the string, allowing the pieces to slither onto the floor before tearing away the brown paper and crunching it into a ball. Realising that Katerina might want to recycle the packaging, she quickly smoothed out the wrinkles, but the damage was done so she hid it in the back of one of the elegant steel filing cabinets she found hidden behind a bamboo screen.

She took a moment to appreciate the carved wooden sign that would inform future customers that they had arrived at *Katerina's Art Studio*. The rectangular-shaped plaque had been fashioned from a piece of rosewood that had been buffed until it shone, and the lettering, written in the Greek style, was bold and eye-catching. Its edges had been cut to create a rippled effect that provided an attractive border, and there were a pair of circular holes in the upper corners that had been set with two shiny brass rings.

The sign was a work of art in its own right.

After giving it a final polish with a patterned cloth she had found in the posh filing cabinet, Suzie headed to the storeroom Katerina had mentioned to find the stepladder, surprised when she saw it was larger than she had anticipated, with seven or eight treads instead of the two or three she'd been expecting. She lugged it through the gallery and out to the street, setting it

down on the uneven cobbles directly beneath the fancy metal bracket Spyros had affixed to the wall above the front door, from which the new sign would hang.

She glanced to her left, then to her right, relieved that the droves of holidaymakers she had seen milling around the maze-like streets the previous evening had decided to enjoy a late breakfast, and her only audience was a trio of cats snoozing in the early morning sunshine. However, she knew that situation wouldn't last forever and the sooner she completed the task the better if she didn't want to become an impromptu comedy act for passing tourists.

She rushed back into the shop, slotted the sign under her arm, and carried it carefully to where she'd left the ladder, pausing to prepare herself before mounting the first three rungs. The temperature was far from scorching, and yet she could already feel perspiration bubbling at her temples, but, as she didn't have a free hand to swish it away, she pressed on regardless. She climbed another two rungs, paused again, then hoisted the heavy plaque onto her shoulder.

With one last effort, she managed to lift the sign and slot the brass ring in the top left-hand corner onto the hook on the left-hand side of Spyros' bracket, which helped to take some of the weight from her already aching biceps. It had been over a year since she had seen the inside of a gym – which had been another casualty of her aversion to frequenting places where she might encounter an abundance of strangers – and her fitness levels had taken a dip because of it.

Something else to add to her to do list whilst she was in Santorini.

She slid her fingers along the bottom of the sign and took hold of the right-hand corner, ready to hoist it up so she could slot the second hook through the final ring. However, she missed the target, and only just managed to reach out and catch the sign as it swung back downwards. Unsurprisingly, her sudden lunging manoeuvre caused the ladder to wobble precariously as she fought to retain her balance and steady the swinging sign, fearing that it would plummet to the ground, with her following in its wake.

What would Amber say if, on her very first morning at the gallery, Suzie was responsible for destroying Katerina's beautifully crafted shop sign, and twisted her ankle, or worse, broke her leg, into the bargain?

With her heart crashing wildly against her ribcage, Suzie managed to resume her equilibrium and she exhaled a long sigh of relief that disaster had been averted. She quickly returned her attention to the job at hand and had just successfully slotted the ring over the right-hand hook when she heard footsteps pounding the cobbles behind her.

Against her better judgement, she twisted her body round in time to see a dark-haired man running down the street towards her at speed, his head turned over his shoulder, his arms slicing through the air as though he was being chased by a battalion of fire-breathing monsters. As he drew ever closer, she realised that he was so concerned with escaping his pursuers that he hadn't noticed she was directly in his path.

'Oh my God! Look out!'

But it was too late.

The man was already upon her, his head still craned over his shoulder as he rammed straight into the stepladder with force, causing it to rock violently from side to side before tumbling away from beneath her feet. Suzie's self-preservation instincts kicked in, and she automatically reached out to grab hold of the metal bracket above her head just as the ladder clattered to the ground, leaving her dangling in mid-air, her tee-shirt riding up her abdomen to reveal a wide expanse of naked midriff.

‘Argh!’

Before she knew what was happening, the sprinter had wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her towards him, his cheek pressed tightly against her stomach, skin on skin. Stumbling a little under her weight, he managed to steady himself before carefully lowering her feet onto the cobbles, his hands remaining on her waist for a few seconds longer than usual to make sure she didn't dissolve into a trembling wreck on the pavement.

‘What the...!’

Suzie just stopped herself from uttering an expletive as she dusted herself down, tucked her tee-shirt back into her shorts, and took a moment to examine the grazes on her palms where she'd clutched the bracket as though her life depended on it, and to confirm that the sign was still hanging safely. Satisfied the scrapes were superficial and that – apart from to her pride – she and the sign had sustained no other injuries, she raised her eyes to meet the intense chocolate-brown gaze of her “rescuer”.

To her astonishment, she experienced a sharp frisson of attraction.

There was no denying the guy was handsome, with smooth sun-kissed skin, a smattering of sexy stubble across his jawline, and a profusion of mahogany curls giving him that just-rolled-out-of-bed look. He wore a washed-out tee-shirt that once-upon-a-time could have been grey or pale blue, along with a pair of frayed denim shorts, and a pair of old canvas espadrilles that were clinging to their last moments of usefulness by a thread. He smelt divine, an unusual medley of fresh sea spray and pine trees, and despite her irritation at his lack of respect for other pavement users, she felt inexplicably drawn to him, as though they'd somehow known each other in a previous life.

Realising that she had been staring at him, she took a quick step backwards, mortified as a whoosh of heat flooded her cheeks when she opened her mouth to say something and found her words were caught in her throat.

*'Ilikriná Signómi!'*

'Oh, erm, I'm sorry, I don't speak Greek.'

'English?'

'Yes, I—'

'I'm so sorry,' said the reckless sprinter, looking anything but sorry as dimples appeared at the corners of his very sensual mouth when he stepped forward to offer her his palm. 'Christos Stephanopoulos, at your service.'

She slid her hand into his, praying that he didn't feel the same spasm of electricity she experienced when their fingers

touched. ‘Suzie Sandringham.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Suzie.’ Christos indicated the gallery. ‘Do you work here?’

‘Yes, I do. I’m helping my sister out for a few weeks while she goes travelling with her boyfriend. They arrived in Thailand this morning, then they’re planning to visit Malaysia and Singapore, before ending up in Bali to visit my mum.’

Another flush of heat suffused her cheeks in consternation at her uncharacteristic openness. What was going on? Why had she felt the need to provide that level of information without being asked, and to a complete stranger, too?

However, there was something about the man standing in front of her, something that invited intimacy and the random sharing of confidences. She knew, somewhere deep down inside, that whatever happened when she was in his company, whatever she said or did, she would be safe, protected from whatever calamity the director of fate sent her way. It was a feeling she hadn’t experienced before, not even when she’d been with Adam.

‘That sounds like an epic trip.’

‘Yes, yes, it does.’

A gaggle of female holidaymakers made their way down the street, pausing when they saw that their route was blocked by the fallen stepladder. Christos strode forward and, in one seamless manoeuvre, crouched down and whisked the ladder out of the way, gifting Suzie and the delighted tourists with a magnificent view of his well-toned buttocks before he propped



the offending ladder against the wall next to the gallery's front door.

‘*Efharistó!*’ the girls chorused.

‘*Parakaló!*’ Christos responded to their volley of cheerful thank yous, before returning his attention to Suzie. ‘I love the new sign, by the way.’

‘Thanks. Erm, are you okay?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What were you running away from?’

Christos hesitated and she saw him cast a quick glance from beneath his extremely long eyelashes towards the end of the street, which led to the villas, restaurants, and bars that overlooked the caldera. The pathway was deserted, save for the cats she'd seen earlier who'd been joined by a couple of friends – a chubby ginger cat and an equally rotund black cat with white paws – all of them busy investigating the contents of a large ceramic dish that had appeared on the step of the swimwear shop next door to the gallery. She made a note to put out her own water bowl for them, and maybe a few treats.

‘I wasn't running away from anything. I was just... just out for my regular daily jog.’

Suzie wasn't sure she believed him. After all, she'd seen the look on his face as he galloped down the alleyway towards her. However, she decided not to press him.

‘Okay, I think I'd better get back to work.’

‘Sure, and again, I'm sorry.’

‘It's fine, no harm done—’

‘And I’d like to make it up to you.’

‘Oh, no, that’s really not necessary. I—’

‘I insist. Have you seen the sunset from the bay yet?’

‘No, not yet, but I hope to—’

‘Then allow me to take you out on my boat.’

‘No, you really don’t have to do that.’

Christos grinned, a gesture that caused his cute dimples to reappear. ‘That’s settled, then. I’ll pick you up tomorrow night at six p.m. Bring your camera. *Yassou*, Suzie.’

And with a quick final glance over his shoulder, Christos continued on his “daily jog” towards the stone archway that led to the main road, his curls bouncing high in the air as he turned left and disappeared from sight. Suzie shook her head and sighed, then headed back into the gallery, desperately in need of the coffee Katerina had promised, although grateful her new friend hadn’t been around to witness the sign-hanging debacle.

She wondered what kind of boat Christos owned.

She didn’t want to be presumptuous but judging from the slightly dishevelled state of his attire, she didn’t think it would be a sleek ninety-foot yacht with smart upholstered seats and a fully stocked cocktail bar – not that that was her kind of thing. She *preferred* frayed, ruffled, tousled, and crumpled to fake finery and contrived elegance any day.

She only hoped that the vessel was seaworthy.

Maybe Katerina could lend her a life jacket.



# Chapter Seven

‘Hi, Suzie, thanks for doing the sign; it looks fantastic. What do you think of your coffee?’

Suzie took a tentative sip from the cup – emblazoned with the blue and white logo of *Taverna Giorgos* – that Katerina had handed to her and almost swooned. Rich, dark, smooth with maybe just a smidgeon more sugar than she was used to. Nevertheless, it was delicious.

‘Wow! This has to be one of the best coffees I’ve ever tasted!’

‘Told you.’ Katerina smiled, swallowing another mouthful of her own coffee as though it was the elixir of life. ‘Greek coffee is the best in the world! I wasn’t sure how sweet you liked your coffee, so I went with a *glykos* for you; neither too bitter nor too sweet, just right, eh?’

‘It’s perfect, *efharistó*.’

‘*Parakaló*. Oh, look, our first customers of the day! Why don’t you take the guy in the pink polo shirt, and I’ll take the couple with the sunburnt shoulders?’

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After that, the rest of the morning and the whole of the afternoon were filled with a continual stream of people, some spending a few minutes having a mooch around, others staying

longer, discussing inspiration and technique with Katerina, and asking for her advice on how to best display her larger pieces when they got them home.

Several smaller items were purchased by customers who had arrived that morning on one of the many cruise ships that visited the island, and Suzie took her time wrapping each one in tissue paper, then encircling it with corrugated cardboard before she slotted the ceramic bowl, jug, vase, or dish into one of the gallery's signature "Santorini blue" boxes and tied it securely with a white ribbon.

Suzie was both relieved and delighted to see that Katerina had no qualms about allowing her to handle a steady stream of potential purchasers, as well as leaving her to hold the fort whilst she slipped out, once again, to make yet another coffee run – her fourth of the day! It seemed Katerina was very much attached to her caffeine fix; either that or there was something – or more likely, *someone* – at the taverna who had piqued her interest. She'd talked about Giorgos a couple of times... Perhaps it was him?

She had decided not to mention her encounter with Christos that morning – especially his invitation to join him on board his boat for a trip around the caldera – for fear of inviting a discussion about relationships, either past, present, *or* future. She suspected Christos wouldn't show up the following day anyway, and she didn't think she could cope with the embarrassment.

By the time seven o'clock arrived, her feet were aching, and she was grateful that Beckie had insisted on lending her her well-worn-in deck shoes. She had no idea how Katerina

managed to spend the whole day trotting around the gallery in her skyscraper stilettos, not to mention making her frequent trips along the uneven cobbled alleyways to fetch their coffees. If Suzie had been responsible for that assignment wearing a pair of five-inch heels, she would almost certainly have sustained a sprained ankle by now.

‘What a day!’ Katerina exclaimed as she turned the sign on the door. ‘Thank you for your help, Suzie. I think we sold more stock today than we did during the whole of last week. You must have brought a sprinkle of magic sales dust with you from Devon.’

‘Oh, I don’t think I—’

‘Hey, credit where credit’s due! Okay, are you hungry?’

Suzie nodded. ‘Starving!’

‘Shall we head to the taverna? I can’t wait to introduce you to Giorgos and Heidi.’

While Suzie ran her fingers through her short hair and straightened her tee-shirt, Katerina reapplied her makeup, twisted a curling iron through her glossy waves, and added a generous spritz of perfume, reaffirming Suzie’s earlier suspicion that there was someone at the taverna who’d caught Katerina’s eye.

‘Ready?’

‘Ready.’

Suzie smiled, trying to ignore the twist of anxiety that had started to meander through her chest at the prospect of eating out at a restaurant, filled with strangers, for the first time in over a year.

‘Then let’s go!’

Katerina hooked the gold chain of her handbag over her shoulder, scooped her freshly curled hair away from her face with her designer sunglasses and secured them on the top of her head, and they headed out of the door. When they emerged from the shady side street where *Katerina’s Art Studio* was located, Suzie was shocked at how congested the road was – it was more like rush-hour in Central London than a small town in the north of Santorini. Cars, scooters, buses, Jeeps, even bicycles, were all heading in the same direction, all jostling for supremacy, all making full use of their horns.

Thankfully, before she expired from carbon monoxide poisoning, Katerina indicated a turning to their right and moments later they had left the chaos behind, strolling along a wide dusty footpath bordered by fields of olive trees, their journey serenaded by the rhythmic sound of the cicadas. It wasn’t long before they arrived at a picturesque taverna, its entrance partially concealed behind a magnificent ruffle of pink bougainvillea.

If Suzie had been asked what she thought an authentic Greek taverna looked like, then *Taverna Giorgos* would be it. With its wide wraparound veranda housing a collection of mismatched tables and chairs, sheltered from the now-descending sun by a wooden pergola entwined with foliage and fairy lights, the place was a travel photographer’s dream, although they wouldn’t be able to capture the delicious, yet unusual, aroma that was emanating from inside the kitchen.

Situated slightly off the beaten track, and therefore not blessed with a view of the west-facing caldera, the taverna’s

patrons were clearly there to escape what Katerina had described as the “rugby scrum” that took place every night on the other side of Oia. The low hum of contented conversation melded with the soft tinkle of bouzouki music, adding an almost serene touch to the tableau, and Suzie started to relax until she realised that every table was occupied, and her anxiety threatened to make an unwelcome appearance.

‘Erm, I think we might be out of luck, maybe we should—’

‘Oh, don’t worry, Giorgos will have saved my usual spot.’

To her immense relief, Katerina pointed to a table at the far side of the veranda, tucked away behind a pair of enormous Greek urns painted in the taverna’s colour scheme of blue and white stripes, and they headed across the room, pausing occasionally for Katerina to accept cheek kisses from friends and to introduce them to Suzie.

No sooner had they taken their seat than a tall, distinguished-looking man, probably in his mid- to late-fifties, with a mane of thick salt-and-pepper hair, an impressive moustache, and a wide jovial smile approached their table, proffering a couple of leather-bound menus. He wore a long-sleeved white shirt cracked open at the collar to reveal a glimpse of chest hair, a pair of beautifully pressed black trousers, and a waistcoat sporting the taverna’s blue and white striped design, its lapel displaying a gold name badge that ensured everyone knew that he was the owner of this little slice of paradise.

‘*Kalispera*, Katerina.’

Giorgos’ soft brown eyes crinkled at the corners as he greeted Katerina warmly, then followed up with a volley of



high-speed Greek that Suzie had no chance of understanding – apart from the mention of Amber’s name and her own – before he turned towards Suzie and offered her his palm.

‘Welcome to *Taverna Giorgos*, Suzie,’ said Giorgos in a deep, gravelly voice with only the slightest hint of an accent. ‘It’s a pleasure to meet you. I trust Amber has arrived safely in Thailand?’

‘Yes, I spoke to her this morning and she’s having the time of her life.’

‘I’m pleased to hear it. Okay, I’ll leave you to study the menu. Sit back, relax, and enjoy some of the finest food, and the most exquisite wines, that you’ll taste while you’re on Santorini. *Kali órexi!*’

‘*Efharistó*, Giorgos.’

‘*Parakaló.*’

Suzie paused before opening the menu. Since moving to Blossomwood Bay, food had been low on her list of priorities and she had tended to eat simple meals that required minimal preparation and cooking time; living in a tepee wasn’t conducive to experimenting with complicated recipes, or hosting elaborate dinner parties, either. Also, she rarely drank alcohol, except on those occasions – before the boardwalk fire – when Chloe had needed her to taste-test one of her experimental gins.

She glanced around the veranda at her fellow diners, hoping to find inspiration by sneaking a peek at what they were eating. To her right was a couple enjoying a romantic candlelit dinner *à deux*, their Greek salads, topped with chunks of

creamy white feta, ignored in favour of staring into each other's eyes. To her left was a multi-generational family of grandparents, parents, and two well-behaved toddlers sharing three huge pizzas sporting a variety of toppings, and next to them were several groups of holidaymakers chatting animatedly in various languages whilst indulging in a slice of moussaka or spanakopita. There was even a solo diner with a shock of sandy-blond hair, enjoying a post-dinner Metaxa brandy and a selection of honey-soaked pastries while he scribbled in his journal.

‘What do you fancy?’ asked Katerina, placing her phone on the table next to her.

‘I’m not sure,’ said Suzie, flicking through the pages of the menu. ‘What do you recommend?’

‘Why don’t we leave it up to Stefanos?’

‘Who’s Stefanos?’

‘The chef!’ Katerina laughed, her cheeks colouring slightly.

Suzie smiled as Katerina placed their order with Giorgos. Now she knew why Katerina made so many forays to the taverna! Having consumed nothing but coffee – lots and lots of coffee – she couldn’t wait to enjoy one of Stefanos’ traditional Greek salads with a drizzle of the local extra-virgin olive oil, followed by a generous portion of the moussaka that had vanished from the plates of the Dutch diners at the table to her left, before rounding her meal off with a slice of Amber’s favourite dessert – honey-soaked baklava.

However, when their first course arrived, she was surprised to discover that whilst she had been served with a salad topped

with a generous slab of crumbly, creamy feta, the dressing was not what she had expected. It had a vibrant, spicy taste of tahini and turmeric with an added touch of honey and a squeeze of lemon juice that made her tastebuds zing.

‘Mmm, this salad is delicious.’

Katerina grinned. ‘Wait until you taste your main course.’

A few minutes later Suzie was savouring the most flavoursome moussaka she’d ever tasted. Like her salad, the dish was a twist on the traditional recipe with the aubergines layered between a rich creamy sauce and topped with a sprinkling of cheese before being baked in the oven. It was a symphony on her tongue and she tucked in, relishing the perfect combination of coconut, lemongrass, and fresh coriander, the flavours deepening with every mouthful until she had consumed every last morsel.

‘Enjoy that?’

‘It was fabulous, but... well, it wasn’t what I was expecting.’

‘Stefanos trained in Paris before spending a year at a five-star hotel in Singapore where he started to experiment with a fusion of Greek and Southeast Asian spices. Wait until you try his desserts – his baklava made with *gula melaka* instead of honey is to die for. What he creates is paradise on the lips, but...’

‘But what?’

‘Well, it’s not exactly what the typical visitor to Santorini wants.’ Katerina nodded towards the group of men drinking bottles of Mythos at a table overlooking the adjacent lemon

grove who were in the process of demolishing a large platter of souvlaki and French fries with gusto. ‘Unfortunately, the dishes he creates so lovingly are rarely ordered, and when they are, it’s not unusual for diners to return them because they’re not “Greek enough”. That’s why I – and Stefanos’ other friends – always make a point of asking for one of his fusion recipes when we have dinner here. Can you imagine how it must feel for a chef who has been classically trained to have to make the same recipes every single day, with no variation, no opportunity to make something as unique as this? What Stefanos creates is still Greek food, but with an added twist.’

‘They don’t know what they’re missing.’

‘I agree, and so does Giorgos, but he has to balance the books and Stefanos has to earn a living, so his days are filled with preparing a constant fayre of Greek salads, moussaka, souvlaki, and *soutzoukakia*, and an endless supply of fries. Don’t get me wrong, all the ingredients are fresh and locally sourced, and his tzatziki is made using a secret recipe handed down to him by his grandmother, but as an accomplished chef, he’s worried that unless he’s continually expanding his repertoire, his culinary creativity will become stale, or worse, lost.’

When she’d scraped the last speck of Stefanos’ dark chocolate mousse – flavoured with a dash of Cognac – from her plate, Suzie sat back in her chair and sipped the wine that Katerina had told her had been made from grapes grown on Santorini. Like the food, it, too, was delicious; smooth, fruity, with just a top-note tobacco, and after a second glass, the nugget of anxiety she had played host to for far too long began to dissolve a little. An unfamiliar feeling of mellowness

infiltrated her veins, and she realised that *Taverna Giorgos* was not simply a Greek restaurant, but a truly special place.

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By the time eleven o'clock came around, the restaurant had started to empty. Giorgos began to clear the tables, ably assisted by a petite waitress with long blonde hair tied into a high ponytail with a blue and white silk scarf – a nod to the taverna's theme. Her eye makeup was spectacular; a wave of emerald-green glitter, which enhanced the colour of her eyes beautifully, spread from her lash-line to her brow-line in the shape of an angel's wing, outlined with a rim of gold. She wore the same *Taverna Giorgos* apron as the rest of the restaurant's staff, except hers had been embellished with golden suns made with sequins, and her earlobes sported a pair of knitted earrings that were green and spherical, with tiny triangles of green felt glued onto them. Suzie knew straightaway that this must be Katerina's friend Heidi, the creator of the gallery's hand-made menagerie and greengrocers.

'Heidi, come and meet Suzie.'

'Hey, Suzie, great to meet you,' said Heidi, dropping into the chair next to Katerina, her lilting Welsh accent falling softly on Suzie's ears. 'Are you here on holiday?'

'No, I'm helping Kat out at the gallery for a couple of weeks.'

'Suzie's Amber's sister,' Katerina reminded her.

‘Ah, yes, of course, sorry. Amber did tell me you were coming over from the UK. It’s really kind of you to drop everything so she can go travelling with Tom. Oh, how I’d love to go on a backpacking adventure through Thailand – a trip to Koh Chang is definitely on my bucket list. Malaysia is, too, *and* Bali. I really do need to start ticking off those countries or I’ll run out of time.’

‘You’re twenty-five!’ Katerina laughed, rolling her eyes at her friend. ‘And at last count you’ve been to thirty-one countries already.’

‘Thirty-two if you count Vatican City.’

‘Which is thirty countries more than me,’ said Katerina.

‘Wow, that’s a lot of travelling,’ said Suzie.

‘Yeah, most of it I didn’t get a say in, though. Hey, guess what?’

Katerina grinned, her dark brown eyes filled with affection. ‘What?’

‘I’ve had an idea for a new business venture.’

‘You have?’ Katerina cast a glance at Suzie that said, “Told you”.

‘I’m thinking of creating my own brand of perfume, using only natural, organic ingredients. What do you think?’

Heidi thrust her wrist under Katerina’s nose, then under Suzie’s, her green eyes filled with excitement and hope as she waited for their verdict. Suzie inhaled a breath and struggled to prevent herself from swiftly recoiling in disgust as the aroma

of burnt car tyres mingled with soapy washing-up liquid assaulted her nostrils.

Fortunately, Katerina was well-practiced in dealing with Heidi's myriad business ideas, and instead of providing honest feedback – and thereby crushing her “perfume empire” idea before it had even got off the ground – she diverted her friend's attention elsewhere.

‘Does that mean you've decided not to go into the literary cocktail-making business?’

‘No, no, I'm still doing that. Did you tell Suzie about tomorrow night?’

‘Not yet, I—’

‘Oh, Suzie, you have you come! Our friend Miranda – who's taken over the running of her cousin's bookshop here in Oia for the summer – is going to be my very first client! While Denise is away attending her best friend's fifth wedding in Cornwall, Miranda has decided that the bookshop should hold its first Book Club night, *and* she's asked me to create a bunch of cocktails that complement the books they've chosen to talk about.’

‘Sounds like fun.’

‘Oh, it will be lots of fun, I can promise you that. We're doing a dry-run – or perhaps I should call it a “tasting” session – tomorrow night before the actual launch on Friday, just to make sure everything's perfect. I don't want to poison anyone! My *absolute* favourite creation is my chocolate Martini, made with Irish cream liqueur, chocolate syrup and vodka, served in a chocolate-coated glass and decorated with a generous

sprinkle of cocoa, which I've paired with Miranda's favourite book, *Chocolat*. Please say you'll come!

'I'd love to...' Suzie began, then stopped. 'Ah, no, I'm sorry, I don't think I can.'

'Oh?' said Katerina, her curiosity piqued. 'Why not?'

'I've... I've booked a boat trip to see the sunset.'

'Already? You only arrived yesterday,' said Katerina, her eyes filled with suspicion.

'Yes, and I'm really looking forward to it.'

'Never mind, you can come to the *actual* book club instead. Just let me know what your favourite book is, and I'll make a special cocktail for you, too. Oh, and make sure you don't book any trips for Sunday night.'

'What's happening on Sunday night?'

'I need you and Kat to help me with another project I've been working on.'

'What kind of project?' asked Katerina, with a small sigh.

'It's a secret; all will be revealed on Sunday.'

When Heidi reached up to select a strand of hair and twist it around her finger, Suzie's eyes snagged on a colourful butterfly tattoo etched on the inside of her left wrist. She couldn't help but smile; it was the perfect adornment for a woman who seemed to flit from one thing to the next, not wanting to settle on one particular idea for fear of missing out on the next big opportunity that might be just around the corner.



‘No problem. I’m happy to help,’ said Suzie, before she’d noticed the covert headshake from Katerina.

‘Great. Hey, Kat, did you see *HolsHacker*’s most recent Vlog?’

‘No, I didn’t. Where is he this time?’

Heidi whipped her phone from the back pocket of her white denim shorts and scrolled through a couple of posts until she found the one she was looking for.

‘He’s in Kefalonia.’

‘Oh my God, he’s in Greece?!’ Katerina exclaimed, leaning closer to Heidi so she could get a better look at the screen. ‘I hope he doesn’t come to Santorini.’

‘Who’s *HolsHacker*?’ asked Suzie.

‘He’s an undercover travel vlogger who started out doing short videos about holiday hacks, you know, like how to pack light, where to hide your valuables, how to bag an upgrade, how to deal with jetlag, how to use nachos to start a campfire, that sort of thing. Then one of his more comical hacks went viral and his vlog suddenly got lots of extra traffic, so he started to make longer videos from a bunch of tourist hotspots around Europe, reporting on the crazy things that only happen on holiday.’

‘What like?’

Heidi giggled. ‘Well, for instance, last week he was in a resort town in Bulgaria where he decided to rent a boat and sail it round to the next cove where the swimming was supposed to be amazing. He was in the middle of doing a live stream when some totally random guy crawled out from under

a tarpaulin at the back of the boat! Oh my God, you should have seen the look on his face; apparently, he'd been sleeping off a hangover and the rumble of the boat's engine had woken him up! Hilarious!

‘So who *is HolsHacker*?’

‘No one knows; like I said, he's an “*undercover*” travel vlogger!’ Heidi laughed.

Suzie turned to Katerina. ‘Why don't you want him to come to Santorini?’

‘Because not all his vlogs are funny; some of them, the more recent ones, have focused on minor things that would usually be overlooked or quickly rectified, like diners being served with the wrong order – in one, a horrified toddler was served with a plate of snails. You should have seen the look on the mother's face—’

‘And remember that one where a nervous waiter dropped a whole dish of spaghetti carbonara into the lap of a local mayor who was up for re-election the following week,’ added Heidi, grinning. ‘I've never seen someone react so quickly, or so angrily! It was hilarious.’

‘It's not hilarious when people's livelihoods are at stake!’ growled Giorgos as he passed their table carrying a stack of crockery with a wine bottle balanced precariously on the top. ‘If I get my hands on that guy, I'll have a few choice things to say to him! Restaurant staff are human; they make mistakes like everyone else and splashing their errors all over the internet can destroy a successful business overnight! It's cruel and irresponsible, and for what?’

Giorgos continued his journey to the kitchen still muttering under his breath.

‘I’d better go,’ said Heidi, jumping up from her chair. ‘I promised to help Stefanos with the washing up in return for giving me a lift over to Fira to collect a box of aloe vera and few natural oils that I ordered yesterday.’

‘I thought you were making perfume?’

‘Oh, no, this is for my new skincare range.’

And with that, Heidi skipped off to the kitchen, her ponytail swinging like a clock’s pendulum, leaving behind a waft of lavender oil, mixed with a strange scent reminiscent of marker pens, behind her.

‘Wow, Heidi has a lot going on, doesn’t she?’

‘Yes.’ Katerina laughed. ‘And she was only supposed to stay here in Santorini for a month, much to her parents’ annoyance.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Both her mother and father work for the UK diplomatic service, and they had hoped Heidi would follow in their footsteps. She’s lived all over the world, in stable and not-so-stable countries, speaks five languages, including Mandarin, and would be a real asset to any government department, but she’s just not interested.’

Suzie nodded. ‘She’d get on well with my friend, Freya. Her parents moved around a lot when she was young, too. They’re medics with Médecins Sans Frontières, and she’s currently running an aromatherapy studio in a château in Provence.’

‘What about you? Did you ever want to follow in your mum’s footsteps?’

Suzie’s heart gave a nip of surprise at the switch in the focus of conversation. However, when it came to personal questions, it was only more recent events that she avoided talking about. Unlike Heidi and Freya, she had spent the majority of her childhood in the same small village in Norfolk, attending the local village school, and then high school, with the same group of friends. When her father had passed away, they had rallied round and offered their support, keeping her from spiralling into an abyss of misery, for which you would be forever grateful. It was only when she had moved to London that her life had unravelled.

‘Actually, I would have loved to teach – it’s still a dream of mine – but life has a way of... presenting diversions.’

Katerina seemed to realise that she had strayed into difficult territory, so she changed the subject. ‘You know, Heidi’s literary cocktail-tasting night will be lots of fun, and it’ll be a great way to get to know Miranda before the book club on Friday. She’s lovely, and I think you’ll—’

‘Oh, no, no, it’s not that, it’s just...’ Suzie sighed, and against her better judgement she told Katerina about that morning’s incident with Christos in the street outside the gallery.

‘Ah, so you’re going on a *date*.’

‘No, it’s not a date...’

‘Sounds like a date to me.’

‘Anyway, he probably won’t turn up.’

‘Why do you say that?’ asked Katerina, her eyes filled with confusion.

As Suzie didn’t have an immediate answer to that question without making herself sound like a confirmed pessimist, she was happy to see that Giorgos was approaching their table brandishing a bottle of spirits in each hand.

‘Would you like a nightcap? Metaxa? Ouzo?’

Suzie tried not to grimace. She’d had ouzo before and thought it tasted like liquorice mouthwash, so she was more than grateful when Katerina – who was clutching the cup of takeaway coffee that Heidi had brought to the table – shook her head and said it was time for them to head home.



# Chapter Eight

The next morning Suzie woke early, flung back the shutters, and stepped out onto the balcony, breathing in the cool, fresh air. She couldn't believe her good fortune. Even though it was barely seven o'clock, the sun was shining, the sky was a perfect cerulean blue, and the birds were well into the second verse of their uplifting daily melody. But what had really elevated her mood was that for the first time in over a year her dreams had been trauma-free, filled instead with a tickertape of joyous images from her night out at *Taverna Giorgos*.

With a smile on her face, she jumped in the shower and spent an extra couple of minutes styling her hair – an almost unheard of event. She paired her smart navy-blue shorts with a fresh tee-shirt that Opal had made for her using organic cotton that she'd hand-dyed in a rich saffron colour and finished with a spritz of her favourite perfume.

She filled the kettle to make herself a cup of peppermint tea, and while she waited for the water to boil, she realised that the only thing that would make her stay in Amber's cute little studio perfect was if Archie was by her side, his short tail wagging with contentment as he devoured his breakfast. She missed him dreadfully, so, after splashing hot water onto her teabag, she grabbed her phone and selected Holly's number, a smile stretching her lips when she heard her friend's cheerful greeting.

'Hi, Suzie, how's Santorini?'

‘It’s absolutely gorgeous, and the people here are so friendly.’

‘Anyone special?’

Suzie rolled her eyes. ‘No, I—’

‘Don’t worry, it’s early days. You’ve got plenty of time to bump into a tall, dark, *sexy* Greek guy with rippling abs and a great line in swoon worthy banter. Doesn’t matter if you don’t speak the language, you can just let your bodies do the talking and—’

‘Okay, okay, Holls, I get the message!’ Suzie laughed. ‘And I wasn’t ringing for a pep talk on the benefits of having a holiday romance, but to find out how Archie is.’

‘Oh, he’s in his element! He adores being with Ariel and Max. Oscar calls them the Terrible Trio because they’re always up to some kind of mischief, sniffing out all the new nooks and crannies in the pub and the beer garden. And of course they all love a walk along the beach down in Blossomwood Bay, or a meander through the woodland around the manor house, although we’ve stayed well clear of the gardens. Thankfully, it looks like someone is still taking care of the lawns and flowerbeds, at least.’

Suzie couldn’t help feeling a little upset that Archie didn’t seem to be missing her as much as she was missing him, but she was also relieved that he was thriving in Holly’s capable care, which was the most important thing. Even though her luxury canine hotel wasn’t yet opened to the public, it was clear that Holly was relishing the role of Doggie Doyenne to her three devoted charges. Suzie’s heart ballooned with joy that after such a heart-breaking few months, her friend not



only had a new venture planned, but had found someone as wonderful as Oscar to share it with.

‘I don’t suppose there’s been any news from Andrew yet?’

‘No news, but I saw a photograph of him standing next to a bright red Porsche, wearing a very expensive three-piece suit, hand-stitched Italian loafers, and a gold Rolex on one of the music websites I occasionally check for information. Would you believe that he told the journalist that he was “about to head off for a couple of days in the Californian wilderness to recharge his depleted batteries”? Apparently being the business manager of a superstar musician is exhausting and he needed a break. I don’t think he realises that hiking the Pacific Crest Trail isn’t the same as taking a Sunday morning stroll around Regent’s Park. Dressed like that, I give him twenty-four hours – forty-eight at the most.’

‘Well, at least he’s made a start at last.’

‘True. Let’s just hope he isn’t eaten by a hungry bear.’

‘Oh, God, don’t say that!’

After thanking Holly again for looking after Archie so well, Suzie slipped her feet into Beckie’s well-worn deck shoes and skipped down the stairs to the gallery, coming to an abrupt halt when she saw the jumble of discarded stationery that seemed to have mushroomed overnight.

She recalled the extreme orderliness she had found the previous day and grimaced, a wave of guilt rolling through her chest. She and Katerina had been so busy serving the constant influx of customers that their tidying tasks had fallen by the wayside. Everywhere she looked there was disarray;

corrugated cardboard and sheets of tissue paper littered the floor, with the gallery's signature blue boxes and reels of white ribbon strewn across the glass desk and the chrome-and-leather chair.

Pens, pencils, scissors, and tape were scattered on every available surface, but worst of all, the stock looked like a gang of marauding wildebeests had enjoyed a party in the shop overnight. The paintings were wonky, the ceramics askew, and Heidi's knitted menagerie was piled in a heap in a wide sunflower-yellow dish. The only part of the gallery to have escaped the maelstrom of mess was the room at the back where the gloomy artwork was housed.

Suzie sighed. Clearly, it had been Amber's influence that kept the gallery from becoming a complete disaster zone, which meant that it was Suzie's job to step up to the plate and maintain her sister's penchant for ensuring that everything was not only neatly displayed and dust-free, but also aesthetically pleasing.

After all, this was an *art* gallery!

She spent a few minutes gathering the discarded packing materials and returning them to their rightful places in an elegant cupboard hidden behind a bamboo screen, and then scooping together the hotchpotch of stationery – invoices, receipts, order forms and payment slips – that had been left in the most random of places.

Why was the receipt book stuffed into a glazed Greek urn?

She was about to give herself a congratulatory pat on the back when her gaze fell on one of Amber's beloved plants, and she experienced another spasm of guilt; it had already started

to wilt. Was she expected to water them every day? She was about to rush up the stairs to her studio to fetch a jug of water when the door burst open, and Katerina walked in clutching two coffees with the *Taverna Giorgos* logo printed on the side.

‘*Kalimera*, Suzie! Did you sleep well?’

‘I did.’ Suzie smiled. ‘I really did!’

‘Great. Here’s your coffee. I thought you might like to mix it up a little, so I got you a *metrios*. It has less sugar than the *glykos* I got for you yesterday, but I think it’s the perfect way to kick-start the day. What do you think?’

Suzie took a tentative sip. ‘Mmm, delicious. *Efharistó*.’

‘*Parakaló*.’

Katerina plonked herself onto the white leather desk chair and dropped her over-sized handbag onto the now clutter-free desk. Today she wore a figure-hugging cream shift dress, its neck and hemline edged in navy-blue ribbon, along with a pair of her favourite sky-high stilettos. Her makeup was pristine, her dark hair bouncy, and her perfume was light, fresh, and floral. Suzie knew that even if she spent the whole morning in front of the mirror in Amber’s tiny bathroom, she would never be able to match the polished elegance Katerina seemed to achieve so effortlessly.

‘Ready for another day at the cutting edge of modern art?’

‘Absolutely!’

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Once again, the day flew by with a steady stream of customers interested in finding out about the processes Katerina used to create her coloured glasswork. Suzie was delighted to sell a tall hand-blown vase that she had secretly coveted for herself, although she was less delighted when a toddler picked up one of Heidi's knitted courgettes that had become entangled with a pair of cherries and insisted that her rather pink-faced parents purchase them immediately.

She was also now an expert in packing the framed paintings and more fragile items that Katerina produced, even going as far as to curl the ends of the white ribbons when the client told her that the item was a gift for someone special "back home". However, by the time five o'clock rolled around and Suzie was able to take a break from her wrapping duties, she couldn't help cringing when she saw that the room was even more cluttered than when she'd first stepped into it that morning.

'I'll just make a start on tidying up the—'

'No, no, it's fine, leave it. I'll do it. You have your date to get ready for.'

Suzie's stomach lurched. They had been so busy she'd completely forgotten about Christos' promise to show her the sunset over the caldera. She met Katerina's gaze and couldn't fail to see the sparkle of mischief in her eyes, not to mention the suggestive wriggling of her perfectly sculpted eyebrows.

'It's not a date!'

'Okay, okay, let's go with "romantic boat trip" then. Remind me of your admirer's name again? Maybe I know him.'

Suzie gulped; she hoped not.

‘His name’s Christos.’

‘Hmm, I know a couple of guys called Christos,’ mused Katerina, tapping her lower lip with her manicured fingernail. ‘One of them owns a vineyard on the other side of the island, but he’s happily married with three gorgeous children, so it can’t be him, and the other is Christos Manikas, who works at an accountancy practice in Fira. He’s one of Giorgos’ best friends; Heidi and I were invited to his sixtieth birthday party a couple of months ago. Is it him?’

‘No!’ Suzie laughed, trying not to be too offended by Katerina’s assumption that her “date” was with someone over thirty years her senior. She dropped into the chair on the other side of the desk from her new friend and took a sip of the home-made lemonade she’d asked Katerina to bring back the last time she’d made her coffee excursion to the taverna. She’d needed the change as her heightened caffeine levels were making her jittery.

‘Are you sure?’

‘The Christos I met yesterday is the same age as we are.’

‘Maybe he’s a new arrival,’ said Katerina as she toyed distractedly with her empty coffee cup. ‘Yet another escapee from the unreasonable, and frankly deplorable, expectations of his Greek family.’

‘What do you mean?’

Suzie saw Katerina flash her a quick glance from beneath her long dark eyelashes, her forehead creasing as she considered whether to confide in her, and she wished she’d

engaged her brain before blurting out her last question. As someone who consistently avoided talking about her own past, she had an inexplicable habit of delving headfirst into other people's.

‘Sorry, I shouldn’t have—’

‘No, no, it’s fine, it’s not a secret I keep from my friends. I’m... well, I’m an escapee, too. In fact, my parents don’t even know I’m in Santorini.’

‘They don’t? Why not?’

‘Because I haven’t yet forgiven them for what they did. Don’t get me wrong, I’m working on it, but it’s going to take some time before I make that call.’

‘What happened?’

Katerina expelled a long, slow breath, and her eyes filled with a sadness that tore at Suzie’s heart as she waited for her to elucidate. When she finally spoke, her voice was strained, and it was clear she was still struggling to talk about what her parents had done.

‘It’s a long story so I’ll just give you the shortened version. Leonides and I grew up in the same village just outside Thessaloniki. Our families were the best of friends, and we did everything as one big, happy, chaotic group; trips to the beach, hikes in the mountains, monthly excursions to the city, and huge parties at Christmas and Easter, and for everyone’s name day – and there were a lot of those!

‘Almost from the day we were born, Leo and I were inseparable. We went through school together, we both got summer jobs at the local taverna, and we were there for each

other throughout our teenage years when we would rage against the restrictions our parents insisted on putting on our lives in the name of achieving academic success. Little did we know that our parents also had our *futures* mapped out for us, too. Apparently, our Big Fat Greek Wedding had been planned down to the last detail, as well as where we were going to live and how many children we were going to have. But Leo was my *best* friend, not my *boyfriend!*'

Katerina paused to swallow down on her rising emotions.

'The saddest part of it, though, was that Leo wasn't upset about what they'd done; it turned out that he wanted that, too. It was the hardest conversation I've ever had in my whole life when I sat down and told Leo how I felt; that I loved him, but not in a romantic, heart-fluttering, all-consuming kind of way. He was devastated, but to give him his credit, he thanked me for my honesty and said he accepted and respected my decision, unlike my parents. They refused to take no for an answer and as the weeks and months went by, the pressure to change my mind became unbearable, as was the truckload of guilt they piled on me by telling me how embarrassed they were at my cruel rejection of their best friend's son.'

Suzie reached out to give Katerina's hand a gentle squeeze. She was shocked to find that her friend was trembling, her face paler than she had ever seen it, and that tears had gathered along her lower lashes.

'It was terrible, just terrible. I cried myself to sleep every night for six months, but I refused to change my mind. That's why I decided to apply for a post-graduate place at Brighton University for a year. I stupidly thought that when I came back

home, things would have moved on – that our families would have seen how their actions were manipulative and demeaning, or that Leo would have found someone else to love – but I was wrong. I tried again, calmly and without raising my voice, to explain to my parents how I felt, and that spending the rest of my life with someone I didn't love was a recipe for unhappiness, for me *and* for Leo. But do you know what they said?'

Suzie shook her head.

'That happiness was over-rated. I couldn't believe it!'

Silence filled the thankfully empty gallery while Katerina made a concerted effort to calm her breathing so that she could continue her heart-breaking story. Suzie didn't know what to say about what Katerina's parents had said to her because it was the complete opposite to what her mum had constantly espoused to both her and Amber after their father had passed away.

Not content with simply *telling* her daughters that their happiness was of paramount importance, she had led by example, resigning from her job as a primary school teacher and heading to Indonesia to take up a post as an English teacher. Living in Bali was something her parents had talked about doing for years after honeymooning there, but, like most people with similar dreams, they hadn't taken the plunge, until, in the most painful way possible, her mother had been reminded that life was short and the time to follow her dreams was not next week, or next month, or next year, but now; right now.

'I'm so sorry, Kat.'



‘The irony was that I missed Leo dreadfully. I’d lost my best friend at a time when I needed him the most, but that was the price I had to pay for doing what I knew was right for both of us. Marriage simply wasn’t an option. Arguments and confrontations became an almost daily occurrence, and to make things worse Leo’s brother got engaged to one of my cousins and a family wedding was looming on the horizon, so I packed my bags – again – and headed here. I needed time and space to make a new start, so I didn’t tell anyone where I was going – although I sent regular emails to my mum to let her know I was okay – and as the weeks turned into months, I realised I’d found my forever home. Santorini is a place where people can escape the shackles of the past and forge a new, happier, more fulfilling and joyous future.’

Suzie opened her mouth to speak but found that her words had caught in her throat. She understood exactly what Katerina meant about escaping the past because she had been trying to do the same – although for completely different reasons – for the last year, and she suspected it would take her just as long to come to terms with what had happened.

But even though her new friend had laid bare her soul, she wasn’t ready to do the same, and to her relief, Katerina didn’t expect her to.

‘Okay, that’s enough of my crazy life story for one day. Don’t you have a rendezvous to get to?’

Suzie smiled. ‘I do.’

‘Have fun, and I want to hear *aaaaall* the juicy details tomorrow!’



## Chapter Nine

After a quick re-energizing shower, Suzie grabbed a fresh tee-shirt, this one a soft pink colour to match the streaks in her blonde hair, and stepped back into the navy-blue shorts and deck shoes she wore for the gallery, which she hoped would be the correct attire for a boat trip. She slotted her phone into the cute triangle-shaped handbag Amber had given her for Christmas the previous year – which she hadn't yet had the opportunity to use – and hooked the narrow strap over her shoulder.

Since arriving in Devon, the only social engagement she had been comfortable attending was the occasional coffee at Beckie's Boathouse Bistro with Holly, Rachel, or Chloe, and even then, she usually went first thing in the morning or just before the doors closed at the end of the day, when she knew it would be quieter. She experienced another tingle of nervousness about meeting Christos, but as she had no way of contacting him, unless she was prepared to stand him up, she had no choice but to step out from the shadows she'd made a habit of sculking in and try to enjoy a splash of Greek sunshine on her face.

At exactly six o'clock, she headed down the studio's whitewashed steps to wait for Christos in the same spot they'd "bumped into each other" the previous day, but when she got there, she found herself in the middle of a constant stream of people, all of them heading in the direction of Oia's cliff-top bars. Fearing she would get swept along with them, she

huddled into the gallery's doorway, standing on her tiptoes to scour the crowd for any sign of Christos before checking her watch.

Six-twenty.

He wasn't coming, and far from being upset about that, she experienced a whoosh of relief. She was about to spin on her flat heels and returned to the sanctuary of Amber's apartment when Christos appeared in front of her, his dark eyes sparkling, wearing the same frayed denim shorts and scruffy espadrilles as the previous day, but with a fresh white tee-shirt that clung to every contour of his muscular torso. A waft of his cologne reached Suzie's nostrils and she struggled to stop herself from closing her eyes to inhale the fragrance that caused a ripple of attraction to zip through her veins.

'*Yassou*, Suzie. Ready for *the* best sunset cruise in the whole of Santorini?'

Suzie smiled. 'Of course.'

'Great.'

To her surprise, Christos reached out to take her hand and steered her against the flow of sunset-seekers, through the stone arch at the end of the street, and along the same dusty pathway she and Katerina had taken the previous evening on their way to *Taverna Giorgos*. This time, however, she was able to fully appreciate its enviable setting in the daylight and it was even more beautiful than she remembered, with its wraparound veranda sheltered from the sun's rays by a wrought-iron pergola decorated with a resplendent grapevine, heavy with clusters of dark red fruit.

‘Are we stopping for a drink first?’ asked Suzie.

‘No, we need to... argh!’

To her astonishment, Christos dropped her hand like a hot stone and shot to his right, away from the tumble-down wall that bordered their path. Suzie stared at him, then looked over her shoulder into the olive grove beyond the wall, fearing a stampede of raging bulls, or a swarm of dragonflies heading in their direction. But all she could see were a couple of goats munching languidly on a patch of dry grass.

‘What’s wrong? What happened?’

‘Nothing, nothing, I just tripped on a protruding stone. Sorry I startled you.’ Christos grinned, his lips bracketed by the cute dimples that made Suzie smile, too. ‘Okay, let’s go or we’ll miss the sunset.’

This time when Christos took her hand, she felt as though it was the most natural thing in the world, and she was even more grateful for his friendly gesture when they turned right at the crumbling ruins of Oia Castle and headed down a steep flight of uneven cobbled steps that zigzagged down the red-hued cliffs. The views out to sea were breathtaking, as was the almost vertical descent, and she had never been so relieved that she was wearing sensible shoes and not the towering stilettos that Katerina preferred.

Fifteen minutes, and several pauses for photographs later, they arrived in a small, picturesque cove, home to a smattering of rustic family-run tavernas that hugged the water’s edge, their menu boards advertising that day’s fresh seafood catch. Every table was occupied by diners enjoying a glass of wine while they waited for the evening’s grand finale.

‘Welcome to Ammoudi Bay,’ said Christos, a note of pride in his voice.

Suzie nodded. ‘It’s beautiful here.’

‘Come on, the boat is this way.’

Christos indicated the jetty, and her nervousness returning with a vengeance when she cast her eyes over the row of boats and catamarans bobbing and bouncing along the side of a short stone pier. She followed in his wake until they were standing in front of a collection of vessels ranging from decrepit former fishing boats and inflatable dinghies to small speed boats and sleek white yachts.

‘Which one is yours?’ she asked, eyeing a paint-blistered rowing boat tied to the end of the jetty with a length of blue nylon rope, its oars dangling from a pair of shiny brass hooks.

Oh God, was he expecting her to row?

‘It’s this one,’ said Christos.

It took Suzie a few seconds to realise that he was not pointing to the rowing boat, but to one of the small, glossy cruisers complete with cabin and upholstered seating area at the rear.

‘Wow, that’s...’

‘Not what you were expecting?’ Christos finished the sentence for her, his eyebrows raised, his lips twitching in amusement as he read her expression perfectly. Heat flooded her cheeks and she felt ashamed of her presumptuousness.

‘No, I...’

Christos laughed. ‘It’s okay. It’s not mine, but we can pretend, can’t we? Over the last few months, I’ve come to realise that when we don’t know who we are any more, the best thing to do is pretend to be who we want to be. Here, take my hand.’

Before Suzie could digest what Christos had just said and ask him to explain what he meant, he had slid his palm into hers and cradled her elbow with his other hand so he could guide her safely on board. The gesture caused a fizzle of electricity to rush through her veins and radiate out to her fingertips, and she was so surprised by her body’s reaction that she stumbled slightly as she stepped from the jetty onto the gently undulating boat. Fortunately, she managed to regain her balance and dropped onto one of the cream leather seats at the back of the boat whilst Christos started the engine and cast off.

‘There’s a bottle of Champagne in the fridge over there, or there’s sparkling water, if you prefer.’

*‘Efharistó.’*

*‘Parakaló.’*

Suzie helped herself to a bottle of water and went to join Christos at the helm. As they sailed from the bay, she turned to look back at the cove, which was even more picturesque when viewed from the sea; the angular whitewashed buildings crouched beneath the ruggedness of the red-hued cliffs and surrounded by the deep turquoise of the Aegean Sea. She tipped her chin skywards, relishing the feel of the breeze on her face. Even though it was the end of September, the air was still humid, and she could taste the salty tang of the sea on her

lips as they cruised at a leisurely pace towards a rocky outcrop beyond which was the famous Santorini caldera.

‘How was your day at the gallery?’

‘Busy, but lots of fun.’

‘Did you work at a gallery in the UK?’

‘No, I had my own hand-made jewellery business.’

Suzie groaned inwardly. She didn’t want to rehash the story about the fire to someone she had only just met, but Christos was looking at her, his dark eyes filled with interest, and for some reason she couldn’t fathom, she felt completely at ease in his company. She felt she could trust him, and although her intuition had let her down spectacularly in the past, she surprised herself by deciding to give him the benefit of the doubt and delivered the briefest of synopses about the incident that had destroyed her business and taken away her livelihood.

‘I’m so sorry, Suzie, that must have been devastating.’

‘It was, but it was the impact it had on my clients that upset me most. The fire meant I had to renege on my promise to create a matching pair of silver wedding rings as well as a specially commissioned engagement ring, both of which were due that week.’

‘I’m sure they understood.’

‘The engaged couple did – they simply sourced their wedding rings from a high street store – but the guy who’d ordered the engagement ring wasn’t so sympathetic.’

Suzie cringed when she recalled the owner of an upmarket French restaurant in Exeter demanding the immediate return of



his deposit, along with a sizeable payment as compensation for the inconvenience caused, which – as she had already purchased the gemstone that was now nestled in the sand at the bottom of Blossomwood Bay – had wiped out every penny in her bank account, a double blow after the fire. Thinking about that heart-wrenching incident made her sad, so she decided to change the subject to Christos' maritime enterprise.

‘So, who does this gorgeous boat belong to?’

‘I rent it from a friend of mine, Dimitris, who's taken a sort-of gap year to visit family in Melbourne before cycling up the east coast of Australia all the way to Darwin. I decided that instead of just sitting around – or I should say, *sailing* around – all day, enjoying the sunshine, I should do something useful. So, for the last six months, I've been offering sunset cruises to people who want a more personalised experience than being crammed together like sardines on one of the tourist boats. I've sailed with people who are on their honeymoon, people who want to propose to their partner, or those who simply want to make special memories while feasting their eyes on nature's curtain-call. Okay, I think this is a good spot.’

They had arrived at a tiny cove watched over by a tumble of whitewashed houses clinging to the sides of vertiginous rocky cliffs. A flotilla of smaller water-based craft was already there, but there were no huge cruise liners or ferries to spoil their uninterrupted view of the sun as it sank towards the ocean, its lower rim already hovering tantalisingly on the horizon, sending a cascade of golden light rippling across the surface of the water.

As dusk replaced the eye-scorching brightness of that day's sunshine, ribbons of apricot, pink, and mauve drifted across the sky, adding a soft wash of colour to the buildings on the shoreline to provide a backdrop that became more and more mesmerising with every second that passed. Despite the presence of other spectators, a noticeable silence had descended, which, along with the rhythmic bobbing of the boat, produced a calm tranquillity that elevated the experience into something truly magical.

'Wow,' Suzie whispered.

She knew the word was woefully inadequate to describe what she was witnessing, and feeling, but she hadn't expected to have such a profoundly emotional reaction to the setting of the sun, an occurrence that was repeated every day all over the world. She was completely awestruck, humbled by the privilege of seeing such unadulterated beauty played out in front of her, and she knew that she would remember every moment of her first Santorini sunset for the rest of her life.

An unfamiliar feeling of serenity wrapped its gentle tendrils around Suzie shoulders as she was serenaded by the sound of the water lapping against the side of the boat, and it was only when the last of the sun's rays melted from the sky that she was finally able to reconnect with reality. She had been so caught up in the strangely uplifting spectacle that she hadn't realised Christos had taken a seat on the banquette next to her, his ankle hooked over his thigh, lost in his own thoughts. Her gaze strayed to an oval-shaped scar on his calf, and she was about to ask him what had happened, but changed her mind, not wanting to spoil the ambiance by bringing up what would no doubt be a painful memory.

‘Thank you for bringing me here, Christos.’

‘The simple pleasures in life aren’t given the accolades they deserve,’ Christos murmured, his voice a little hoarse with emotion. ‘Being on Santorini has taught me that it’s not money, ambition, or possessions that make us happy, it’s witnessing sights like this. They remind us how insignificant our difficulties are in the grand scheme of things and inspire us – every day – to keep our eyes fixed on the horizon, and to follow our dreams, wherever they may lead us.’

Suzie’s thoughts scooted back to what Katerina had told her that morning, and she wondered if Christos was running away, too. She met his eyes and there was something she couldn’t quite put her finger lurking in their depths; was it disappointment? Irritation? Anger? But she didn’t want to pry. Even though she felt unexpectedly comfortable in his presence, they *had* only just met, and she certainly didn’t want to risk having to reciprocate with her own life story – the very thought of having to do that made her nauseous, and it had nothing to do with the boat’s increased undulations as their fellow waterborne observers prepared to return to shore.

‘Ready to head back?’

‘Absolutely.’

Christos re-started the engine and steered them back to Ammoudi Bay. After dropping anchor and making sure the boat was securely tethered to the cringle on the pier, he once again held out his palm to help her on to the jetty. She hooked her bag over her shoulder and just as she reached out to take his hand, a larger, more powerful motorboat sailed past them at speed causing their boat to surge upwards and she lost her

footing, stumbling backwards into the boat. She managed to right herself, but to her dismay, she realised that her handbag had tumbled from her shoulder and into the sea.

‘No!’

A wave of panic crashed through her chest, followed by astonishment as she watched Christos kick off his shoes and launch himself into the water, scoop up her floating handbag, and toss it onto the deck. She hurried to the side of the boat to offer her hand to haul him back on board, but to her horror, as soon as his fingers gripped hold of hers, she found herself following him into the surprisingly warm – and thankfully shallow – Aegean Sea.

‘Oh my God! I can’t believe you just did that!’

She spluttered, her heart pounding out a cacophony of alarm, until she felt the pebbles beneath her toes, and the gentle embrace of the cool water that wrapped its waves around her body like a pashmina of the smoothest silk. When she looked across at Christos, she saw the glint of mischief in his dark brown eyes and despite the unorthodox end to their “sunset cruise”, she had to laugh.

‘Do you do that to all your clients?’

‘Only the really special ones.’

This time, when Christos offered her his hand, he gently laced his fingers through hers and together they waded out of the sea, through the shallows, and onto the beach, her cheeks filling with heat when she heard a smattering of applause from the tables of one of the seafront restaurants who had been watching the impromptu seaside show with obvious delight.

And yet, it was the perfect way to round off what had been one of the most amazing evenings of her life when, just for an hour or two, she had forgotten about the trauma of her past and had simply enjoyed living in the moment.



# Chapter Ten

To Suzie's surprise, when she arrived for her shift at the gallery the following day, Katerina was already there. But she wasn't alone. She was conversing in high-speed Greek with a woman who looked as though she'd just stepped from an Athens catwalk. Not only was she wearing the most exquisitely cut designer suit in a rich emerald colour, but her caramel hair was also salon-fresh, her manicure pristine and her chunky gold necklace told Suzie that she had excellent taste in jewellery, not to mention a healthy bank balance.

However, Katerina could certainly match her in the sartorial stakes, having chosen a short black skirt with a double ruffle around the hemline, which she'd paired with a silk blouse and towering heels. The client was clearly excited about the large canvas that was currently being displayed on a wooden easel in the middle of the gallery – a vibrant oil painting featuring the view out to sea from the edge of the caldera – and if it hadn't been for the random hillocks of tissue paper dotted around the room and the rolls of discarded corrugated cardboard piled up behind the desk, they could have been discussing inspiration and technique in a high-end gallery in Manhattan or London.

Not wanting to interrupt the wheels of commerce – which would hopefully result in a lucrative sale – Suzie decided it was her turn to collect that morning's caffeine fix from *Taverna Giorgos*. She managed to catch Katerina's eye and mime the universally recognised gesture for coffee before

heading out of the front door, allowing herself a satisfied smile when she saw the gallery's new sign glinting in the sunshine.

It was still early, so instead of heading straight to the taverna, she took a detour along the footpath that hugged Oia's clifftop, pausing at a popular viewpoint to stare slack-jawed at the panorama spread out in front of her. No wonder Katerina produced such stunning artwork. There was no shortage of subject matter to choose from: the hotch-potch of sugar-cube houses, the profusion of pink bougainvillea, the winding cobbled streets and soaring archways, not to mention the rich turquoise of the sea and the translucent sky overhead. The only thing that spoiled the view was the colossus cruise ship currently at anchor in the middle of the lagoon; a veritable whale overshadowing the shoals of tenders and yachts that encircled it.

She continued her saunter towards the taverna, taking her time to appreciate the absence of the usual hustle and bustle that the passengers from the cruise ship would bring to the town when the sightseeing coaches started to arrive in the next hour or two, and her thoughts drifted back to the previous night.

For the first time in a long time, she had felt like the *real* Suzie Sandringham, the one for whom excitement and joyous anticipation was her go-to emotion whenever she was invited to a social gathering, rather than reluctance, suspicion, and, worst of all, fear. She had been on the island for four days and already Santorini was weaving its magic through her veins, and she understood why her sister had chosen to make the island her home. However, as she climbed the wooden steps to



*Taverna Giorgos*, something occurred to her that caused her to pause.

Would Amber come back?

What if she decided to stay in Bali with their mum?

What if—

‘*Kalimera*, Suzie.’

‘Oh... *Kalimera*, Giorgos.’

Suzie smiled at the taverna’s eponymous owner, his silver-streaked hair neatly barbered, his impressive moustache twitching upwards as he gifted her with a broad smile of welcome. His white shirt was cracked open at the neck to reveal a glint of gold nestled amongst the wisps of chest hair, and as he guided her towards the veranda, she was gifted with a delicious waft of his woody cologne. Clearly, he was sensible enough to avoid the use of Heidi’s weird concoctions.

‘Take a seat, I’ll be with you in a moment.’

‘Oh no, I was just coming to collect our take-out coffees—’

But Giorgos was already heading towards the kitchen, so she had no choice but to do as he’d requested, choosing a table in the shade of a climbing grapevine and a picturesque view of the adjacent orchard. She couldn’t believe that, if she wanted to, she could just reach out and pluck a lemon, or an orange, or a handful of grapes straight from the tree or the vine. She sat back in her chair and closed her eyes, appreciating the light breeze that lifted her hair from her face to the melodious accompaniment of the cicadas and the staccato whoosh of the coffee machine as Giorgos prepared her coffee.

While she waited, she took the opportunity to glance around the veranda at her fellow early risers. There was a group of cyclists digging into a huge, carb-laden breakfast, a tired-looking couple feeding their toddler with a bowl of yoghurt, and the sandy-haired guy she'd seen on her previous visit to the taverna sitting at the same table, tapping his pen against his lips as he considered what to write next. As was her habit, she noticed he was wearing a child's plastic watch with a cartoon character on its face, and a silver bracelet from which a tiny book-shaped charm dangled. She wondered if he was an author who had come to Santorini to research his next novel.

To her consternation, the man chose that moment to look up from his notebook and caught her staring at him, so she gave him a smile of acknowledgement, and was surprised to see her friendly gesture wasn't reciprocated before he resumed his jottings, ignoring the plate of flaky Greek pastries on the table in front of him. When the warm, buttery, honey-flavoured aroma reached Suzie's nostrils, her stomach growled in envy, and she wished she had ordered a selection from Giorgos to go with her coffee.

'One *metrios*,' said Giorgos, setting down her coffee with a flourish.

'Giorgos, what's the guy over there with the notebook eating?'

Giorgos glanced across to where the writer was now staring into space, clearly waiting for inspiration to strike. 'That's a plate of Stefanos' special-recipe *Galaktoboureko*; Greek custard pie with a twist. Want to try a slice?'

‘I’d love to, thank you.’

A few minutes later, Giorgos placed a plate of *Galaktoboureko* in front of her and, after a quick glance around his eponymous domain to make sure his patrons were happy, he surprised Suzie by taking a seat next to her.

‘So, what do you think of Santorini?’

‘Oh, I love it, it’s... well, it’s magical. You are so lucky to live in a place like this.’

Clearly, she had said the right thing because Giorgos beamed at her response, before his shoulders sagged slightly and his eyes clouded with sadness.

‘I love my home, Suzie. My family have lived here for generations. My grandfather opened this taverna after the earthquake of 1957, which devastated the island and forced him to reinvent his life from scratch.’

Giorgos paused, and when he continued his voice was filled with emotion.

‘In those early days, Santorini was a place people could come to relax, to create, to enjoy a slice of our Greek paradise, and I’ve met some wonderful people over the years, people who want to experience the *real* Santorini, to learn about our food, our history, our culture, maybe a little of our language. There’s more to Santorini than the beautiful sunset, or the equally stunning *sunrise*. We have picturesque vineyards, interesting churches and monasteries, unique and diverse wildlife, important archaeological ruins – it is a sort of Greek Pompeii – not to mention the fact that some believe the lost city of Atlantis originated here.’

‘Really?’

Giorgos nodded, but legends and myths clearly weren’t what were on his mind.

‘We’re faced with an impossible conundrum. We need to make a living to provide for our families, so we *want* visitors to come here, but modern tourism needs to be sustainable, otherwise we risk destroying the very thing that we rely on for our livelihoods. We need to control the numbers who come here, and to the other more popular Greek Islands, but our politicians are at best slow, and at worst, blinkered to the disaster that is looming if we continue to do nothing. Have you seen the cruise ships in the caldera?’

Suzie nodded.

‘Over the last ten years they’ve grown larger and more frequent, especially in the summer months, and they regularly disgorge more than three thousand visitors in the space of a couple of hours. We simply don’t have the infrastructure to cope with that amount of people, all searching for the same thing. Our island is overcrowded; our water supplies are perilously low, we’re plagued with traffic jams, and waste management is a constant struggle. We’ve reached breaking point and it’s time for our community leaders to think of something other than euros and make the changes we all know need to happen if we want Santorini to survive for the next generation to enjoy.’

Giorgos shook his head sadly, before raising his eyes to meet Suzie’s, and she was shocked to see they were shining with unshed tears. Realising he might have got a little carried away, he smiled and reached out to pat her hand.

‘I’m sorry, Suzie, I didn’t mean to spoil your breakfast.’

Before she could assure him that he hadn’t, that his anxieties were completely understandable and legitimate, Giorgos had pushed back his chair and ambled to the other side of the veranda to welcome a group of new arrivals in search of one of Stefanos’ breakfast platters. His seat was immediately taken by Heidi.

‘Hey, Suzie!’

‘Hi, Heidi, I—’

Suzie couldn’t stop herself from performing a doubletake. That morning, her new friend’s choice of makeup was even more dazzling than before; a wide swathe of glittery peach eyeshadow enhanced by a thick contour of rich magenta eyeliner, and lashes coated in a vibrant crimson mascara. She looked amazing, but Suzie couldn’t say the same for the scent she was wearing, which smelled like what her mum had rubbed on hers and Amber’s chests when they had a cold as children. Clearly another one of Heidi’s own “inventions”.

‘I love your mascara.’

‘Thanks, I mixed it myself. *So*, how was your date last night?’

Suzie rolled her eyes. ‘It *wasn’t* a date.’

‘Okay. Was it just the two of you on the boat?’

‘Yes, it was, but—’

‘And did you watch the sunset together?’

‘Of course we did, that was why we were—’

‘Was there Champagne?’

‘Yes, but I didn’t—’

‘Did you kiss?’

‘No! We did *not* kiss!’

‘But you wanted to?’

‘No, I...’

Suzie stopped. She could feel the heat spreading upwards from her chest into her neck and cheeks, so she decided the only way to stop her new friend from digging ever deeper into how she felt about Christos was to turn the interrogation spotlight on Heidi, even though she knew she would probably regret the subject she chose.

‘Okay, enough about me, tell me about the perfume you’re wearing today. Is it another of your own brands?’

‘Yes, it is. Do you like it?’

‘It’s certainly... unusual. What’s in it?’

‘It’s a blend of witch hazel, eucalyptus and peppermint oil.’

Trying hard not grimace as another waft of the sharp, nostril-clearing perfume floated towards her, an idea pinged into Suzie’s mind.

‘You know, one of my best friends is a genius with fragrances. She ran her own aromatherapy business before... before she relocated to Provence. Her Uncle Toby was a famous “nose” – he worked for one of the big French perfume houses before he passed away a couple of years ago – and she’s now following in his footsteps. If you’re serious about going into the perfume business, I could ask her to have a chat to you, give you the benefit of her, and her uncle’s, expertise.’

‘Wow, I’d love that, thank you, Suzie.’

‘No problem.’

‘Hey, guess what!’

Suzie smiled as Heidi pulled her phone from her pocket.

‘What?’

‘*HolsHacker* has posted a new video and guess where he is now? Mykonos!’

‘Oh, no. Do you think he’ll come to Santorini?’

‘I hope so!’

Suzie knew Giorgos wouldn’t agree with Heidi’s enthusiasm, but she still scooted in close to watch the undercover vlogger’s most recent posting. However, before they got to the “comedy” part of the vlog, a loud burst of laughter interrupted their viewing. In perfect unison with Heidi, she swivelled round in her seat to where Giorgos was regaling a group of Greek men of similar age to himself with what was clearly a hilarious story. Heidi caught Suzie’s eye and opened her mouth to speak, but hesitated, casting another glance at her boss before deciding to say what was on her mind.

‘I saw you chatting to Giorgos when you arrived. Were you telling him about your date with Christos?’

‘It wasn’t—’

‘I hope he wasn’t boring you with his usual “guard your heart” speech.’

‘His “guard your heart” speech? What do you mean?’

‘About not succumbing to Santorini’s mystical romance spell.’

‘Actually, no, he was telling me about—’

‘He’s always going on at me about protecting my heart, warning me not to fall for the charms of someone who is only in search of a holiday fling and nothing else. You should have heard him when Amber started dating Tom at the beginning of the summer. Although, I suppose it’s not totally surprising, given what happened to him.’

‘Why, what happened to him?’

Heidi cast a surreptitious look over her shoulder to make sure Giorgos was still gossiping with his friends and not within eavesdropping distance, then leaned nearer to Suzie, her voice low, her tone more serious than usual.

‘It’s so sad. Giorgos fell in love with someone who came over here for the summer. She worked as a tour guide in Fira, and from the very first night they met on this very veranda, they were inseparable. They spent their evenings exploring the island, sailing around the coast on his boat, and then dancing until dawn. It was like a *real life* Big Fat Greek Romance; they fell in love, got engaged, and had a fabulous party here at the taverna. All Giorgos’ family came –he has a big family, and I mean *big!* At the end of the holiday season, Anya went back to Sweden to sort out a few things there and... well, she never came back.’

‘What? Why?’

‘That’s the worst thing. Giorgos doesn’t know. He tried to contact her – you have to remember that this was almost



twenty years ago, when we didn't have the social media channels we do now – but even though he called her constantly, her phone went to voicemail every time. Then her number became unavailable, and eventually he took the hint. Understandably, he was completely heartbroken, and after that he wasn't prepared to risk the same thing happening again, so he refused to go on any more dates, which means he hasn't met anyone else.'

'Oh, that's so sad.'

'I *know*. He has lots of friends, though. I mean, he knows *everyone* on the island, and *everyone* loves him, as you can see. He's known as the *Santorini Sage* because he's the person we all go to for advice on *everything*, although I'd think twice before asking him for advice on anything to do with romance. Giorgos calls it a "grenade-strewn territory", but I'm firmly of the view that you have to forgive, forget, and move on. Time is short, and there are *a lot* of great guys out there to have fun with... like that guy over there.'

Suzie looked across at the man with the mop of sandy hair.

'The writer?'

'Yes. Do you think he's famous? Maybe he's writing his next bestselling novel! I wonder if it's a romance. Or a detective story? Or his memoir? Oh, oh, what if it's a movie script, set in a gorgeous Greek taverna, and we are the—'

'I hate to burst your bubble, Heidi, but unfortunately he's none of those things.'

Unbeknown to them, Giorgos had arrived at their table with a couple of coffees for Suzie to take back to the gallery and

had been listening to Heidi's excited speculation on the identity of the mystery novelist, screenwriter, or playwright. His mahogany eyes were twinkling with amusement, but also affection for his excitable colleague.

‘Apparently, he’s a bartender at a hotel in Perissa.’

Instead of disappointment, Heidi's eyes lit up with delight.

‘No way? That’s even better! I’m going to ask him if he has any advice for my *Literary Cocktails* launch tonight.’ She sprang from her chair, then paused to meet Suzie’s eyes. ‘You *are* coming to Miranda’s book club, aren’t you, Suzie?’

Suzie smiled. ‘Of course, although I’m a bit worried that I won’t have read any of the books.’

‘Oh, don’t worry about that. You won’t be the only one. Between you and me, it’s just an excuse to get together for an evening of girly gossip. See you at eight. Don’t be late.’



# Chapter Eleven

By the time seven o'clock came around, Suzie was exhausted. The gallery had been even busier than the previous day, so busy that Katerina hadn't had the opportunity to make her usual forays to the taverna for her regular infusions of caffeine, or to stare longingly at Stefanos. Suzie wasn't complaining though because it also meant that she hadn't been subjected to a second interrogation on how her "date" had gone with Christos, and whether or not she was going to see him again.

To her surprise, she was disappointed their evening had ended with a friendly *yassou*, and Christos hadn't suggested they meet again, or even asked her for her phone number, but then, as their sunset cruise wasn't a date and just a very generous apology for causing the accident outside the gallery, why should he do either of those things?

When Katerina finally turned the sign on the door to "Closed", Suzie's feet ached so much she flopped down onto the desk chair and expelled a long, ragged sigh, only to jump straight back up again when she saw the state of the place. She had to admit that, despite her good intentions, she wasn't in the same league as her sister when it came to organisation, or aesthetics, but even she had to accept that the gallery looked a mess, and she still hadn't managed to find the time to water the plants.

'We'd better hurry or we'll be late for the book club,' said Katerina, seemingly oblivious to the chaos around her as she

rescued her handbag from the embrace of a ream of corrugated cardboard before heading for the door. ‘I promised we’d help Miranda to sort out the chairs. By the way, did you text Heidi the title of the book you’ve chosen to talk about?’

‘Yes, I have.’

‘To be honest, I haven’t read many novels,’ said Katerina, as they made their way down the winding alleyway that led to the centre of Oia. ‘I prefer non-fiction; books on archaeology, architecture, history, photography, as well as more academic publications on the cutting-edge techniques currently being used in the art world. What about you?’

Suzie didn’t want to confess to Katerina that whilst she had always loved reading, she had experienced a severe bout of “reader’s block” since the incident in London, which had left her ability to concentrate on anything vaguely cerebral so depleted that trying to read anything was like wading through treacle. Unfortunately, that meant she hadn’t read any of the most recent bestsellers, so she had fallen back on one of her all-time favourite novels, which she knew she would have no trouble talking about at the book club. She was looking forward to tasting the cocktail Heidi made to match her choice.

‘I’ve chosen *Death on the Nile* by Agatha Christie.’

She smiled, remembering how she and her father had shared a love of the “Queen of Crime Fiction”, and their many, many conversations and heated discussions about which of her books was the best. They had disagreed on their choice – her father preferred *Evil Under the Sun* – but many happy hours were spent dissecting the twists and turns of each story and

pinpointing the exact moment when they had worked out who the murderer, or murderers, were and how they did it.

‘Here we are.’

Katerina pointed to a flight of steps that led down to a small shady courtyard housing an eclectic collection of tables, chairs, and potted plants, where the bookshop’s customers could shelter from the sun and read the first few pages of the book they’d bought. Suzie paused at the top of the steps, her heartbeat rising. She had been so busy dealing with a constant flow of customers at the gallery that day, followed by the rush to lock up and head to the bookshop to help Miranda set out the chairs, that her anxiety demons hadn’t had time to play havoc with her confidence, but they were in full flight mode now.

What if someone recognised her?

‘Erm, how many people are coming to the book club?’

But Katerina had already descended the steps and disappeared through the door, and unless she was going to run away, back to her empty studio, she had no choice but to swallow down hard on the cauldron of panic that had started to swirl through her abdomen and follow in her footsteps. However, as soon as she walked through the door of the bookshop, to her surprise and relief, an unexpected feeling of comfortable familiarity surrounded her and she relaxed, smiling even, as she took in the scene in front of her.

There were books everywhere; a kaleidoscope of hardbacks and paperbacks, both fresh-from-the-press and previously loved, displayed in their respective genres on floor-to-ceiling bookshelves or on re-purposed desks and carved wooden

trunks. The place smelled of furniture polish and that special undefinable aroma that books exuded, along with an unusual top-note of liquorice, which Suzie suspected was another of Heidi's special perfume concoctions.

Despite Katerina's statement that they were needed to assist Miranda with the chairs, it seemed that they were the last to arrive, and a collection of white cane chairs with chintzy cushions had already been arranged in a circle in the middle of the room. In a small nook to the right of the door was a small oval table, draped in a white cloth and groaning under the weight of at least twenty bottles of spirits and liqueurs, around which a dozen or so literature lovers were gathered, half of whom were sipping their designated cocktail, while the other half waited in eager anticipation for Heidi to prepare theirs.

In homage to the theme of the evening, Heidi was wearing a short, belted dress fashioned from fabric printed with row upon row of books, and a pair of white trainers with tiny silver charms in the shape of typewriters attached to the laces. That evening's eyeshadow was a wide streak of glittery gold across the lid, with a sparkling copper shade beneath her eyebrow, edged with a dash of turquoise. Suzie wished she had made more of an effort with her appearance than a simple finger-comb and a dash of nude lip balm.

'Okay, Diana, this one is for you.'

Heidi handed a vivid green cocktail, which looked a bit like liquidised grass, to a woman dressed in an ankle-length kaftan, her auburn hair plaited and pinned in two coils on top of her head. She was clutching a book that, from the state of the jacket, Suzie could see had been well-loved, and she couldn't

help smiling when she saw the title. *Anne of Green Gables* had been one of her childhood favourites, too.

‘So? What do you think?’ asked Heidi, a whisper of anxiety in her voice.

‘It’s perfect. What’s in it?’

‘Vodka, crème de menthe, cucumber, and mint. I’ve called it the *Green Gable Goddess*.’

‘Delicious.’

Next in line was a tall slender woman with a halo of blonde curls wearing a pair of loose denim dungarees with the skimpiest of bra-tops underneath. Suzie tipped her head to the side to read the title of her book and was surprised to see that it was *The Hobbit*.

‘Hi, Robyn. I’ve made a *Dark Dragon Daiquiri* for you.’

Heidi poured a pink-hued cocktail from a shaker into a wide-brimmed glass, added a slice of lime, and handed it to Robyn with a beaming smile.

‘Erm, what are the black bits, darling?’

‘They’re from the dragon fruit, of course.’

‘Of course.’

Suzie watched Robyn take a sip of her cocktail, her eyes watering a little when the alcohol hit the back of her throat. However, that didn’t prevent her from taking another swift gulp so she could top up her glass with the liquid that remained in Heidi’s shaker, before claiming her seat in the book club circle where the conversation had morphed from gentle mumble to high-pitched hilarity.



After handing a bright red cocktail to a woman whose favourite book was *Gone with the Wind*, and a *Cappuccino Cloud* to Katerina in honour of her obsession with all-things coffee related, it was Suzie's turn, and when she tasted what Heidi had created for her, she grinned with delight.

'Mmm, I love it.'

'I've called it a *Pharaoh Fizz*. It's Prosecco with a splash of cherry brandy.'

'It's perfect, thank you. By the way, did you get any tips from the guy at the taverna?'

'His name's Nathan, apparently, and I did ask him, but he was a bit vague.'

'Maybe he was worried you'd pinch his recipes.'

'Maybe.'

'Come on, Suzie, I'll introduce you to Miranda before the meeting starts,' Katerina said, pulling Suzie away.

Suzie followed her to where Miranda was finishing her chocolate martini, running the tip of her tongue along her lower lip to collect the last dribble of the cocoa-infused vodka.

She estimated their host to be in her early-to-mid fifties, but her matching silk-blouse-and-cashmere-cardigan-combo spoke of an older woman. Maybe she was just someone who had more important things to do than worry about the latest fashions?

With her hair styled into a neat bob the colour of butterscotch, her makeup consisting of just a slick of brown mascara and a dash of pale peach lipstick, and a pair of gold-

rimmed spectacles dangling on a chain at her chest, she looked exactly how Suzie thought a bookshop owner would look, until she remembered that Miranda was only filling in while her cousin was at a wedding in Cornwall.

‘Miranda, this is Suzie, Amber’s sister. Suzie, this is Miranda Parker.’

‘It’s good to meet you, Suzie, Amber has told me so much about you.’

Again, Suzie cringed, praying that her sister had been judicious when sharing details of her background, just as she had when she’d been talking about her to Katerina.

‘It’s good to meet you, too. Thank you for letting me come along to your very first book club.’

‘The more the merrier. Oh, and I’ve found this for you.’ Miranda handed her a well-thumbed copy of *Death on the Nile*. ‘Right, I’ll just ask Heidi for a refill, and we’ll get started.’

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The next two hours were filled with a little bit of book chat and a whole load of gossip about subjects as diverse as dating, divorce and whether the *Dirty Dancing* film had deserved an Oscar. As the evening wore on and the cocktails continued to flow, the conversation became more personal, touching on issues of failing marriages, the menopause, and how meditation could change your life for the better. The noise level was so high that Suzie was having difficulty following

Robyn's story about spending the previous year learning how to ride a motorbike, which had culminated in her recent wedding to her instructor who was a big fan of fantasy novels, hence the reason she had brought along a copy of *The Hobbit*.

After her third *Pharoah Fizz*, Suzie decided it was time to switch to sparkling water, otherwise she feared she wouldn't be able to remember the way home through the maze of winding streets that made up the town of Oia – especially in the dark – and would end up spending the night on someone's doorstep, although it didn't look like anyone else shared the fear of losing their navigational compass.

It was almost midnight when someone suggested they brought the evening to a close, a suggestion swiftly followed by a vociferous, and unanimous, demand that the book club be repeated the following month. Miranda, whose cheeks were glowing from all the martinis she'd imbibed, was only too happy to oblige, on the strict understanding that next time tea and coffee would be served as she didn't want Denise to come back to a bankrupt bookshop.

Miranda closed the door after a chorus of noisy farewells, and when she turned round she was clearly surprised to see that Katerina, Heidi, and Suzie were still there, collecting glasses, stacking chairs, and returning abandoned books to their rightful places until they had erased all evidence of that night's book club-cum-cocktail party so that Miranda could safely open the store to the paying public the following day.

'Would anyone like a coffee before they head home?' asked Miranda.

‘Yes, please,’ said Katerina, never one to turn down an offer of her favourite caffeine fix.

‘Heidi?’

‘I think I’d better just have a glass of water.’

Despite smudges of tiredness, Heidi’s eyes sparkled with happiness at what had been a successful delivery of her newest enterprise. All evening long, the booklovers of Santorini had showered her with praise for her inventiveness and obvious talent for mixing the perfect ingredients to create their literary cocktails.

‘What can I get you, Suzie?’

‘Do you have chamomile tea?’

‘Coming right up.’

Five minutes later, Suzie was sitting at the ancient table-cum-cocktail bar, sipping her drink and marvelling at the miniature cathedral of books that surrounded her. A peaceful contentment descended as the tea began to chase away the fuzziness that had taken up residence in her brain after the unaccustomed indulgence in alcohol.

‘This is an amazing place,’ she murmured, lacing her fingers around her mug and hugging it to her chest. ‘My friend Beckie would love it here. She adores books, but she especially likes to read autobiographies written by people who’ve gone on amazing adventures, like climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, or walking the Appalachian Trail, or cycling the length of Australia, or sailing singlehandedly across the Atlantic.’

‘I’d love to do something like that,’ said Miranda, a wistful tone in her voice.

Heidi laughed. ‘What? Climb Mount Kilimanjaro?’

‘Not that specifically, but go on an adventure, yes. The most exciting thing I’ve done is a sponsored canoe race across Lake Windermere when the twins were eleven, which is not the same as rowing the Atlantic.’

Miranda fiddled distractedly with the chain around her neck and for the first time Suzie noticed the white mark around the third finger of her left hand, where there had obviously once been a wedding band.

‘You know, when I was young, I planned to do lots of exciting things, like abseiling from the Sydney Harbour Bridge, or zip-lining across Penrhyn Quarry, or hiking up Mount Fuji, but I never got to do any of them. I never got to be Miranda Kennedy, intrepid explorer of far-flung locations. Before I realised what was happening, I was Miranda Parker; loyal wife, doting mother, supportive sister, caring daughter, and friendly colleague.’

Miranda sighed, swallowing down hard on her rising emotions.

‘And now, now that Joe and Jessica are settled at university, pursuing their own dreams... well, it turns out that my husband – who I thought might want to join me on an expedition or two – has already been enjoying his own *adventure* with Bella Bertram from the golf club, and I’m left wondering where all the time has gone.’

A few seconds of silence ticked by until Miranda looked up from where she'd been twiddling her glasses, an expression of shock flitting across her face when she realised that she had spoken her last sentence out loud instead of to herself. Her cheeks coloured and she quickly forced a smile onto her lips.

'That's why I'm here. Denise all-but pressganged me into coming, saying that it was time I had my own adventure. But while I love working in the bookshop and I've had fun at the book club this evening, it's not exactly what I thought my Big Fat Adventure of a Lifetime would look like.'

'What *does* it look like?' asked Katerina.

'Well... don't laugh, but I always wanted to learn how to dance. All the classics – the waltz, the foxtrot, the quickstep – but also the flamenco, the tango, the samba, the pasodoble... And then, once I got the hang of the basics, I wanted to fly off to the countries where those dances originated. So, dance the Viennese Waltz in Vienna, the flamenco in Andalusia, the tango in Argentina, the samba in Brazil, in full authentic costume and to live local music.'

'Then why don't you do that?'

'Maybe I will, one day,' said Miranda, but without any real conviction. 'What about you, Suzie?'

Still suffused with the mellowness that Heidi's cocktails and the calming effect of the chamomile tea had engendered, Suzie was startled when she heard Miranda say her name.

'Sorry?'

'Do you have a dream you want to fulfil?'

'I...'

In her state of complete relaxation, and alcohol-induced repose, she wondered briefly if she could prise open the tightly sealed lid on her deep-seated anxieties and share some of her story with these wonderful women. Could she tell them that she was fortunate enough to have been able to pursue her dreams twice, but that each time her carefully laid plans had imploded spectacularly, first in London and then in Blossomwood Bay, and that now she was terrified to poke her nose above the parapet for fear of inviting further wrath from the director of her fate, or from the tabloid press?

She realised that Katerina, Heidi, and Miranda were staring at her, waiting for her answer, but when she opened her mouth to speak, her courage failed her. Even people whom she had thought were friends had been horrified when they'd found out what had happened, whether from seeing it on the local news or reading about it on social media, and apart from Amber and her mum, not one of them had stuck around to support her through what had been the worst experience of her life – even her fiancé, Adam, had turned his back on her.

How could she expect people she had known for a few days to react any differently?

She cast around for something to say, and from the far reaches of her brain she managed to drag up a dream she had harboured since her early teens, one she had shared with her father, but which he'd never had the opportunity to do anything about before his untimely passing.

‘Actually, I’ve always wanted to write a book.’ [\[ED1\]](#)

‘What kind of book?’ asked Heidi, scooting to the edge of her seat. ‘A memoir?’

‘Good God, no!’

The vehemence of her response may have been surprising to the other women, but it was no surprise to Suzie. While the story of her life was probably worthy of a Hollywood movie, she had no wish to put herself through the soul-crushing experience of putting the details down on paper and having readers rake over the ashes of her experiences in the name of entertainment. Others had done that much better than she could, unfortunately.

‘Suzie? Are you okay?’

‘Sorry,’ she said quickly. ‘No, not a memoir; a detective novel, a kind of modern day Agatha Christie.’

‘Like *Death on the Nile*?’ Heidi laughed. ‘You could call it *Skulduggery in Santorini*!’

‘Or *A Corpse in the Caldera*,’ Katerina suggested.

‘Or *Trickery at the Taverna*,’ added Miranda.

Suzie smiled at their enthusiasm. ‘Yes, maybe.’

‘Well, I have lots of dreams I want to fulfil before I even think about settling down,’ Heidi declared, the mood in the bookshop lifting at last. ‘As well as my literary cocktails business, and my knitted artwork enterprise, I’m hoping my most recent idea is going to be the best one I’ve had so far. Serenity Organic Santorini Skincare – or SOS Skincare for short – is in its early stages of development, but I’m loving the research, as well as sourcing the ingredients, and creating my own fragrances to add to my facemasks. All I need now is someone who’s willing to help me road-test them, so, if you’re *really* feeling adventurous, Miranda, how about I come round



one night after the bookshop closes and give you a complete makeover, not just the facemasks, but hair, nails, makeup, the works?’

Miranda beamed. ‘I’d love that.’

‘Great. Have you ever thought about getting a tattoo?’

The look of horror that flashed across Miranda’s face made Suzie giggle.

‘Erm, no, actually, I...’

‘Oh, I don’t mean a permanent tattoo. No, I mean a *henna* tattoo. Something to remind you that life is simply a series of events. Some are fun, some are exciting, and some are sad or terrifying, but they are all just part of the journey that we’re on, and in order to get the most from the time we’ve been given, we need to grab our courage and experience everything that’s on offer. Don’t you agree?’

‘I do, and I’d love to give you something in return.’

‘Really?’

‘When the twins were at high school, I worked part-time for a small marketing agency, so I could help you design the labels for your new business, if you like. I’m sure you know that a strong brand is *the* most important part of any successful enterprise.’

‘Oh, Miranda, that would be amazing, thank you so much.’

‘And I can help, too,’ said Katerina, her eyes alive with excitement. ‘Stefanos’ brother Darius works for a printing company in Fira – they print the *Santorini Gazette* – and I could ask him to run off a couple of sheets of labels for you.’

I'm sure he wouldn't mind doing something a little more creative for a change.'

'Oh, you guys are awesome.'

The women came together in a group embrace, and over Miranda's shoulder Suzie saw Heidi give Katerina a surreptitious thumbs up. Her heart ballooned with affection when she realised that the two friends had been planning the suggested beauty makeover for a while.

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When she finally slid into bed that night, she was exhausted and exhilarated in equal measure. While she had formed several close friendships with her fellow beach hut owners in Blossomwood Bay, she hadn't been brave enough to take them up on their offers to socialise with them beyond the occasional coffee, and more recently Rachel's yoga session, which meant that she had felt like she was lingering on the fringes of their friendship group. She knew that was her choice, and that it was out of necessity, but that hadn't stopped her from feeling lonely and insignificant.

However, in Santorini, she felt like she was an integral part of the community, just like she had when she had been at school in Norwich, or at university in Nottingham, before she had headed to London and her life had taken a more dramatic turn. She sent up a missive of gratitude to the director of her fate for writing a brand-new chapter for her – this time in the sun-filled beach read genre instead of the horror genre.



## Chapter Twelve

As it was her first day off since she'd arrived on Santorini over a week ago, Suzie decided to have a lie-in, snoozing on and off as she listened to the various sounds of Oia waking up, and watching the early morning sunshine stream through the slats in the shutters. Once again, her dreams had not been plagued with the upsetting flashbacks she'd endured for over a year, which meant she had slept well and had more energy to face the day without constantly dwelling on the past.

Eventually she dragged herself from the comfort of her sofa bed and headed to the bathroom, luxuriating in a slightly longer shower than she usually took, before pulling on her favourite pair of harem pants and a skimpy bra top and heading to the tiny kitchen nook to make herself a cup of Amber's peppermint tea, which she seemed to have acquired an unexpected liking for.

She had just set the kettle to boil when she noticed something had been shoved under the door. She padded across the marble floor and stooped to collect a crumpled envelope with her name scribbled across the front in pencil, but before she could investigate the contents there was an urgent pounding on the door.

'Suzie? Suzie? Are you there?'

She shoved the envelope into the pocket of her cotton trousers and pulled open the door, surprised to see Heidi standing on the doorstep in a pair of stripy shorts and a strappy

tee-shirt, her face devoid of her signature glittery makeup, her hair uncombed, her green eyes wide with worry.

‘Heidi? What’s wrong?’

‘It’s Miranda. Will you come with me to the bookshop?’

‘Of course. What’s happened?’

‘I’ll tell you on the way.’

Suzie grabbed her hoodie, slid her feet into her trainers, and when she turned round, she saw that instead of waiting for her, Heidi had already dashed back down the steps to the street. She jogged to catch up with her, weaving around the town’s early risers, which gave her no opportunity to ask what was going on. When they arrived at the bookshop, Heidi paused in the courtyard to inhale a deep breath and square her shoulders, and then pushed open the door. Suzie stepped in behind her, not quite sure what to expect, but it definitely wasn’t the sight that was spread out in front of her.

Instead of the carefully curated books, housed in their respective genres in alphabetical order on neat floor-to-ceiling shelves that hugged every contour of the store, it looked like there had been an explosion of reading material. Everywhere she looked there were books scattered across the floor, their dust jackets wrenched away from their covers, their pages stretched open, their spines broken. It was carnage, like a bibliographic battlefield strewn with casualties, and in complete contrast to the oasis of serenity of the previous evening.

In the midst of all the chaos was Miranda, sitting in a chair behind the cash desk, her head lowered as she wiped away

tears with a tiny handkerchief. Her cheeks were pale and the expression on her face utterly distraught.

‘Oh, Miranda, are you okay?’

Heidi rushed forward to embrace her, causing a cascade of crime novels to tumble in her wake like a game of literary Jenga, and Suzie was forced to pick her way across the floor at a more cautious pace so as to not add a torrent of sci-fi books into the mix. She was desperate to know what had happened, but supporting Miranda was her first priority, and when she was finally able to offer her a hug, she wasn’t surprised to find she was shaking.

‘I’ll get you a glass of water,’ Suzie offered.

‘No! Don’t go into the bathroom!’ Miranda nearly shouted.

‘What? Why not?’

To Suzie’s consternation Miranda started to cry again, this time huge racking sobs. She exchanged an anxious glance with Heidi over the top of Miranda’s head, then mimed “I’ll take a look”, thrusting her thumb in the direction of the door that led to the bookshop’s restrooms and ignoring the uncomfortable swirl of trepidation that had started to coil through her chest as she contemplated what she might find in there.

Fortunately, the area to the left of the cash desk had escaped the “book tornado” relatively unscathed, and she was able to navigate the short distance without too much difficulty. She turned the brass handle and tentatively pushed open the restroom door, relieved to find there were no wild animals lurking in the cubicles, ready to launch an attack on the next person to use the facilities. She took a step inside, noting the

gleaming white marble floor, the impressive chandelier that wouldn't have looked out of place in the Palace of Versailles, and the pretty pot plant on the unit next to the dual sinks.

And then she saw it.

‘Oh my God!’

She stared at the mirror, her heart pounding out a symphony of shock until she realised that the words scrawled across its surface weren't written in blood as she had initially thought, but in bright red lipstick, and the famous Shakespearean quote “*Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo*” had been embellished with copious drawings of hearts and... what looked like kisses made with real lips.

Ergh!

No wonder Miranda was so upset.

She quickly headed out of the bathroom, closing the door behind her, and hanging an “Out of Use” sign, which she found on a stack of John Grisham novels, on the handle to prevent anyone else from entering and finding the disturbing image.

As she made her way back to where Miranda, under the gentle ministrations of Heidi, was looking a little less distressed, her eyes snagged on the linen-bedecked table Heidi had used as her makeshift cocktail-shaking bar the previous night, still playing host to a selection of spirits, and she made a quick detour to pour Miranda a small brandy.

‘Here, drink this.’

Miranda took a sip, the colour returning to her cheeks almost immediately.

‘Thanks, Suzie.’

‘Can you tell us what happened?’

Miranda took another gulp of her brandy, grimacing as it scorched down her throat.

‘I really don’t know. The place was like this when I arrived this morning; all our wonderful books just tossed around the place like discarded litter. I thought the roof might have fallen in! I was so shocked, I didn’t look where I was going and managed to trip over a mound of fantasy novels and fall flat on my face, grazing my hands and my knees. And when I went into the bathroom to find the First Aid kit, well... you’ve seen what’s in there. Oh, this is all my fault.’

‘How can it be your fault?’ said Heidi, completely bewildered.

To Suzie’s astonishment, a flush of heat seeped into Miranda’s pale cheeks, and she averted her eyes to focus on twisting her crumpled handkerchief through her fingers. When she finally spoke, her voice was hoarse with emotion.

‘Because... I forgot to lock the door when I went home last night.’

‘Then, if anyone is to blame,’ Heidi whispered. ‘It’s me.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘If I hadn’t made you all those chocolate martinis you would never have forgotten to lock up.’ Heidi gulped down hard, her soft Welsh accent more pronounced as her emotions rose and tears threatened to spill. ‘I’m so sorry, Miranda.’



‘Heidi, you’re not responsible for what happened here, and neither is Miranda,’ said Suzie, firmly, dismayed by the anguish written across her friends’ faces as well as the necklace of tears along their lower lashes. ‘Look, why don’t we head over to the taverna for one of Giorgos’ Greek coffees to settle our nerves while we decide what to do?’

Miranda nodded her agreement and ten minutes later they were sitting on the veranda at *Taverna Giorgos*, making their way through one of Stefanos’ breakfast platters. When they told Giorgos what had happened, he was horrified, and insisted on pouring them each a *glikos* coffee – with extra sugar – to help with the shock they had all experienced. He then joined them at the table with a *sketos* – rich, dark, and bitter – for himself.

‘You need to report this to the police,’ said Giorgos, his expression serious.

‘Oh, no, I don’t think that’s necessary,’ Miranda replied, clearly flustered by the suggestion.

‘Was anything taken?’

‘No, and it was probably just a silly prank.’

‘Well, if that’s the case, it’s in very poor taste,’ Giorgos said, a look of anger on his face.

Miranda flashed a quick look of panic in Suzie’s direction, and she realised that the reason her new friend was reluctant to involve the authorities was that she would have to admit to leaving the door unlocked all night, and possibly even wide open, thus inviting any passing party-goer who’d have a few too many ouzos – and there were a lot of those in Oia on any

given evening – to pop inside and have a little fun in the quirky bookshop.

Fortunately, Giorgos accepted Miranda’s decision not to call the police, and left them to enjoy their coffees while he welcomed a group of walkers who’d arrived for a hearty breakfast before setting off to hike the Caldera Trail. After handing them the menu, he strode off to the kitchen where Stefanos had just finishing whipping up an omelette, which Giorgos then delivered to the sandy-haired bartender-cum-writer who was scrolling through his phone at the other side of the veranda.

‘Hey, I’ve just had an idea!’ announced Heidi, jumping up from her seat and causing Suzie to jolt in surprise. ‘I know what will cheer you up, Miranda. Just give me a minute.’

‘Heidi, I’m actually not—’

But Heidi had already disappeared into the kitchen.

‘Are you okay?’ Suzie asked gently, knowing that Miranda had purposely avoided mentioning the scene in the bathroom to Giorgos so as to not freak Heidi out, but that she must have been as shocked as Suzie was when she’d first seen it. ‘Are you sure about not wanting to inform the police? I’ll come with you if you like.’

Suzie ignored the tickle of anxiety the mention of the police caused, and while she would have done whatever was necessary to support Miranda, she was relieved when her friend shook her head.

‘Thanks, Suzie, that’s kind of you, but I really don’t think —’

‘Okay,’ said Heidi, who was now wearing her *Taverna Giorgos* apron and a broad smile, as well as her usual sparkly eye makeup, today’s a vibrant purple edged with silver stars. ‘It’s all sorted.’

‘What is?’

‘I remembered what you said last night, Miranda, about wanting to go on a Big Fat Worldwide Dance Adventure, and, well, it just so just happens that Giorgos is *the* best Greek dancer in the whole of Santorini! He used to teach classes to tourists before... well, before he stopped doing that... and, after a little persuasion, he’s agreed to give you a one-to-one lesson to cheer you up after what happened this morning. So, your very first dance will be a Greek dance, taught to you by a local expert, just like you wanted! Oh, and I’m hoping to source a costume for you to wear, too.’

Tears returned to Miranda’s eyes, but this time they were tears of joy, and of gratitude for Heidi’s thoughtfulness and support.

‘I... I don’t know what to say.’

‘You don’t have to say anything.’

‘*Efharistó*, Heidi.’

‘*Parakaló*.’

Heidi gave Miranda a quick hug, then floated away to take the hikers’ breakfast order, her habitually cheerful demeanour returning when the guy who was wearing a khaki utility vest said he’d hiked up Snowdonia several times and they started to share weather-related anecdotes.

‘Okay, I think I should head back to the bookshop and make a start on the tidying up.’

‘Need any help?’ Suzie asked. ‘It’s my day off today.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it! Go off and enjoy whatever you have planned.’

‘I don’t actually have anything planned.’

‘Then the world’s your oyster, as they say!’

Miranda patted Suzie on the shoulder and made her way from the taverna, leaving behind the faint aroma of crushed rose petals. Suzie checked her watch and was astonished to see that it was only ten a.m. and that the whole day stretched out in front of her with nothing to do and no one to do it with.

To her surprise, she suddenly felt bereft.

When she was at home in Devon, she actually preferred her own company, often turning down invitations to join her friends on their various activities, mainly for fear of encountering someone who recognised her from when she’d lived in London. It had only happened on two occasions since she’d fled the capital, but both times had been traumatic and had left her with recurring nightmares that the whole heart-breaking debacle would be revisited in the local press – accompanied by photographs – and she would have to move on again.

However, here in Santorini, she felt like a different person, like what had happened the previous year had happened to someone else, and the New Suzie Sandringham could do whatever she liked without having to first think about who she might bump into. No one knew her here, and anyway,

everyone was more concerned with enjoying their holiday than wondering who the woman with the pink-streaked hair sitting in the corner of a Greek taverna reminded them of.

While her demons hadn't yet headed off to torment another luckless soul with their snide, confidence-sapping comments, their hold on her emotions wasn't as tenacious as it had once been, and if Katerina, Heidi, or Miranda hadn't been at work, and had asked her to spend the day exploring the island with them, she would have jumped at the chance. However, she refused to waste her time off mooching around her studio when there was so much to see and do, so she tossed back the remainder of her coffee and rummaged in her pocket for her phone so she could do some research on the top ten "must-see" sights on Santorini.

When she pulled out her phone, the crumpled envelope she'd found shoved under the door that morning came with it and fluttered to the floor. She picked it up and stared at the scribbled writing for a moment, then ran her finger under the flap and drew out a scrap of paper – which looked like it had been torn from the back of a guidebook – and she couldn't prevent a smile from tugging at her lips when she read what it said:

*If you're ever looking for someone to give you a tour of the island, I'm happy to oblige.*

*Christos.*



# Chapter Thirteen

Before she could think of a reason not to do so, she dialled the number Christos had scrawled across the bottom of his note, her heart pounding against her ribcage as it was the first time in a long time she had called someone she was attracted to. Was she doing the right thing? What if...

‘*Ne?*’

‘Oh, hi, Christos, it’s Suzie.... from the gallery?’

‘*Yassou*, Suzie. I take it you got my note?’

She loved the way he said “Suzie” in his sexy Greek accent, and it was immediately clear from the tone of his voice that he was pleased she’d called. Her heartbeat slowed from gallop to trot, and her spirits lifted, giving her the confidence to continue their conversation without feeling she was imposing on his time.

‘I did, and I’d love to take you up on your offer, but...’

‘But what?’

‘It’s my day off *today*.’

‘That’s fine. I’ll collect you in thirty minutes.’

Before she could respond, the line went dead. She glanced down at the tattered old hoodie she’d pulled on in a hurry when Heidi had appeared on her doorstep in a state of panic, and cringed. She dropped a few euros on the table, waved goodbye to Giorgos, and hared back to her studio to change, choosing a pair of lightweight dungaree shorts and a sleeveless

white tee-shirt, hoping that her outfit was suitable for what Christos had in mind.

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This time Christos turned up on time.

She pulled open the door and experienced a surprise surge of desire that caused her cheeks to flush when she saw him standing there, his hands thrust casually into the pockets of his frayed jeans, his smile bracketed by the cute dimples that caused her heart to flutter. His dark wavy curls were still damp from the shower, and he had obviously been a little overzealous with the cologne, a detail that caused her to return his smile. Clearly, he was looking forward to their day together as much as she was.

‘Hey, Suzie, ready to see the *real* Santorini?’

‘Absolutely.’

Just as he had when they’d headed off for their sunset cruise, Christos slipped his palm into hers and, weaving in and out of the crowds of holidaymakers that had already descended on Oia that morning, he guided her down the street towards the archway that led to the main road.

‘Jump on.’

Suzie stared at the decrepit scooter parked at the kerb, which in a former life could have been blue... or grey... but was now the colour of rust. She had never ridden a scooter before, either as a driver or a passenger, and a swirl of



trepidation rotated through her chest at the prospect of doing so for the first time in a place where the rules of the road seemed to be interpreted as merely loose guidelines.

However, Christos had already thrust a helmet into her arms and was sitting astride the battered old scooter waiting for her to join him. She inhaled a breath and climbed on behind him, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist as they joined the flow of cars, Jeeps, vans, lorries, taxis, and tourist buses, every one of them determined to get to their destination in the shortest amount of time possible.

Once again, she marvelled at the fact that for such a small island, the traffic was so surprisingly, and worryingly, hectic, and she was relieved when, after only a few kilometres, Christos turned onto a quieter road and they were able to leave the crowds behind. She relaxed immediately, loosening her vice-like grip around Christos' waist and tipping her head back, revelling in the caress of the early October breeze that carried with it the fragrance of warm baked earth and a waft of Christos' sandalwood and leather cologne.

No matter which way she looked there was a view that wouldn't have looked out of place in a travel brochure; tiny hamlets nestled into the hillside, crumbling windmills surrounded by clusters of palm trees, flounces of bougainvillea draped over wonky stone walls, fields of low-level vegetation trained into what looked like over-sized bird's nests, all watched over by an infinite blue sky with not a cloud in sight.

Ten minutes later they arrived at a small family-run winery, its car park deserted but for a couple of shiny new motorbikes that had been parked in the shade of a pomegranate tree, its

fruit dangling from the branches like Christmas ornaments. Christos dismounted, hooked their helmets over the handlebars and pointed to a pair of wooden gates with polished brass signage, behind which was a whitewashed building with an expansive marble terrace. The terrace was home to numerous tables and chairs that were sheltered from the sun by several inter-connecting pergolas wrapped in foliage.

‘Welcome to the Alexandros Winery. Give me a minute, I’ll be right back.’

‘No problem.’

Suzie sauntered onto the terrace, surprised to see that only two of the tables were occupied, both by couples who only had eyes for each other as they tasted a selection of wines, each one paired with a seemingly constant stream of elegant white plates showcasing the most exquisitely arranged food. Suzie’s tastebuds tingled as she anticipated joining them, but to her astonishment, when Christos returned he was carrying a picnic basket in one hand and a wine cooler in the other.

‘This way.’

Trying hard to douse her disappointment, she took the cooler from Christos and followed him into the vineyard, the rock-strewn pathway causing her to stumble slightly, until they arrived at the perfect spot and all thought of the stylish restaurant on the terrace evaporated. Someone – she assumed the owners of the winery – had placed a small bistro table in the dappled shade of an ancient olive tree and set it for dining à deux. Christos placed the picnic basket on the blue and white-checked tablecloth, pulled out one of the chairs, and invited her to take a seat.

In front of her was a panoramic sweep of the Santorini countryside consisting of the low-level “bird’s nest” vegetation bordered by a parade of lemon and olive trees. Over a fence to her right was a small field in which a couple of donkeys were grazing languidly on a patch of yellowed grass, their tails swishing and their ears twitching.

It was the most beautiful vista.

‘This vineyard belongs to Michalis Alexandros, but it’s been in his family for three generations, and they make the best wine in the whole of Santorini. I have some here for you to taste, along with a selection of Greek mezze prepared by Petros, one of my fellow... One of my friends from Athens who came here to pursue a long-held dream to train as a chef.’

Christos opened the bottle of white wine, poured an inch of the pale lemon-coloured elixir into each glass, and raised his in a toast, his dark brown eyes meeting hers with such intensity that a zip of electricity shot through her whole body, causing her breath to catch in her throat. It really was *the* most romantic of settings, and she wondered why he’d chosen to bring her here, not to mention arranged with the owner for them to have such an intimate lunch.

‘*Yiomas*, Suzie!’

‘*Yiomas*.’

She took a sip of the wine, savouring the crisp, fresh acidity that danced across her tongue followed by flavours of lime, bruised apple, and a hint of honey, and finally a discernible earthiness that lingered on the palette long after she’d swallowed.

‘What do you think?’

‘I love it.’

‘Can you taste the mineral-like tang?’

‘Actually, I can.’

‘It’s because the grapes are grown in volcanic soil, which has a high mineral content. See these black pumice stones?’ Christos stooped to collect a rock the shape of a small rugby ball from the ground and handed it to Suzie. ‘Believe it or not, they’re part of the vineyard’s natural irrigation system. During the night, when the temperature lowers, they absorb moisture from the air, which they then release over the course of the following day. The arid conditions mean there’s a much lower yield, but the grapes are of excellent quality and produce this amazing wine that’s popular all over the world.’

Suzie glanced around her. Despite having an uninterrupted view of the surrounding area, she couldn’t see the snaking avenues of vines she expected to see in a vineyard, their leaves fluttering in the scant breeze.

‘So where exactly does Michalis grow his grapes?’

Christos’ forehead creased. ‘Well, here, at the vineyard, of course.’

Now it was her turn to look confused.

‘Ok... ay.’

Christos laughed. ‘See the circular wreaths? These are the vines. Look.’ Christos jumped from his chair and crouched next to one of the vines, gently lifting the leaves to reveal clusters of grapes, sheltered from the harsh rays of the sun

beneath a canopy of foliage and ripe for the picking. ‘They’re not trained around horizontal wires like in other wine-producing regions. Santorini is often buffeted by very strong winds, so the vines are twisted into these circles to create a sort of leafy basket in which the grapes are protected as they ripen.’

‘That’s amazing.’

‘Okay, that’s enough lectures on viticulture for the day. Are you hungry?’

‘Starving!’

‘Then let’s eat!’

Christos flipped back the lid of the picnic basket, exclaiming with delight as he decanted the contents and introduced each dish to Suzie with a discernible hint of pride in his voice.

‘Okay, so we have a Greek salad with locally produced feta cheese, and these dolmades have been made with ingredients grown in the vineyard’s own garden at the rear of the winery. This is bruschetta topped with anchovies, capers, and a squeeze of lime juice. These are tomato fritters that have to be eaten with Petros’ special-recipe sauce, and these are salted shrimp with fava bean paste topped with a radish and chive garnish. Over here we have a dish of roasted beetroot with grated cucumber and dill finished with a drizzle of olive oil made from Michalis’ home-grown olives, and here we have freshly baked *horiatiko psomi*. Dig in.’

Suzie didn’t have to be asked twice.

Another thing that had improved since arriving on Santorini was her appetite and she was determined to try everything on offer, even the dish that Christos told her was marinated octopus, which she wasn't sure she would like, but was the perfect accompaniment to what was clearly the star of the show: the wine.

When she and Adam had been together, he had liked to think that he was some kind of wine connoisseur, showing off his oenological knowledge whenever they went out to dinner at a fancy West End restaurant to celebrate a special occasion, or when he landed a new account for the accountancy practice where he was hoping to be made a junior partner. She, on the other hand, wasn't interested in whether the wine was flamboyant or nuanced, chewy or smooth, subtle or herbaceous, only whether she liked it or not, and the wine Christos had chosen to accompany their *al fresco* picnic had zoomed to the top of her list.

After devouring her share of the picnic, she sat back in her chair, replete. The only sound she could hear was from the insects brave enough to risk the heat to complete their daily tasks, oblivious to the fact that they had company in their little slice of paradise. Contentment descended. All her worries and anxieties melted away and she felt at one with her surroundings, part of the natural world where all that mattered was the daily pursuit of nourishment and shelter.

She was pleased Christos had brought her to the vineyard instead of racing around the island in an attempt to tick off the top ten Santorini must-sees. In the space of an hour, she had learned about the more important things the island had to offer the curious visitor: the delicious food, the spectacular wine –

and how it was made – and the talent of its residents in creating it and promoting it.

‘Thank you for bringing me here, Christos. It’s exactly what I needed after the craziness of this morning.’

‘What do you mean?’

She gave him a quick summary of the events at the bookshop.

‘And Miranda thinks it was someone playing a practical joke?’

‘Yes, she’s certain of it.’

‘And she’s sure she left the door open?’

‘Yes, that’s why she didn’t want to call the police, like Giorgos suggested.’

‘I can understand that. Shall we take a walk?’

‘I’d love to.’

Suzie sauntered down the dusty pathway that dissected the vineyard and the donkey’s field, her senses heightened by the close proximity of Christos and the occasional wisp of his cologne that floated on the air between them. She felt a strange affinity with him, as though they’d met before in a previous life, and that they had been friends – perhaps even... more than friends? The thought produced a pleasurable tingle in her lower abdomen, followed swiftly by a whoosh of embarrassment that caused her to blurt out the first question that popped into her head.

‘Do your family live here on Santorini?’

‘No, they live in Athens.’

Suzie regretted her enquiry when she saw the twist of annoyance on Christos' lips. She remembered then what he'd said when they were watching the sunset together, about how important it was to follow your dreams and the spark of irritation she'd seen in his eyes when he'd said it. She hadn't wanted to pry then, and she didn't want to do so now. Everyone had secrets they wanted to hold close to their chest – she knew that more than anyone – and if she'd inadvertently stumbled onto a subject Christos didn't want to talk about, she completely understood.

'I'm sorry, Christos, I didn't mean—'

'It's okay. I love my family, but we disagree on a lot of things that are important to me. My parents worked at Athens University for a while, both highly respected in their individual fields by their peers, until they left to run their own publishing business. My sister and I were brought up to believe that academia was the only way to secure a bright future, and while Lyra happily followed in their footsteps, and subsequently joined the company, I wanted to take a different path. I wanted to explore my *creative* passions, and whilst they didn't stop me, they didn't support me in my chosen career either.'

'So how did you end up in Santorini?'

'I needed to get away,' said Christos, his eyes trained on the horizon, clearly upset as he re-lived the catalyst to his departure. 'I'd broken up with my ex and had a blazing row with my sister. Lyra and I used to come here when we were young to visit our grandparents and when Dimitris offered me his boat and a place to stay, I grabbed it. I've been here for six



months and it feels like home now, a place I can escape the scrutiny of Athens and be myself, instead of having to constantly pretend I'm someone I'm not. I thought the people I loved would understand that, but obviously not.'

'I'm sorry, Christos, that must have been hard.'

'It was. Anyway, enough about me. Do you have someone special in your life?'

'No. I split up with my ex, Adam, over a year ago and there hasn't been anyone since.' She could feel her anxiety demons start to rouse from their slumber and moved swiftly on. 'I relocated to Devon, then in June there was the fire I told you about, and as if that wasn't enough of a catastrophe, two weeks ago my home got trampled on by a bunch of rampaging horses – it's a long story – and so my sister suggested I come over to Santorini to cover for her at the gallery while she goes travelling with her boyfriend. My mum lives in Bali – she's a schoolteacher there – and they're planning to spend some time with her before heading back here. At least... I hope they're heading back here.'

'Have you been over to Bali for a visit?'

'No. I'd love to go one day, but as I have no business and no job at the moment, I don't think that's going to happen anytime soon. It's been three months since the fire and we're still waiting for the insurance to be sorted out.'

'Why is it taking so long?'

Suzie sighed. 'The owner of the boardwalk is proving hard to contact.'

'Why?'

‘Because he’s on one of his solo hikes. He does them every year to “replenish his creativity coffers”, but I think it’s mainly to have some time away from his adoring fans, and the paparazzi.’

‘Is he an actor?’

‘No, he’s a musician. Dexter Hawkins.’

Christos’ jaw dropped, his eyes wide with surprise.

‘Dexter Hawkins lives in Devon?’

‘Yes, he owns an Edwardian manor house overlooking Blossomwood Bay.’

‘Wow, he didn’t mention that when.... When I read the interview he did with *Athens Today*. I’m sorry to hear you’re having difficulty locating him. Have you thought about contacting his manager, Andrew?’

She stared at him. ‘You know his manager?’

‘I think he was mentioned in the interview.’

‘Oh, okay, and yes, my friend Beckie – whose aunt owns the boathouse that was the only structure not to be affected by the fire – has been in touch with him. He’s also had problems contacting Dexter, so he’s flown over to California to try to find him, although from what I’ve seen on his Instagram feed, he’s been spending most of his time at Hollywood parties rather than roughing it on the Pacific Crest Trail like his client. But hopefully it shouldn’t be long before we get some news. Apparently, there was a sighting of Dexter at a campfire sing-along a couple of weeks ago.’

‘I’m sorry you’re having to deal with that, Suzie. It must be so stressful.’

Their stroll around the vineyard had brought them back to where they’d left their picnic. Christos paused, leaning against the wooden fence that encircled the vineyard’s olive grove, his hand in hers, his eyes filled with sympathy, but something else, too. Something dark, intense, questioning. She held his gaze, aware that his lips were mere inches from hers, her body thrumming with anticipation as he drew her closer, his breath soft on her cheek as he....

*‘Argh!’*

To her astonishment, Christos leapt away from her like Tigger on speed and took refuge behind their picnic table. When she looked over her shoulder to see what had caused his sudden flight, she couldn’t help but laugh. One of the donkeys in the adjacent field must have found a gap in the fence and had decided to join them – at the most inopportune moment! She took hold of its harness, wrinkling her nose at the rather ripe “donkey smell”, and led him back to his field before returning to find Christos had packed away their empty plates and glasses and was ready to leave.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes, yes, absolutely...’ Christos shoved his hands in his pockets and met her eyes, then his shoulders sagged, and he sighed. ‘Okay, no, sorry, I’m not okay. I’m... well, I’m scared of donkeys... Actually, I’m scared of most animals.’

‘You’re scared of animals?’

After running his fingers through his curls several times, Christos dropped onto one of the rattan chairs and invited Suzie to take the other. She did as he suggested and waited in sympathetic silence for him to gather his emotions and explain.

‘When I was five years old, I was bitten by a stray dog.’ Christos stuck out his leg and pointed to the oval-shaped scar on his calf that she’d noticed when they were on Dimitris’ boat the previous week. ‘Ever since then I’ve been terrified, not just of dogs, but of horses, donkeys...’

‘Goats?’

Christos nodded, his cheeks taking on a pink hue. ‘And cats, too. I’m sorry, Suzie, but when I knocked you off the stepladder outside the gallery, I’d just seen a gang of feral cats – there must have been at least nine or ten of them – and I was sure they were about to give chase, so I ran, and I didn’t expect you to be standing on a ladder in the middle of the street, and...’

‘It’s fine, really. I understand.’

‘I know I should face my fears, and I’m working on it, but well... suffice to say it’s still a work-in-progress, which involves slowly exposing myself to that which I fear most, and there’s a distinct lack of people who keep dogs and cats as soft-hearted family pets in Santorini.’

‘Well, I can personally attest that there are some very soft-hearted dogs in Devon. I have the pleasure of owning a cute little dachshund called Archie who wouldn’t hurt a fly, and my friend Holly has a gorgeous springer spaniel called Ariel, and

her boyfriend has a lively, but gentle, westie called Max. I'm sure if you met *them*, you'd feel differently.'

Christos looked sceptical. 'Maybe. Are you afraid of anything, Suzie?'

She wondered if journalists counted.

She would much rather be pursued by a rampant bevy of feral cats any day! Although, if she remembered correctly, the posse of cats she'd seen outside the gallery before she started to hang the sign had looked pretty tame to her. However, instead of questioning his judgement, or worse, belittling his obvious, and justifiable phobia, she decided it was prudent to move away from talking about their fears and change the subject to something more positive.

'Does the Alexandros Winery have a shop?'

'Of course. Why?'

'Because I'd like to buy a bottle of wine for Miranda.'

'Great idea!'

They wandered back to the winery in companionable silence, giving Suzie the opportunity to mull over the various things Christos had shared with her over lunch and on their subsequent perambulation. She was happy that he'd felt able to confide in her about his fear of animals and its origin, but she suspected there was a lot more to his story about relocating to Santorini than he was letting on.

She sighed. It seemed that everyone she had met in Santorini so far – apart from Giorgos, maybe – was running away from something. Not just Christos, but also Katerina, Miranda, and even Heidi.

And, if she was being honest, she should add her own name to that list, too.



# Chapter Fourteen

‘Hi Suzie, how are things at the gallery?’

Suzie grinned when she heard her sister’s voice, her soft Norfolk accent more pronounced over the telephone line all the way from Southeast Asia. A sudden spasm of homesickness threatened to engulf her; she missed her sister – and her mum – so much, and she wished they’d been able to spend more time together than they had over the last year, but they were both pursuing their dreams and that was the most important thing to her.

‘Everything’s fine, don’t worry.’

‘And it doesn’t look like a tornado has passed through?’

Suzie cringed; her sister knew her so well.

‘Of course not.’

‘And what about my plants? Are they still alive?’

‘They’re thriving,’ she said, crossing her fingers behind her back before moving swiftly on. ‘You’ll be pleased to know that over the last couple of weeks we’ve sold six of Kat’s larger paintings and three of her marble sculptures, which she said was a record for the end of September. Oh, and guess what? I happened to mention how much I miss being able to indulge in a few hours of creativity, and Kat has offered to let me use her art studio over in Armeni this afternoon. I’m going to have a go at throwing a pot!’



‘Oh, that’s fabulous. I went over there last month with Tom. We had lots of fun, if you know what I mean.’ Amber giggled. ‘Talking of romance, how did your day out at the vineyard go last week? I have to say the photos you sent me of the two of you enjoying a bottle of wine together were *swoon worthy*. Christos is gorgeous, isn’t he?’

Suzie felt her cheeks colour and was glad she wasn’t on a video call.

‘I suppose so. I hadn’t really noticed,’ she mumbled.

‘Oh Suzie, I’m so pleased you’re dating again. It’s been such a long time.’

‘It was just a picnic, Ambie.’

‘Did you kiss?’

‘No! We did *not* kiss!’

‘Shame, but there’s always next time. Oh, I’ve got an idea! Why don’t you ask him to tag along with you this afternoon? You could recreate that scene from *Ghost!*’

‘We’re not going to recreate the scene from *Ghost!*’ Suzie shot back, deciding that, in her sister’s case, the best line of defence was attack. ‘So, tell me about Malaysia. What’s the food like? Did you do that zip wire ride you were telling me about?’

The next twenty minutes were filled with Amber’s stories of their intrepid backpacking adventures; exploring the Batu Caves, visiting hillside tea and coffee plantations, trekking into the jungle to see sun bears in the wild, something Suzie knew she would never be able to persuade Christos to do.

‘When do you fly to Bali?’

‘The day after tomorrow. Oh, did Mum tell you what she’s doing now?’

‘No? What?’

‘She’s volunteering at an animal sanctuary, and they have Sumatran tigers! You know it’s my absolute dream to see a real life tiger. Tom’s excited, too – about the tigers, that is. I think he’s more nervous about meeting Mum for the first time than coming face to face with one of the world’s most endangered Big Cats. Oh, I can’t wait to see her, Suzie.’

‘Give Mum a big hug from me,’ said Suzie, swallowing down on an uptick of emotion. She wished with all her heart that she could be with them, but as that wasn’t possible, she inhaled a breath and told her sister she loved her.

‘Love you, too, Suze. Now go and water my plants!’

Suzie laughed and the line was cut.

She flung back the sheets from her sofa bed and hopped in the shower, experiencing a surge of gratitude for not only having the sole use of a full-sized shower cubicle, but for the luxury of living in a place with four sturdy stone walls that kept the heat out. Whether it was summer or winter, her tepee was often powerless to protect her against the vagaries of the English weather, but the fluctuation of the temperature was nothing compared to the constant battle she fought with the mud; something she was sure did not feature on the residents of Santorini’s list of environmental problems.

As it was still early, she grabbed her handbag – which looked a little wrinkled after its unscheduled swim in the sea –

and headed for the taverna with a spring in her step. Her sister always had a way of lifting her spirits, no matter how low they had dipped, and last year her spirits had certainly sunk to the very bottom rung of the happiness scale. She would be eternally grateful to Amber for dropping everything and rushing to her side when her world had come tumbling down, and she was pleased her sister had found someone like Tom, who was clearly doing the same for her.

When she stepped onto *Taverna Giorgos*' veranda, she wasn't surprised to see Katerina already there, sipping a cup of her favourite Greek coffee while sneaking regular peeks into the kitchen every time the door swung open. Suzie could see that Stefanos was in there, whipping up a conveyor belt of omelettes for a group of thirty-something men in dark glasses who looked like they were all suffering from the king of all hangovers.

*'Kalimera, Suzie. Your usual?'*

*'Yes, please, Giorgos.'*

No sooner had Giorgos disappeared behind the bar to make her coffee, than Heidi burst from the kitchen and rushed across to their table, sliding into the seat next to Katerina and thrusting her phone in front of her face.

*'Look! He's here!'*

*'What exactly are you—'*

*'HolsHacker! He's here... in Santorini!'*

*'Oh my God!'*

Katerina grabbed Heidi's phone from her, and they all watched the brief YouTube video that featured Santorini's port

at Athinios where two reality TV stars had disembarked from one of the regular ferries, dressed in the skimpiest of outfits, their long legs beautifully bronzed, their hair salon-fresh, clearly playing up to the camera.

However, while the two celebrities might have started out as the focus of *HolsHacker*'s video, their star-power had been supplanted by what was going on in the background where two older women in towering leopard-print stilettos were dealing with the aftermath of having inadvertently stepped into a large "deposit" that had been left by one of the many donkeys that were used to take day-trippers up the hill to the town. Suzie knew she shouldn't laugh, but the expression of revulsion on their faces was pure comedy gold and the vlog already had ten thousand likes.

Heidi took her phone back from Katerina and slotted it into the front pocket of the bright orange shorts she was wearing. They matched that day's shade of eyeshadow, which looked like a miniature version of the Santorini sunset. Heidi exuded a sort of chlorine-esque aroma that Suzie couldn't quite put her finger on, and she decided not to enquire about it, in case she was asked for her honest opinion.

'What if he comes to Oia?' said Heidi, pulling a face.

'He won't,' said Katerina, gently. 'Don't worry.'

'But... Oh my God!' Heidi's hand flew to her lips.

'What?'

'What if he hears about what happened at the book shop last week?'

This time it was Suzie's turn to placate Heidi. 'He *won't*.'

‘How do you know?’

‘Well, because no one knows about it apart from you, me, Kat, and Miranda. And Giorgos.’

‘And the person who did it,’ added Katerina, unhelpfully.

‘And their friends,’ said Heidi.

‘Okay, apart from them.’

‘And I told Stefanos,’ said Katerina, sheepishly. ‘Sorry.’

‘Okay, well, apart from—’

‘Oh, and Miranda’s friend Cynthia who helped her to clean up,’ added Heidi.

‘So the whole of Oia knows then?’ Suzie laughed, realising that she too had been guilty of sharing the incident with Christos.

‘Probably, if Cynthia’s got anything to do with it.’ Katerina grinned and glanced across the veranda as the kitchen door swung open. ‘She’s a bit of a gossip, I’m afraid.’

‘Talking of gossip,’ said Heidi, scooting to the edge of her seat and placing her chin in the palm of her hand, her green eyes focused on Suzie like laser-beams, ‘do you want to fill us in on what you did on your day off?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘A little bird told me they saw you with an extraordinarily attractive guy at the Alexandros Winery, and I’m assuming it’s the same guy who took you out for the sunset-cruise-that-definitely-wasn’t-a-date. For “just a friend”, he *does* seem to take you to *the* most romantic places on the island. I mean, the food at the winery is to die for! Apparently, the chef there not

only used to play the drums in a famous Greek rock band, but rumour has it that he's also about to be awarded with a Michelin star! So, come on, when do we get to meet him?'

'The chef?'

Heidi rolled her eyes. 'No, Christos!'

The thought of introducing Christos to Heidi and Katerina gave Suzie palpitations, especially when she envisaged them sitting at this very table cross-examining him as to his future intentions, or something equally as embarrassing. As it was, whenever she thought of their meander through the countryside that had almost-but-not-quite culminated in a passionate kiss, her heart skipped a beat and she cursed the inconvenient appearance of their donkey friend. She cast around for a change of subject and she knew exactly what would divert Heidi's interest.

'So, have you decided when you're going to do Miranda's makeover?'

'Oh, yes! With all the excitement about the vlogger I completely forgot! It's Monday night. Monday is the quietest night at the taverna, and Giorgos has agreed to close early so we can do it here.'

'What? The makeover?'

'No, not the makeover. Guess what?' Heidi squealed, clapping her hands with excitement, and causing the taverna's breakfast customers to glance in their direction to see what the commotion was about. 'Giorgos has offered to give us *all* a Greek dance lesson. So, I'll do Miranda's makeover at my

apartment first, using the items from my new SOS Skincare range, then we'll head over here.'

Suzie was horrified when Heidi leaned forwards to scrutinise her face. Her skincare regime had been one of many things to have fallen by the wayside since she'd lost her beach hut – and her means of earning a living – and she knew her skin was dry and more than a little dull.

'Why don't you come along, too, Suzie?'

'Oh, no, I...' she began, then stopped. What was she thinking? She was desperate for a bit of pampering. 'Actually, I'd love that, thanks, Heidi.'

'Giorgos has asked a couple of his friends to provide the music while we learn all the dance moves. Hey, why don't you invite Christos to join us? The more, the merrier, as my mum always says.'

'I'm not sure...'

'She'll invite Christos if you invite Nathan,' said Katerina, with a sparkle of mischief in her eyes. 'I've seen you watching him while he scribbles in that journal of his, a dreamy look in those gorgeous green eyes of yours. You like him, don't you?'

'Well, you have to admit that he *is* handsome, in a "I'm-so-laid-back-I-might-fall-over" kind of a way. I love it when his hair falls across his face and he sweeps it back over his forehead, only for it to fall back into his eyes again. And for your information, I *have* asked him to join us, but all I got was a vague, non-committal shrug and something about having to work at the hotel on Monday night.'

'Never mind, Heidi, he can't work every night.'

‘True, true.’

Heidi jumped from her chair and dashed off to the kitchen, and Suzie watched Katerina strain her neck to catch a glimpse of Stefanos as the door swung open and then closed behind Heidi. As both she and Heidi had just been cross-examined about their love lives – if she could call it that – she felt suddenly emboldened to ask Katerina about hers.

‘Is Stefanos working on Monday night, too? I bet he would love to join us, if only for the comedy value of watching me, Heidi, and Miranda make complete fools of ourselves.’

‘I don’t know if that’s such a good idea.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because Giorgos told me he’s still hung up on his fiancée.’

‘His fiancée?’

‘Sorry, his ex-fiancée. She apparently ran off with his cousin a couple of months ago. They live in Mykonos now.’

‘Oh, I—’

‘Okay, I think I’d better head off to open the gallery. You stay and finish your coffee. I’ll see you later.’

Before Suzie could say anything further, Katerina was striding across the veranda, her heels clickety-clacking on the wooden slats. Not wanting to dally for too long either, she tossed back her coffee and had just hooked her bag over her shoulder when she saw that Heidi’s would-be dance partner was sitting at his usual seat in the corner of the veranda, sipping coffee and staring at an undefinable point in the distance, deep in thought.



She wondered why he was always by himself. Why didn't he ask one of his friends or colleagues from the hotel in Parissa to join him? That morning he looked particularly lonely – and a little bit sad – so, in a completely uncharacteristic gesture on her part, she decided to say a cheery hello on her way past his table. Even making the decision to do that caused her spirits to lift.

‘*Kalimera*,’ she said with a broad smile.

Her greeting had clearly taken him by surprise because he jolted in his seat, his body stiffening and his pale blue eyes wary at the unexpected interruption as he looked up from where he'd been typing something into his phone.

‘Sorry, I didn't mean to make you jump.’

‘It's fine, it's just... sorry. *Kalimera*, I'm Nathan.’

Nathan pushed back his chair and stood, slotting his phone into the pocket of his beige canvas trousers, then offering Suzie his palm and subjecting her to an unexpectedly firm handshake before surprising her by asking her to join him for a coffee. She was about to decline but she didn't want to appear rude. After all, she'd interrupted *him* and not the other way round.

‘Thanks. I'm Suzie.’

As she waited for Giorgos to bring them their coffees, she tried to ignore the squirm of discomfort that had started to worm its way upwards from her stomach, tightening as it went, and eroding that initial spark of confidence she'd experienced before she'd uttered her ill-advised greeting to a random stranger.

What had she been thinking?

Fortunately, Nathan didn't seem to notice how uncomfortable she was in his company and after taking a sip of his *metrios* he had launched into a soliloquy about how good the coffee was at *Taverna Giorgos*, and how he made it a habit to get his caffeine fix there before he started work, which enabled her to talk about Katerina and her love of the coffee bean. Her bout of nervousness began to retreat, and she even allowed herself a smile when she saw Nathan scoop back his sandy hair from his eyes and toss it over his forehead in the gesture that had caught Heidi's attention.

Her friend was right; Nathan was attractive, in his canvas trousers and collarless linen shirt with its cuffs rolled back to reveal the child's plastic watch she'd noticed before. Now she was sitting next to him she saw that the cartoon character was Winnie the Pooh, a choice she applauded, even if she did think it unusual for a man in his thirties. Perhaps it was a gift from someone special, or maybe a childhood keepsake, and she wondered if the same went for the slender silver chain he wore around his right wrist.

'Heidi said you're a bartender at a hotel in Parissa.'

'Heidi?'

Suzie's heart sank. Nathan clearly didn't remember their introduction as clearly, or as fondly, as Heidi did, which made her sad. She nodded towards where Heidi had just served breakfast to a couple who had brought their Pekinese with them and was currently fussing over the little dog whilst sending enquiring glances in Suzie's direction.

'Ah, yes, Heidi. Yes, she's right, I am.'

‘That must be fun.’

‘I suppose so,’ said Nathan, without enthusiasm.

‘It’s a bit of a drive, though, isn’t it?’

‘What is?’

She was surprised at the confusion in Nathan’s eyes. ‘From Parissa?’

‘Oh, yes, yes, it is, but as I said, they do serve the best coffee on the island here.’

Suzie saw Nathan flick his eyes towards the entrance of the taverna where another group of breakfast-seekers had arrived, and it occurred to her for the first time that perhaps he *hadn’t* been sitting at his corner table alone and lonely as she had initially thought, but was simply waiting for someone, a thought that caused her cheeks to colour.

‘Okay, well, I’d better—’

‘Actually, before you go, I happen to have overheard you and your friends chatting about a party you’re organising—’

‘Oh, it’s not a party, just a dance lesson for one of our friends to cheer her up after... after she had a bit of a shock the other day.’

‘What kind of a shock?’

Suzie hesitated, unsure whether she should tell Nathan about the incident at the bookshop, even though she knew that, if asked, Heidi would probably have disclosed every minute detail of the debacle. Nevertheless, she decided it was best not to say anything because she knew what it was like to be the subject of the gossip grapevine.

‘Oh, just some news from home.’ She knew immediately from the look in Nathan’s sharp eyes that he didn’t believe her and so she cast around for something to divert their conversation and was embarrassed by her lack of inventiveness. She would never make the grade as an interviewer! ‘So, what brings you to Santorini?’

‘I’ve taken a couple of months sabbatical from work, and as Santorini is one of the most photographed islands in Greece, if not the whole of the Mediterranean, I really wanted to come and see it for myself.’

‘Do you work in hospitality back in the UK?’

‘Hospitality? Oh, no, no, I don’t. I hear you work at the art gallery in town.’

Suzie assuming Heidi must have told him when they were chatting, although he could also have overheard her and Katerina talking about the gallery over their daily coffees, which made her slightly worried that anyone could be listening in to their conversations.

‘Yes, I do, and actually I’m late, so I’d better get going.’ She stood before Nathan could delay her further. ‘It was nice to meet you.’

‘You, too, Suzie.’

Nathan held her gaze for just a moment longer than she expected and as she left the taverna and made her way back to the gallery, a flash of unease sliced through her chest. Although she couldn’t put her finger on what had caused it, she felt as though her “friendly chat” with Nathan had been something more than superficial politeness. It was the first

time she had met him and yet he seemed to know things she wouldn't normally have expected – about where she worked, about the party they were organising – and her old insecurities came screaming back.

However, her unnerving encounter with Nathan flew straight from her mind when she stepped into the gallery and got a taste of what a customer's first impression of the shop would be. She vowed that today would *definitely* be the day she would tackle the cardboard chaos that she and Katerina seemed to attract, and was just about to head to the storeroom to collect the bin when she noticed that Katerina was sitting at the desk, a broad smile on her face.

'Oh, Suzie, you'll never believe what's happened!'

'No, I—'

'I've just sold one of the depressing paintings! That's two this month, which is completely unheard of.'

'Which one?'

'The black one.'

Suzie was none the wiser as, to her untrained eye, they were all black, and depressing.

'Which black one?'

'The one with the white and grey splashes on it.'

'That's fantastic.'

'It's reminded me that beauty's always in the eye of the beholder.'

'True.'

Suzie wouldn't admit it, but out of all the paintings that had been relegated to the room at the back of the gallery, the one the artist had entitled "The Sky at Night" was her least favourite.

'Oh, and I've just had a call from my friend, Eleni. She's coming here at lunchtime for a coffee and to chat about all-things fashion, so if you want to head over to my ceramics studio a bit earlier, then that's no problem.'

'Thanks, Kat.' Suzie paused as she remembered what Amber had said to her about her own visit to the studio. 'Is it okay if I invite Christos?'

'Of course it is.' Katerina laughed. 'On one condition.'

Suzie groaned inwardly, knowing she wasn't going to like what Katerina was going to suggest. 'What condition?'

'That you also invite him to the dance class on Monday.'

'I really don't know about that, Kat.'

'It's going to be lots of fun, and it would be great to meet him.'

To her surprise, Suzie experienced a repeat surge of the elusive confidence she had felt that morning at the taverna that had been the catalyst to her now-regretted urge to talk to Nathan. It felt good, despite its intermittent appearance, and she was determined to take advantage of its re-appearance. When she had lived in London, she had brimmed with self-confidence, never turning down an opportunity to meet new people, or try new things, but all that had evaporated in the space of a few minutes and, until her arrival on Santorini, she

had been too cowardly to work on putting that right. It was time to change that.

‘Okay, I’ll ask him.’

‘Great!’

However, Katerina continued to hold her gaze.

‘What?’

‘So call him!’

‘What, now?’

‘Yes.’

Fortunately, a customer chose that moment to enter the gallery and enquire about a multicoloured glass bowl in the window – one of Katerina’s most recent pieces – and Suzie was relieved she didn’t have to make the phone call in front of her friend. She was thrilled when Christos accepted her invitation to “throw a pot”, and she promised herself she would invite him to the dance class if their afternoon of creativity went as well as she hoped.





# Chapter Fifteen

Katarina's ceramics studio was housed in a small garage attached to the back of the house she rented on the outskirts of Armeni, a village further down the coast from Oia. Unlike Suzie's tiny apartment above the gallery, the house was spacious with two generous bedrooms and a bathroom on the ground floor, and a large light-filled lounge upstairs to take advantage of the stunning view across the caldera.

No wonder she was never short of inspiration.

However, Suzie wasn't there to tour the house, so she headed across a cobbled courtyard – home to an ancient olive tree that had a fun rope swing attached to one of its branches – and into the art studio, grinning broadly when she pulled open the door and saw what was inside. Her creativity had deserted her after the fire, and apart from a pair of earrings she'd made for Opal's birthday using coloured beads she'd found in a jar hiding under a pile of old *Vogue* magazines at the back of her tepee, she hadn't made anything.

As she feasted her eyes on the well-stocked shelves that lined all four walls, she could feel her artistic sprites awaken from their long slumber, and when she investigated the area behind a woven bamboo screen and saw the potter's wheel, they started to dance in delight. Her fingers tingled and she couldn't wait to grab a slab of the red-brown clay from the adjacent shelf and start making something. She'd made a few basic bowls and wonky flowerpots when she was at college, but here – in Katarina's wonderful studio – she had the wheel

all to herself and she was looking forward to seeing what she could create without the pressure of being watched by her fellow students.

Her excitement was interrupted by a loud knock on the door, and when she saw Christos standing on the threshold, there was no denying her growing feelings for him. As usual, he wore a pair of frayed jeans and scruffy espadrilles, but for their afternoon of pot-throwing he'd chosen a pale pink collared shirt, open at the neck to reveal a tantalising glimpse of chest hair. He'd also made a valiant attempt to tame his curls and had added a spritz of the sea-spray cologne he favoured, but what drew her to him was his smile, bracketed by the dimples she loved, that told her that he was equally as happy to see her.

‘Hi, Christos. Come on in.’

‘Wow, this place is amazing. What I wouldn't give to have a studio like this.’

‘It's fabulous, isn't it? What do you want to try first?’

‘You're the guru, you decide.’

Suzie laughed. ‘I wouldn't say that.’

‘You make artisan jewellery!’

‘I *used* to make artisan jewellery. Anyway, there's no jewellery equipment here.’

‘What about these?’ Christos picked up a jar filled with nuggets of polished glass in a kaleidoscope of colours that Suzie assumed were by-products of Katerina's glass-blowing items. ‘They look like gemstones, don't you think? It must be a very satisfying feeling to create a bespoke piece of jewellery

that you know will be treasured by your clients, and potentially passed down the generations.’

‘Oh, it is, it really is. I used to love seeing the look on people’s faces when I unveiled the piece of jewellery they’d commissioned. In fact, looking back, it was the best part of the whole process.’ Suzie paused for a moment, running her fingers through the jar of translucent pebbles as she contemplated what she had achieved over the last year before everything she’d worked for had ended up at the bottom of the bay. ‘You know, I thought designing jewellery was my dream career, but now I’m not so sure.’

‘Did you set up your jewellery business straight from college?’

‘No, I—’

She stopped, aware they were skirting around the edges of a subject she usually avoided talking about, but Christos was smiling at her, genuinely interested in what she had to say, and she decided she could risk opening up a little, like he had during their picnic together.

‘I didn’t have the funds to do that straight away, so I took a job at an upmarket jewellery store in the West End of London, which helped to replenish my bank account after university. However, it meant that I also got to learn about the business side of the trade, as well as which products sold well, and which of them didn’t. The store attracted a constant stream of people with more than enough money to last several lifetimes, and we sold a lot of very, *very* expensive watches, which didn’t really interest me, but the jewellery we sold was stunning! I was thrilled that I was able to study designs created

by some of the best in the business featuring flawless gemstones.’

‘How long did you work there?’

‘Five years.’

‘And then you were finally able to move to Devon to set up your own business?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

Suzie avoided Christos’ eyes. She’d already told him far more than she had intended, and more than she had shared with her fellow glamping site residents back in Blossomwood Bay. She had long suspected though that Jules, at least, knew more than he let on. Having previously lived with his brother in Pimlico, he had no doubt seen the reporting at the time. Holly knew what had happened, and so did Freya and Chloe, but even they didn’t know *all* the details.

‘Okay, so do you want to show me how to make a bracelet with these beads? Or what about a necklace, or maybe I’d look good in a toe ring?’

Suzie smiled, her spirits lifting at Christos’ enthusiasm.

‘Actually, if it’s okay with you, I thought we could do something different.’

‘What do you have in mind?’ asked Christos, his lips twitching at the corners.

To Suzie’s surprise, a wave of sexual attraction rolled through her body, and she quickly turned her back on Christos for fear he might notice the reaction his question had caused. It had been a long time since she’d experience a similar

response, and when her eyes strayed to the potter's wheel, she wondered whether it had been a good idea to invite Christos to join her at the studio – especially when she remembered what Amber had said about recreating the scene from *Ghost!*

However, when she saw the clay sitting on the shelf next to the wheel, she realised that she might not get another chance to have a go at throwing a pot, so, with some difficulty, she pushed the thought of Christos playing the male lead in the movie's re-make from her mind and pointed to the area behind the bamboo screen.

‘If it's okay with you, I thought we could have a go at throwing a pot.’

‘Sounds like fun. Is this the clay?’

Christos stretched across Suzie to liberate the chunk of clay from its plastic wrapping, his shirt riding up to reveal an expanse of naked torso. To her consternation, she realised that he had seen her admiring his muscular, bronzed abdomen and heat rushed into her cheeks as she took a seat on the narrow wooden plank behind the wheel and slammed the clay that Christos had handed to her onto the turntable, making sure it was dead centre.

She started the wheel, dipped her hands into a bowl of water and, with her forearm resting on the wheel's tray, she anchored the clay using the side of her left hand, then wrapped her fingers around it, squeezing it gently from the side and above, relishing the feel of the wet, slippery clay sliding across the palm of her hand. Using her left thumb and right index finger, she pushed deep into the centre of the clay, then pulled the walls out horizontally in one smooth motion, before

drawing them gently upwards using her knuckle until she'd created a tall, cylindrical vase of which she was inordinately proud.

When she finally looked up from her work of art, she was surprised to see Christos standing in front of her, watching her every move, his eyes dark and sultry. She had been so consumed in the intense creative process that she had completely forgotten he was there; it was just her and the chunk of well-lubricated clay that responded so obediently to her touch. Flustered by the emotions swirling through her body, she quickly washed and dried her hands, then drew a taut wire across the bottom of her vase and removed it from the wheel, setting it carefully onto a wooden board Katerina had placed on an adjacent table for just that purpose.

‘Okay, now it’s your turn.’

Christos didn’t have to be asked twice. He quickly cocked his leg over the narrow plank she had just vacated, and she helped him set a second piece of clay on the turntable, making sure it was in the middle, but as soon as the wheel started to rotate, the clay migrated to one side.

Suzie laughed. ‘You have to hold your hand like this.’

Without thinking, she straddled the seat behind him, threading her arms around his waist and taking hold of his hands with hers, guiding them around the clay, speaking softly and calmly as she helped him to ease his first pot into a wide-rimmed bowl shape. Naively, perhaps, she hadn’t expected it to be such a sensual experience; their bodies pressed tightly together, their hands entwined as they caressed the silky

smooth surface of the wet clay, the smell of rich earthiness floating through the air between them.

As the wheel slowed, Christos turned slightly in his seat so he could meet Suzie's gaze, causing a sharp flash of electricity to blaze through her veins. For a few delicious seconds, she felt as though time stood still as Christos waited for her to make the next move, his warm breath tickling her left earlobe and sending spasms of desire cascading down her spine. She smiled and a moment later his lips were on hers. Soft, gentle, it was a mere brush of a kiss, but then he drew her closer, this time kissing her properly, deeply, ardently, his embrace sending her emotions into a tantalising tailspin.

When they finally pulled apart, Suzie felt breathless and slightly disorientated, and she could see from the expression on Christos' face that he felt the same. The strength of their reactions had clearly taken them both by surprise, but there was no awkwardness between them. In fact, Suzie had never felt more at ease than she did at that moment, and she wished she could bottle the feeling and take it with her out into the world so she could use it whenever she needed a boost of confidence.

'So, what do you say we decorate our masterpieces?' asked Suzie, getting up from the potter's wheel seat so she could remove Christos' bowl with the wire and place it next to her tall narrow vase on the wooden board.

'Great idea. Let's use these beads.'

Christos grabbed the jar, picked out a handful of blue and green glass pebbles, and handed them to Suzie. She studied them for a moment, then pressed them into the top of her vase,

creating an attractive pattern that glinted in the shafts of sunshine slicing through the window. Unfortunately, the weight of the glass caused the rim to sink inwards, so that the aperture was the width of a coin and creating an undeniably phallic shape. Her lips twitched slightly, but she managed to quash the whip of amusement for fear of having to explain her reaction to Christos.

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Something simple; a sunflower, I think.’

Suzie watched Christos create a skilfully executed sunflower using yellow beads for the petals and a row of smaller green beads for a single leaf that climbed the side of the bowl.

‘Have you done this before?’ She laughed.

‘Actually, one of the reasons I came to Santorini was so I could explore my creative side. I’ve dabbled a little in oils and watercolours, and photography, but it’s harder than I thought to create something that truly speaks straight from the heart. I don’t seem to have found my niche yet, but maybe I should consider expressing my innermost emotions through the medium of clay? Thanks for being such a patient teacher, Suzie. Did you offer jewellery-making classes at your beach hut studio?’

‘No, I didn’t.’

‘You should think about it; you’d be good at it.’

After leaving university, she had dreamed of doing exactly as Christos had suggested. She had talked at length to her mum about teaching techniques and even gone so far as to



prepare a few lesson plans. Then, when she started working at the jewellery store, she discovered that her colleague Carmen had the same dream, and they had attended several silversmithing classes together to get an idea of what would be involved. Sadly, misfortune had intervened and they had both been forced to ditch their aspirations.

‘Suzie? Are you okay?’

‘Mmm?’

‘What’s wrong? You’re shaking!’

‘Oh, nothing, nothing, I’m fine.’

Christos was clearly not convinced. He passed her a damp cloth to clean her hands, then did the same himself, before lacing his fingers through hers in that familiar gesture she had grown to appreciate and giving them a gentle squeeze.

‘Okay, that’s enough creativity for one day. How does dinner sound?’

‘It sounds perfect. Shall we take these with us?’

Christos released her hand and picked up the wooden board on which stood their decorated vase and bowl in all their sparkling glory. Suzie was about to decline, but when she saw the pride for what he had created written across Christos’ face, she didn’t have the heart to suggest they left them behind.

‘Absolutely. We can drop them off at the gallery on the way to the taverna.’

Christos called a taxi and ten minutes later they’d let themselves into the now-closed gallery. She left Christos admiring his sunflower bowl – which she had to reluctantly

accept had turned out better than her vase, *and* without the embarrassingly phallic connotations – while she scampered up the steps to her apartment to change out of her clay-splattered clothes.

Walking back into the gallery she began, ‘Okay, shall we —’

But she got no further. Christos caught her wrist and pulled her into his arms, their bodies so close she could feel his heart pounding in his chest, his soft breath on her cheek. When he looked into her eyes, she felt as though he was scouring her very soul, and a shiver of anticipation spiralled out to her fingertips. This time it was Christos who made the first move, reaching up to gently caress the back of her neck, murmuring a long slow stream of Greek words that she had no chance of understanding, but which added to her rising pleasure.

Finally, his lips met hers and desire exploded through every part of her. She kissed him back, marvelling at the way her body reacted to Christos’ touch, desperate for their passionate embrace to go on forever. Even when their kiss had ended, Suzie could still feel the imprint of his lips on hers, and she knew that the connection she had found with Christos was something special, because in the two years she’d spent with Adam she had never felt the way she did now.

It had been an extraordinary day. One which she knew would remain in her memory bank for a long time. She felt buoyant, uplifted, and most of all, happy about the return of the creativity she thought had deserted her forever. Ideas had started to ricochet around her head; designs for quirky ceramics, the possibility of classes, maybe even learning how

to create smaller versions of Katerina's glass pieces that she could use to make jewellery.

'Katerina is a very talented artist,' said Christos, his eyes lingering on one of her oil paintings of the caldera. 'Hey, what's through that archway over there?'

Before Suzie could stop him, Christos was striding towards the room at the rear of the gallery where the dark, brooding paintings were hung, coming to a standstill in front of the largest of them and studying it as though he was a seasoned art critic.

'Do you like them?' Suzie asked.

'I think... they've got potential. You?'

She remembered Katerina's statement that beauty was in the eye of the beholder, and also that the world would be a very dull and boring place if everyone liked the same thing.

'They're certainly different. Okay, I'm starving. Are you ready to head to the taverna?'

'Absolutely.'

Suzie followed Christos out of the door of the gallery, making doubly sure she had locked it behind her after the incident at the bookshop.



## Chapter Sixteen

When Suzie descended the stairs into the gallery the next day she groaned, then immediately chastised herself for letting Amber and Katerina down. She had promised to step into her sister's shoes and that meant running the gallery in the same way her sister would. So, she rolled up her sleeves and went off in search of a brush to sweep up the confetti of detritus that had somehow been scattered across the marble floor, then began the task of straightening every picture, plaque, sculpture, and ornament – glass and knitted – on the many shelves around the room.

Next, she decided to refresh the window display, but as she removed a collection of beautifully decorated mugs that one of Katerina's friends had painted with scenes from around Santorini, she was forced to gulp back a surge of horror. Perched on a raised wood pedestal for passers-by to see in all its glory was her hand-made vase, its glass beads glistening in the sunshine. As she reached out to retrieve it, her eyes met those of two young women who had stopped to gawp at – and photograph – the erotically shaped sculpture, pointing and giggling until they saw her watching them and dashed away laughing.

‘Oh my God!’

Suzie snatched up the large white card that was propped up in front of the vase announcing to the world that the creator of the gallery's “October Centrepiece” was none other than the “Renowned UK Jewellery Designer, Suzie Sandringham”. She

rolled her eyes as she realised that Christos must have made it while she was getting changed the previous evening.

She hid them both in the storeroom and had just sat down with a restorative coffee when her phone pinged with a text. She smiled when she saw it was from Heidi. However, before she could read it, her phone pinged again, this time with one from Katerina, then again with one from Miranda.

What was going on?

She was about to select the text from Katerina when the gallery's door opened, and their first customer of the day strolled in, quickly surveyed the room, then headed straight for Katerina's largest canvas – and Suzie's favourite – a spectacular depiction of the Santorini sunset. She waited a few moments, then went to join the tall, dark, and extremely handsome guy who seemed to be mesmerised by the watercolour painting.

*'Kalimera. Can I help you at all?'*

*'Oh no, no, I just wanted to...'*

The man was clearly unsettled by her approach and when he turned towards her, instead of looking her in the eye as she had expected, he continued to scan the room behind her, as though fearful someone might jump out of the shadows and launch an attack on him. When he started fidgeting with the dial on his chunky diver's watch, Suzie took pity on him.

*'It's a beautiful painting, isn't it?'*

*'Yes, yes, it is. I... Is Katerina here?'*

*'No, not at the moment, I'm afraid. She should be here this afternoon, though. Shall I—'*

To Suzie's surprise, the guy quickly thanked her, then all-but sprinted from the gallery without a backward glance. She shrugged and put the weird interaction down to the potential purchaser's disappointment at not having the opportunity of dealing with the artist herself, then went back to collect her phone from the now neat-and-tidy desk – she could actually see the glass top – to read Katerina's text.

'No way!'

The text simply read "*LOL*", but the photograph attached said so much more. She sank down slowly into the white leather desk chair and stared at the image, trying to think of a positive spin on what she was looking at. She suspected that Heidi and Miranda's texts would be along similar lines, and she was right, except Heidi suggested she considered making "ceramic erotica" her new business venture instead of artisan jewellery.

She stared at the photograph of the vase, which she assumed had been taken by one of the girls she'd seen loitering outside the shop earlier. They'd obviously uploaded the image to their Instagram page, along with several suggestive hashtags, and to her surprise – and dismay – the post already had over a thousand likes. One consolation was that, thankfully, it was difficult to see the handwritten card with her name on it unless you were interested enough to enlarge the image.

The gallery door opened again and this time a gaggle of women surged into the gallery, their phones raised as they searched for their target. With her heart thumping – she'd never been good with any kind of confrontation, or even polite

objection – Suzie approached them as she knew that Katerina was very strict about customers not taking photographs of hers, and her colleagues’, artwork.

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Suzie with her best customer-service smile, ‘but we don’t allow photography inside the gallery.’

‘Oh, don’t worry, we’re not interested in the paintings,’ said one of the women, tossing her flowing red hair over her shoulder in what looked like a practiced gesture. ‘Ergh, especially not these awful black and grey ones. If you could just point us in the direction of the Instagram Vase, that would be great. I couldn’t believe it when I saw Scarlet Gardener-Jones’ post and realised she was here in Santorini! Oh my God, I’m about to post the same photograph as her! It’s exactly what I’ve been hoping for to increase my follower numbers.’

Heat flooded Suzie’s cheeks and she made an executive decision.

‘I’m sorry, what vase are you taking about?’

The girl lowered her phone to give Suzie the most condescending look.

‘The one that looks like a—’

‘Oh, yes, that one. Hilarious, isn’t it? Unfortunately, you’ve come to the wrong gallery. The sculpture you’re looking for is being showcased at our branch in Fira.’

She saw the confusion, swiftly followed by disappointment, on the girls’ faces. Thankfully they accepted her statement without question and, after one of them bought a collection of Heidi’s knitted cats for her goddaughter, they hustled from the



gallery to catch a taxi to Santorini's main town. Suzie didn't have time to feel guilty about what she'd done because after that there was a steady stream of customers, most of whom were there for the artwork, but with a sizeable contingent enquiring about the "famous vase".

The only tricky moment was when someone asked if her name was Suzie and she almost said yes, until she realised that her worst fear had been realised and someone had indeed enlarged Scarlet's photograph and discovered the name of the vase's creator. She managed to deflect the enquiry, and by the time one o'clock came she had never been more relieved to turn the sign to "Closed" so she could have a few minutes respite from the onslaught of would-be Instagram influencers.

She climbed the stairs to her studio to make herself some lunch and send Christos an indignant text. However, after one of Amber's chamomile teas, she decided to let it pass. After all, he'd done it as a joke and couldn't have anticipated that it would result in a horde of social media groupies piling into the shop in search of their next Instagrammable image.

One positive thing to come from the whole debacle was that not only had she sold a bunch of Heidi's knitted cats, but she'd also sold six – yes, six – of Katerina and her colleagues' smaller canvasses, twice as many as they had sold the previous day. However, unsurprisingly, she hadn't sold a single one of the paintings lurking in the room at the back of the gallery. While they weren't to Suzie's taste either, she was starting to feel sorry for the artist who must be dismayed to almost never receive a phone call – or however Katerina communicated a sale – to inform them that there was room for a new canvas.

An hour later, when Katerina turned up for the afternoon shift – along with a coffee each from *Taverna Giorgos* and a selection of honey-soaked Greek pastries – she declared herself thrilled with the success of the morning’s business, and congratulated Suzie on her off-piste marketing strategy.

‘It wasn’t my idea, it was Christos’! He put the vase I made yesterday in the window as a joke when we popped back here so I could get changed before going out to dinner last night. I had no idea he’d done it until—’

‘Ah, so you went on another date, did you?’

‘No, we’d spent the whole afternoon at your studio, we were both hungry, so—’

‘Are you two an item, then?’

‘No, we’re just friends.’ Suzie saw the scepticism scrawled across Katerina’s face so, to head her off at the pass, she continued. ‘Oh, by the way, when I opened up this morning a guy came in asking for you.’

Katerina paused mid-coffee sip. ‘What did he look like?’

‘Tall, dark, super-handsome.’

‘Smooth shaven?’

‘Yes.’

‘And a chunky silver diver’s watch?’

‘Yes! Do you know him?’

‘Oh God.’

Katerina dropped down onto the desk chair and started to swivel from left to right.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘It was Leo.’

‘Your ex?’

‘He’s not my ex. We were only ever friends.’ Katerina laughed when she saw Suzie raise her eyebrows. ‘Okay, touché! I can’t believe he’s here in Santorini. I didn’t think he knew where I was, or that I rent this place.’

‘Why don’t you talk to him?’

‘I’ve tried that. I just seemed to hurt him even more and that’s the last thing I want to do.’

‘But he clearly wants to talk to you, or he wouldn’t have come to the gallery this morning.’ Suzie paused. ‘He seemed nervous, a little on edge, when he was here.’

‘Really? That doesn’t sound like him.’ Katerina took her phone from her over-sized shoulder bag and scrolled through a few images before turning the screen round to show Suzie the one she’d selected. ‘Is this who you saw?’

‘Yes, that’s him. He’s very attractive, isn’t he?’

‘Everyone says that,’ Katerina murmured, peering at the photograph as she tried to work out what her friends saw that she didn’t. ‘He’s always just been Leo to me.’

‘Why don’t you meet him, listen to what he’s come to say? It might give him the closure he needs so he can move on, just like you have.’

‘Did you meet up with Adam before you left London?’

A crash of surprise exploded in her chest at the unexpected mention of his name.

‘That’s different.’

‘Really? Why?’

‘Because Adam ditched me, not the other way round, and then he *refused* to meet me, or speak to me, or have anything to do with me, no matter how much I pleaded. I’d just been through a hugely traumatic experience, and the person I thought loved me the most in the world – apart from Mum and Amber, of course – just *deleted* me from his life. I was completely devastated. It was yet another kick in the gut when I was already at my lowest. One of the things that’s stopping me from moving on is that I’ve never been able to get closure as far as our relationship was concerned.’

‘When was the last time you spoke to him?’

‘When he told me that if I called him again, he’d consult a lawyer.’

‘Oh, Suzie, I’m so sorry you had to go through that.’

Suzie inhaled a deep breath. Out of everything that had happened, Adam’s dismissive treatment of her had hurt the most. Maybe if he had stood by her, been there with her when she’d had to deal with the aftermath, she could have got through it with her emotional wellbeing intact. As it was, that responsibility had fallen to Amber – who had certainly stepped up to the big sister podium – but having Adam, a qualified accountant with extensive professional contacts who could have helped her, by her side, would have made all the difference.

‘Thanks, Kat.’

After a few beats of silence, Katerina jumped up and hooked her arm through Suzie's.

‘Come on, I think we both deserve a coffee at the taverna, don't you?’

‘Absolutely.’

They strolled to the taverna, chatting about a myriad of things, their journey accompanied by a soft, jasmine-infused breeze tickling the leaves of the lemon trees and the occasional scooter zipping past them on the way to the harbour. There had been a noticeable decrease in traffic over the last few days as they moved from September into October, but Oia still attracted busloads of holidaymakers keen to witness the perfect sunset from such an iconic location.

Suzie recalled the conversation she'd had with Giorgos and how ambivalent he felt about the level of tourism the island attracted; on the one hand, he and his fellow business owners – including Katerina – had to make a living to support their families, but on the other hand, the increase in the number of visitors, especially those that arrived *en masse* from the enormous cruise ships, was unsustainable and the island's infrastructure was beginning to crumble under the strain.

It was a conundrum that required urgent attention if Santorini was to survive.

‘Guys, guys, I'm so glad you're here! Look what's just arrived!’

Heidi came running across the veranda towards them, waving several small glass jars in the air like a cheerleader's pompoms. As usual, her hair was tied into a high ponytail and

her makeup was more Vegas showgirl than Santorini siren, but Suzie had to admit that she looked young, fresh, and full of energy, even though she knew Heidi must have been on her feet since seven that morning dashing between the kitchen and the taverna's hungry patrons. However, that afternoon she was even more exuberant than usual, her eyes sparkling with excitement as she joined them at their table.

‘What are they?’ asked Suzie, taking one of the glass jars and studying the beautifully designed labels.

‘Samples of my new skincare range! There's a whole box of them on the table over there. Help yourselves! I really need to know what you think, so I want you to be honest.’

Heidi pointed to one of the taverna's spare tables where three large cardboard boxes had been ripped open and their contents spilt at random onto the blue and white tablecloth, and a couple of the taverna's patrons were inspecting the various products with interest. Sitting at the adjacent table was Nathan, his pen poised above his notebook, the expression on his face one of intense concentration, his forehead wrinkled as he chased down the clearly elusive inspiration pixies with the help of one of Stefanos' own-recipe moussakas.

Whilst Suzie understood that jewellery design was different to creative writing, she knew how hard it was to summon inspiration when under pressure to do so, and when he glanced up from the page he'd been scribbling on, she tried to offer him a smile of sympathy, but to her surprise, instead of returning her supportive gesture, he quickly averted his eyes.

‘Mmm, this smells amazing, Heidi,’ said Katerina, trying to keep the shock from her voice as she sniffed one of the jars.

‘What do you think, Suzie?’

Suzie unscrewed the lid of the glass jar Heidi had handed to her, rehearsing her response in case it was as disturbing as the fragrance her friend had chosen to wear that day: a jarring blend of burnt toast and marker pens with just a faint after-note of roses. However, she was relieved to discover that she could be “honest”, just as Heidi had asked, because the white gloop smelled rather pleasant.

‘I love it.’

‘That’s the cleanser, which I’ve made using only natural ingredients, and this is the toner, here, and I’ve got moisturiser and hand cream, too. Don’t you just adore these labels that Miranda helped me to design and Darius has printed for me? You know, I think this might be my best idea yet!’

‘Well, you definitely have your first customer,’ said Suzie, rubbing a dollop of the hand cream into her hands, relishing the delicate fragrance of cucumber and mint.

‘Thanks, Suzie, and *I’ll be yours!*’

‘Mine? What do you mean?’

‘Well, I assume you’re taking commissions?’

‘Commissions?’ Suzie gaped at Heidi. ‘I’m sorry, I’m not sure I—’

‘Didn’t you get my text? I saw your... erm, *quirky* vase on Instagram and I’ve had a great idea! Why don’t you start your own business, too? Suzie’s Suggestively-Shaped Ceramics! Oh, oh, and I’ve got lots of other ideas I could share with you! What about diversifying into—’

‘Heidi, table six are waiting for their desserts,’ said Giorgos, as he rushed by with his hands full.

‘Sorry, Giorgos, I’m on my way.’

Suzie was relieved at Giorgos’ interruption of Heidi’s empire building plans, but before she left to collect a tray full of Stefanos’ home-made lavender and honey ice cream, Heidi leaned towards her, her expression serious for a moment.

‘I’m here if you need me, Suzie.’

‘Erm... thanks, Heidi.’

‘And don’t forget about Monday night. I’ll see you at my place at five for your makeover. Miranda will be there too, along with a couple of her friends you met at the book club. Oh, I just can’t wait! It’s going to be an absolute blast!’





## Chapter Seventeen

The day of Giorgos' Greek dance class – and Heidi's first makeover session – dawned with a cloud-free sky and a welcome reduction in temperature from sizzling to pleasantly warm with a noticeable breeze. Now that October had properly arrived, footfall at the gallery had dropped significantly, and Katerina had taken the decision to close the gallery early some days. Like the taverna, Monday was their least busy day, so it meant Suzie could have a long relaxing lunch before heading to the apartment Heidi shared with a friend from Wales who had also taken a job at a taverna in Oia for the summer.

After making herself a cup of peppermint tea, she strolled outside to sit on the tiny balcony of Amber's studio apartment and watch the world go by. It was quieter than usual, with a noticeable lack of tooting horns and loud, exuberant conversation floating up from the alleyway below as visitors made their way towards the seafront. The shutters of the luxury villa opposite were tightly sealed, and she hadn't seen anyone using the jacuzzi for over a week, which was a relief as several guests had taken to bathing in the nude, which had been a little disconcerting when she was trying to eat her breakfast.

She tipped her head towards the sun, closing her eyes as she filed away the memory of the warmth on her cheeks for when she was back in Devon, trudging through the rain on Archie's twice daily walks. As she had no home to return to, it was difficult to envisage which routes would be best in the autumn

and winter months, and she made a mental note to ask Holly for recommendations of the best dog-friendly footpaths. She missed her faithful canine friend, but anticipating that, Holly had made sure to send her regular photographs of him having fun with Ariel and Max on the beach and in the woodland that surrounded Blossomwood Manor.

She finished her tea and as she was washing the cup, she remembered her promise to Heidi to call Freya to see if she had any tips or suggestions that might assist in the start-up of her fragrance enterprise. She perched on her bed – which she had rarely turned back into its primary purpose as a sofa – and dialled Freya’s number, picturing her friend sitting in the orangery at her uncle’s chateau in Provence, drinking Champagne or pastis, maybe, and eating a selection of delicious patisserie. Sadly, her call went to voicemail, so she left a cheery message, asking for an update on her romance with her French boyfriend, Jacques, then jumped into the shower, her spirits high as she anticipated an afternoon of girly pampering.

It had been a long time since she’d enjoyed a spa day, the last one being for her birthday with a group of her London friends, all of whom had vanished into the ether after reading that cruel – and totally fabricated – article about her in the local newspaper. She shoved the upsetting thought to the back of her mind; today was about having fun with *new* friends, friends who had accepted her for who she was, without judgement, and she was determined to have a good time.

When she arrived at Heidi’s apartment, no one answered the door despite her insistent knocking. She was about to send Heidi a text when, out of the corner of her eye, she saw

Katerina and one of her friends emerge from the back of a small white van carrying a silver clothing rail crammed with vibrantly coloured outfits, before disappearing through a tall, blue-painted gate.

Suzie followed in their wake and found herself in a pretty courtyard, decorated with butterfly-shaped fairy lights and hand-stitched bunting featuring what looked like the inner workings of a clock – which she assumed was another of Heidi’s business ideas. In the corner, under the shade of an old olive tree, was a bistro table displaying the jars, bottles, tubs, and tubes of Heidi’s new SOS Skincare range, next to which were two upholstered sunbeds, both draped in fluffy white towels where Miranda and her friend Diana were in the process of receiving facials from Heidi and her flatmate.

‘Hey, Suzie, welcome! This is my friend, Angharad, Ana for short. Today she has very kindly agreed to be my “beauty salon assistant” in return for an invitation to our Greek dance class tonight,’ said Heidi.

‘Hi, Ana, it’s good to meet you.’

‘You, too, Suzie. I’ve heard a lot about you.’

Suzie smiled at the twenty-something young woman with the same singsong Welsh accent as Heidi’s, who was currently smoothing lotion from Diana’s décolletage to her forehead, her profusion of ginger curls flopping into her eyes as she did so. Like Heidi, she was wearing a Barbie-pink clinician’s jacket with her name embroidered across the top of the pocket in white stitching, and clearly shared her friend’s interest in cosmetics, sporting a perfect Cupid’s bow of bright cerise lipstick.

‘Grab a drink, Suzie, and I’ll be with you in a few minutes.’

‘Thanks, Heidi.’

She helped herself to a glass of iced lemonade and settled on a bar stool next to Miranda’s friend Robyn, whom she’d met at the bookshop the previous week, and watched mesmerized as Heidi and Ana skilfully applied a procession of lotions and potions onto their willing models’ faces.

‘Erm, this face cream smells slightly unusual,’ said Miranda, peeling one eye open to peer at Heidi. ‘What did you say was in it?’

‘Just natural ingredients; a little bit of this, a generous dollop of that. In fact, it’s *so* natural that it’s probably safe to eat. Would you like to taste it?’

‘No! Of course not.’

‘What about you, Diana?’

Diana – who had sampled Heidi’s lethal *Green Gables Goddess* at the literary cocktail night – shook her head decisively, causing Ana to deposit a splodge of moisturiser into her left ear.

‘Oops, sorry, Diana.’

‘Robyn? Do you want to taste it?’ Heidi offered.

‘Does it have gin in it?’

‘No, it only has—’

‘Then it’s a hard pass from me too, darling.’

Suzie reached out to select one of Heidi’s jars labelled “body scrub” and unscrewed the lid. Miranda was right; it did

smell strange, but not in an unpleasant way, a bit like liquidised cucumber but with a distinct top-note of furniture polish. There were also specks of black in it, which on closer inspection she realised were nothing more unusual than poppy seeds.

‘Okay, that’s your facial done, Mirrie,’ said Heidi, wiping her hands on a damp face cloth and flicking open the latch on a multi-tiered makeup trunk that looked to Suzie more like an artist’s paint box as it contained a rainbow of colour palettes and an assortment of brushes in varying sizes. ‘Now for your makeup.’

Suzie stared in awed fascination as Heidi smoothed foundation onto Miranda’s face, taking special care around her laughter lines, before adding a soft dash of blusher to her cheeks, and painting her lips with a flattering shade of peach. Next, she took her time applying her signature gold glitter eye makeup to the full width of Miranda’s lid, which she edged with plum-coloured eyeliner, before finishing what was truly an artistic creation with several coats of dark brown mascara.

‘Wow, Miranda, you look like a Greek Goddess!’

‘Thank you, Suzie. I feel like a new woman! What do you think, Robyn?’

‘Absolutely transformational, darling. You, too, Diana. I hardly recognise you both. I think you’ve found your true vocation, Heidi, and I can’t wait for my turn. Do you think I could I have that sparkly peacock-blue eyeshadow, please? And I really like the look of the turquoise mascara and eyeliner you have in your box of magic tricks.’

‘Your wish is my command,’ said Heidi, clearly delighted by Robyn’s enthusiasm.

‘Come on, Suzie, it’s our turn to be pampered.’

Suzie didn’t have to be asked twice. She lay on the improvised “beauty couch” next to Robyn, and enjoyed the most relaxing ten minutes of her life as Ana massaged a selection of Heidi’s home-made skincare products into her dull, dehydrated skin before giving her a more subtle version of Miranda’s makeup, choosing a dusky pink eyeshadow that complemented the now-faded pink streaks in her hair. When she looked in the tiny hand mirror that Ana handed to her, she gasped, hardly recognising herself, and she experienced a welcome uptick in confidence.

‘Okay, now for the best bit!’ Heidi announced, clapping her hands in delight. ‘It’s time to try on our costumes! Come on, Kat and Eleni are waiting for us inside, where it’s a little more private.’

Suzie followed Heidi and the other women into Heidi and Ana’s apartment – the blast of air-conditioning a welcome respite from the late afternoon heat that had accumulated in the courtyard – and she couldn’t help but laugh as she was almost knocked to the ground in the unseemly dash to get to the silver clothes rail that she’d seen Katerina and Eleni wheeling into the courtyard earlier.

‘Oh, Kat, these are simply gorgeous, darling,’ said Robyn, holding up a long, diaphanous dress made from blue-green chiffon printed with a swirl of gold. ‘Did you design them yourself?’

‘I did, and not just the dresses, but the fabric, too. It’s inspired by the colours I see every day here on Santorini, using printing techniques I learned during my training at art school. Try it on! It’ll go perfectly with your fabulous eye makeup. Suzie, I’ve made this for you.’

Not one for dresses, Suzie was both relieved and delighted when Katerina handed her a pair of lightweight dungarees made from the softest cotton in a rich dark red with sand-coloured splashes that she knew were a nod to the beaches in the south of the island. When she tried them on, she wasn’t surprised to find they fit her like a glove and the whoosh of confidence she’d felt earlier, edged up a notch.

‘Oh, Kat, I love them. Thank you so much.’

‘And Heidi, this is for you.’

Heidi stared at the garment on the padded clothes hanger Katerina was holding. The short, skimpy sun dress, in a rich sunflower yellow fabric, had spaghetti straps and a wide ruffle around the hem with a confection of pink and white butterflies embroidered across the bust. It matched her sunny, upbeat, slightly flighty personality to a tee.

‘Thank you, Kat,’ Heidi whispered, her words full of emotion.

But it was when Katerina produced Miranda’s dress that everyone had tears in their eyes. In order to fulfil Miranda’s dream of learning how to do various dances in the places they originated – to live music and wearing the local attire – Katerina had created a stunning white column dress, embroidered with gold thread in the familiar Greek key pattern with a matching gold sash tied around the waist.



‘Do you like it?’

‘Like it? I *love* it!’

‘I’m sorry it’s not the *traditional* costume of the island, which is layers and layers of white petticoats with a thick, heavily embroidered, woollen waistcoat and a headscarf. I knew it wouldn’t suit you but, more importantly, it would hinder your ability to really enjoy the dancing, which is what tonight is all about.’

‘*Efharistó.*’

Miranda pulled Katerina into her arms, clearly overwhelmed by her friend’s thoughtfulness, and while she wiped away her tears, Katerina and Eleni handed Ana and Diana their own outfits to gasps of delight and noisy excitement; Ana’s a similar style to Heidi’s but in bougainvillea pink, and Diana’s a knee-length tea dress, nipped in at the waist, in a rich olive green. They looked like they were ready to attend a royal garden party, not a Greek dance class at the local taverna.

‘Okay, guys, it’s time to go,’ said Heidi, after touching up Ana’s cerise-coloured eye makeup. ‘We don’t want to keep Giorgos waiting, do we?’



## Chapter Eighteen

‘Did you invite Christos?’ Katerina asked, as they made their way along the main road into Oia and towards the pathway that led to *Taverna Giorgos*. ‘I can’t wait to meet him.’

‘Yes, I did, but he’s got a booking for a sunset cruise tonight with a couple who are celebrating their honeymoon. He said he’d try to come over afterwards, but it depends on how many photographs the newly-weds want to take, and how many bottles of Champagne they want to enjoy after the sun has faded from the sky. Did you talk to Stefanos?’

‘Didn’t have to. Giorgos forgot about a dinner reservation he’s taken for tonight so Stefanos has agreed to cover for him – in the kitchen *and* in the restaurant – so Giorgos can concentrate on our dance session.’

‘Are you going to talk to him?’

‘Maybe.’ Katerina sighed. ‘Heidi, do you think Nathan will come?’

‘I’m confident he won’t be able to resist the opportunity to dance with me!’

As the taverna came into view, Suzie could hear the soft strains of live bouzouki music floating through the air and was thrilled when she stepped onto the veranda and saw that three of Giorgos’ friends – who frequented the taverna every evening to play *tavli* and partake in a glass or two of ouzo – were the source. She didn’t recognise any of the instruments

they were playing, but the trio were clearly accomplished musicians.

While the indoor part of the restaurant still housed the eclectic mix of tables and chairs – one of which was occupied by another group of Giorgos' friends, whose talents clearly lay in wine-consumption rather than bouzouki-playing – the veranda had been cleared to create a makeshift dance floor and the band's raised podium, which was attractively framed by the leafy pergola. It was strange to see the space so empty, but Suzie was relieved that meant there wouldn't be an audience to witness her first attempt at Greek dancing.

'*Kalispera*, my friends!' Giorgos said as he rushed forward to greet everyone with exuberant cheek kisses, taking his time to compliment each of them in turn on their outfits and their "striking" makeup. He looked even more handsome than usual in a pair of beautifully pressed black trousers, a crisp white shirt open at the collar, and a dark blue sash tied around his waist, which Suzie noticed was the same costume worn by the band members.

Stefanos emerged from the kitchen carrying a platter of mezze, which he placed on the bar, before taking a couple of bottles of white wine from the fridge, dropping them into a cooler, and adding a collection of wine glasses, along with a jug of iced water, for people to help themselves to. Suzie decided she was going to stick with the latter.

'Okay, are you ready for your lesson?' asked Giorgos, beaming.

'Yes,' came the cheerful response.

The band took their cue and began to play a slow melody. Giorgos stepped forward, offered Miranda his hand, dipped his head, and invited her to join him. Her cheeks coloured slightly, but her eyes sparkled as she took his proffered hand and allowed him to guide her to the middle of the dance floor.

‘Don’t they look...’ Heidi began. ‘Oh, how wonderful!’

Suzie couldn’t help but smile when she saw four of Giorgos’ friends leave their game of *tavli* and follow his lead by asking Diana, Robyn, Ana, and Eleni to join them on the dance floor, too. They gleefully accepted, giggling as they introduced themselves – apart from Eleni, who clearly already knew Andreas – and warned them to watch out for their toes. Suzie’s smile changed to surprise, then joy, when Stefanos came out of the kitchen, removed his white chef’s jacket to reveal a figure-hugging black tee shirt, and strode purposely towards Katerina, leaning forward to whisper something in Greek that caused her to grin broadly.

‘So cute,’ murmured Heidi, until her eyes widened with astonishment. ‘I don’t believe it!’

Standing on the threshold between the restaurant and the veranda was Nathan, clutching his notebook to his chest and looking like a deer caught in headlights. Suzie could see from his demeanour – and the look of alarm on his face – that he had forgotten about that evening’s dance class and had simply strolled into the taverna in search of his usual glass of red wine. His eyes filled with panic, but before he had chance to spin on his heels and bolt for the hills, Heidi had dashed towards him, grabbed his hand, and dragged him into the melee on the dance floor, her smile just as wide as Katerina’s.

Feeling a little like a wallflower, Suzie experienced a flicker of discomfort, her earlier confidence deflating a little as she found herself standing on the periphery of the ebullient group, the fact that she had no partner to dance with overlooked in the excitement. To her relief, Giorgos noticed her predicament and was clearly about to invite her to join him and Miranda when he stopped, his gaze focused on a spot over Suzie's right shoulder.

She turned to see what had caused him to pause, and her heart soared when she saw Christos standing on the steps next to the band's podium, looking super-sexy in a pair of smart navy-blue shorts and a cream linen shirt, which she assumed was his usual "sunset cruise" attire. As soon as their eyes met, she was thrilled to see his whole face light up, and she experienced a sharp frisson of desire when he dropped a quick kiss onto her lips, slid his palm into hers, and escorted her onto the dance floor.

'Okay, shall we begin?' said Georgios, in his deep, gravelly voice that caused everyone to pause their conversations immediately and turn to face him. 'We Greeks love to dance. It is in our hearts, in our souls, and over the centuries it has evolved to reflect the regional diversity of our culture. Of course, the most recognisable dance for most visitors to our beloved island is the *Sirtaki*, but what a lot of people don't know is that this dance only dates back to the 1960s when it was specifically created for the movie *Zorba the Greek*. However, it is easy to learn and lots of fun. So, shall we do this?'

'Yes,' came the chorus of replies.

Giorgos was joined on the makeshift dance floor by his *tavli* friends, and to the lilting strains of the instantly recognisable tune, they hooked their arms over each other's shoulders and demonstrated the first set of steps to the famous dance, left to right, then forward and back, while those watching clapped along to the rhythm.

Then it was their turn.

It took Suzie a great deal of concentration to get the hang of the steps, but fortunately she wasn't the only one, with Diana and Robyn tripping over their feet, and Miranda and Ana regularly moving to their left instead of their right and vice versa. However, under Giorgos' patient tuition – and the fact that they were all paired up with partners for whom the choreography was second nature – they soon got the hang of the dance steps, although it was obvious that they would never be as proficient as Katerina and Stefanos, and Eleni and Andreas, both couples looking like they were taking part in the Santorini version of *Strictly*.

Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for Heidi, who had just performed a twirl that had sent her crashing into a stack of the taverna's chairs. Instead of laughing it off, or helping her to disentangle herself, Nathan watched on in bewilderment, his expression making it clear to everyone that he really didn't want to be there. Suzie hoped it was because he wasn't a lover of dancing, or music – or fun, maybe – and not because he wasn't enjoying Heidi's company. Even the most disinterested onlooker could see that Heidi liked him, and she hoped that a concentrated splash of her friend's sunny personality would burn through Nathan's cool exterior before the end of the night.

Midway through their lesson, the group of diners Giorgos had forgotten about stumbled into the taverna, each wearing powder-blue polo shirt featuring a large, gold-embossed logo of a yacht. Before anyone had the chance to tell them that this was a private dance class, they'd joined them on the dancefloor, and when the tempo increased, the circuitous line of dancers morphed into an exuberant Conga-like line, with plenty of high kicks and whoops of delight.

When the music finally stopped, everyone was gasping for breath, laughing and joking, and declaring how much fun it had been. The guys in the polo shirts started to take selfies of themselves, before including the rest of the group, encouraging them to strike model-like poses, with their hands on their waists – Miranda, Diana, and Robyn – or pouting into the camera – Ana and Eleni – as they dashed around with their phones held aloft, pretending to be paparazzi and causing even more hilarity.

‘Okay, thanks everyone! The drinks are on the house!’

Giorgos' declaration caused a noisy stampede to the bar where Stefanos handed out bottles of cold Mythos beer to those who wanted one and opened several more bottles of chilled white wine for everyone else, apart from Robyn who had now moved on to gin with a splash of tonic, and Suzie, who had decided to stick with iced water. Then, after hoovering up their meal as though they hadn't eaten for days, the yacht guys bid them a fond farewell, and headed for the busier bars in the centre of Oia to continue their evening of revelry.



‘Where’s Christos?’ asked Katerina, joining Suzie at the table hidden behind the two enormous Greek urns where she’d escaped to, to avoid being roped into the boisterous disco-dancing moves that Heidi, Ana, and Eleni were currently demonstrating to Miranda, Diana and Robyn.

‘He’s taking a phone call.’

Suzie gestured towards the lemon grove on the other side of the veranda where Christos was strolling backwards and forwards between the trees, his phone glued to his ear as he spoke in rapid Greek to the person on the other end of the line.

Katerina smiled. ‘I like him. He’s great fun, not to mention extraordinarily handsome! I think you make a great couple, don’t you? Can I ask you something?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Have you thought of staying on here when Amber gets back from Bali?’

‘Oh, I’m—’

‘Because I’ve been thinking about how I can supplement my income when the summer holiday season is over, and Giorgos’ dance class has reignited an idea I’ve been toying with for a while. I’ve done a couple of sketching classes this summer – short, introductory sessions, really – but I was thinking about organising a few *week-long* workshops, for groups of friends *and* solo visitors, who want something more complex, such as painting with watercolours, or pastels, or in oils, or...’ Katerina paused to look Suzie directly in the eye. ‘Maybe something craft-based, like making jewellery. What do you say?’

‘I’m not sure, I... Is it okay if I think about it?’

‘Of course,’ said Katerina, taking a sip of her wine. ‘You know, I’m jealous.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, Christos spends his days sailing around the caldera on his boat, and the guys we met tonight are lucky enough to have rented a super-yacht for three weeks and are on a mission to visit all the inhabited islands in the Aegean Sea. I wish *I* could do that; be free to sail wherever the mood takes me, stopping at any random bay, cove, or island that takes my fancy and staying there for as long as I want, eating at the restaurants, drinking at the bars, and dancing until sunrise!’

‘They’re on vacation. I’m sure they have jobs to go back to,’ said Suzie, taking a sip of her water. ‘Did they say where they’re from?’

‘According to the guy they called “Captain Ted” – the one with the red hair and freckles – they all work for a trendy PR and marketing firm in Wimbledon.’

Suzie experienced a sharp nip of anxiety at the mention of the word Wimbledon. She knew it was extremely unlikely they would have recognised her – after all, Wimbledon was a big place and very few people knew their neighbours – and yet she had the same reaction every time someone mentioned the place where she and Adam had lived when they were together.

‘Are you okay, Suzie?’ asked Katerina, concern in her eyes.

‘What? Oh, yes, yes, I’m fine.’

To her relief, Stefanos chose that particular moment to emerge from the kitchen and make his way to the bar where he

perched on one of the stools, his head dipped as he scrolled through the messages on his phone, and Katerina's attention was diverted elsewhere. Suzie saw Katerina hesitate for a few seconds in the hope that he would glance in her direction, but when he didn't, she switched her gaze to the dance floor where Heidi was coaching Nathan in a high-octane version of the Macarena with lots of exaggerated hip wiggles.

‘Looks like Heidi's having a great time.’

‘It does.’ Suzie smiled, happy for her friend.

‘Actually, I think I'll ask Stefanos if he wants to dance, too.’

Suzie watched Katerina stroll towards the bar, and she was about to go in search of Christos when he dropped into the seat Katerina had vacated and took a long gulp of water from Suzie's glass.

‘Having fun?’ he asked.

‘Absolutely. It's the best night I've had for a very long time – apart from my own personal sunset cruise, of course.’

Christos smirked. ‘Not our visit to the pottery studio, then?’

Suzie laughed. ‘Actually, I want a word with you about that.’

‘I don't know what you mean?’ Christos assumed an innocent expression, but his lips twitched at the corners, indicating that he knew *exactly* what she meant. However, before she could jokingly berate him about putting her vase in the gallery's front window, he'd pushed back his chair, and taken her hand into his. She thought he was going to ask her to join him in a rendition of Gangnam style that was currently

being attempted by Giorgos and his friends, but to her relief, he collected a bottle of wine from the cooler on the bar and led her into the lemon grove, to where someone had set up a table and two chairs.

Instead of inviting Suzie to take a seat, he drew her into his arms, his dark mahogany gaze holding hers for a moment before he lowered his head and kissed her, softly at first, a mere brush of his lips against hers that caused a curl of pleasure to weave its way through her veins, then more urgently, the contours of their bodies moulding perfectly together.

She could feel his heart beating against her chest, faster and faster, whipping her emotions into a maelstrom of desire. She kissed him back, sliding her hand around to the nape of his neck, caressing the curls that were still damp from that evening's energetic dance routines, hoping to show him in that one gesture how much he meant to her.

Time seemed to stand still; their embrace serenaded by the ubiquitous melody of the cicadas, punctuated by the occasional ripple of music that floated from the direction of the veranda. She had no idea how long they stayed there amidst the fragrant lemon trees, but they finally drew apart when their romantic interlude was interrupted by a loud burst of laughter emanating from behind a tree to their right.

'Who do you...?' she began, before falling silent as she squinted into the darkness, thrilled to see Miranda and Giorgos strolling arm-in-arm through the lemon grove, chatting softly, completely oblivious to their presence. They looked happy together, relaxed in each other's company, and if Suzie hadn't

known that they had only met that night, she would have thought they were a married couple, such was their contented body language. She knew they had both been through heartbreak as far as their previous relationships were concerned, and she hoped that this was the start of something new for them.

After sharing a glass of wine, Christos escorted Suzie back to the veranda where the band had packed away their instruments and were enjoying a brandy with their friends, along with Diana and Robyn, who seemed to be having no problem navigating the language barrier. Stefanos had disappeared, and there was no sign of Heidi and Nathan, which Suzie hoped was a good sign.

‘See you tomorrow, Suzie.’

Katerina deposited kisses on Suzie and Christos’ cheeks, then left the taverna with her arm hooked through Eleni’s, gossiping in rapid-fire Greek as they disappeared into the darkness. After a quick nightcap with Diana and Robyn, Suzie said her own *efharistós* and *kalinychtas* and Christos walked her back to her studio before heading to his friend’s apartment on the other side of the island.

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Later, as she stared at the ceiling fan rotating languidly above her sofa bed, a wave of elation washed over her. It had been a wonderful day; one filled with fun, friendship, and lots and lots of laughter, surrounded by people she cared about and

who cared about her. She was thrilled that Miranda had made a connection with Giorgos, that Heidi had plucked up the courage to invite a clearly reluctant Nathan to join in with their Greek dance class, and that Katerina had broken the ice with Stefanos at last – even though, after their initial dance, he'd spent most of the rest of the night staring at his phone.

She was also happy that her friends' business ventures were blossoming, too. Miranda had expanded the bookshop's clientele by organising her book-club-and-literary-cocktail nights, Heidi had successfully launched her SOS Skincare range to appreciative fanfare, and Katerina's gallery was thriving and her dream of diversifying into the fashion arena, as well as designing her own fabrics, had been a triumph, not to mention her plan to run workshops.

Santorini had softened the jagged edges of her trauma. It was a beautiful place – picturesque, photogenic, and inspiring – but it was the people that gave it its *soul*, and she would be sad to leave when Amber returned from her trip. She felt safe here, far away from the gremlins that had pursued her from London to Devon.

Could she stay?

Could she run the jewellery-making classes that Katerina had suggested?

If she did, she could build on her relationship with Christos, which she hoped was more than just a holiday romance. Maybe, with Christos by her side, she could make a fresh start, and look forward to a life that didn't involve constantly looking over her shoulder or worrying about things like people taking photographs at a Greek dance class.

Her new friends had shown her how to live again, free from the tethers of her emotional captors, and for the first time in a long time, she felt like she was the *real* Suzie Sandringham – happy, upbeat, ready to smile and laugh, and willing to join in instead of remaining resolutely on the side-lines for fear of being judged, or worse, rejected.

She was within touching distance of her dream of leading a calm and carefree life.

All she had to do was reach out and grab it.





## Chapter Nineteen

When Suzie sat on the balcony the next day, cradling her cup of peppermint tea, she realised she hadn't felt so calm and carefree for a long time. A feeling of intense gratitude swept over her as she appreciated how fortunate she was to be sitting there, in the early morning sunshine, surrounded by such natural and architectural beauty. If the view was a painting, its composition would be perfect and she tried hard to fix the image in her mind's eye so it would remain there forever, available in her memory to brighten those days when the bulbous grey skies descended on Blossomwood Bay in the winter months.

But it wasn't just her surroundings that had changed, her internal monologue had, too. The constant ticker tape of blame that sapped her self-confidence had, if not vanished, certainly retreated to the seats at the back of the auditorium instead of heckling her from the front row. She slept better, enjoying pleasant dreams featuring endless blue skies, glossy white yachts, and frilly pink bougainvillea in the place of grim nightmares in which she always seemed to be running away from something dark and dangerous. And because she was well rested, her energy levels were higher, which in turn meant she could do more, and being busy prevented negative thoughts from taking over.

However, much as she would like to, she couldn't spend all day soaking up the sun's rays; she had a class to prepare for! It was only ten a.m. and Katerina had already sent her a text to

inform her that, if she was interested, several of the people who had taken her pencil sketching class in the summer had responded enthusiastically to her suggestion of a week-long class in watercolours, which would also include a short demonstration in the art of silversmithing.

She was excited and nervous in equal measure, but her appreciation for Katerina's kind gesture outweighed any deep-seated urge to refuse her offer, so excitement won out. She was looking forward to the change in direction from working in self-imposed isolation, to sharing her skills and knowledge with others, and before she did anything, she intended to call her mum for some tips on delivering an interesting and stimulating class, something her mum was an expert on.

She finished the last dribble of her tea and had just pushed back her chair to head to the kitchenette to wash the mug and place it in its allocated space in the cupboard above the sink, when a flash of light caught her eye. She glanced across to the terrace of the luxury villa next door – which had been empty for the last couple of weeks – her heart skipping a beat when she saw someone standing there, an expensive camera held aloft, taking photographs.

To her surprise, and consternation, it looked like he was pointing his lens not at the caldera, but in the direction of her balcony, and even more disconcertingly, there was something familiar about him, too. With a jolt of surprise, she realised that he looked very much like the ginger-haired guy from that taverna the previous night, the one everyone had referred to as “Captain Ted”.

Her hackles rose, and her spidey sense told her something wasn't quite right.

She abandoned her mug and rushed through the French doors into the safety of the apartment, confused and bewildered that the glow of positivity she had felt just a few moments ago could vanish so quickly and she was forced to conclude that, sadly, she had not made as much progress in changing her mindset as she had previously thought. Her suspicion sprites were clearly alive and well and dancing a jig in her chest, causing her mouth to feel dry and her breath to come in rapid spurts.

Making sure the shutters were firmly closed, she took a quick shower, hoping that would help, but it didn't. She still felt unnerved by what she had seen, although she admitted that she was in no way certain that it was the man from the taverna. She dressed quickly, and descended the wooden stairs to the gallery, where she was shocked to find Katerina hunched over the desk, her shoulders shaking, her coffee cup untouched.

'Kat? What's wrong?'

When Katerina looked up and Suzie saw her puffy red eyes, she rushed forward to wrap her arms around her. Seeing the distress on her friend's face caused all thought of her own anxieties about the unwelcome and intrusive photographer to fly straight from her mind.

'I've just come from the taverna.'

'Ok... kay.'

'Stefanos was there serving breakfast, so I thought... well, after last night, it was the right time to... to talk to him, to tell

him how I feel about him. Giorgos wasn't around, so I nipped behind the bar to make myself a coffee – sort of caffeinated Dutch Courage, I suppose – then headed into the kitchen and...'

Katerina paused to dash away her tears and blow her nose. Suzie simply waited for her to continue, giving her the time and space to get her thoughts in order without pressurising her to explain what had caused such uncharacteristic upset.

'Well, Stefanos *was* in the kitchen, but he wasn't cooking omelettes, and he wasn't alone either. I was so surprised that I let the door slam behind me, which caused him to break off from his *very* passionate embrace with an attractive brunette in a pair of tight-fitting zebra-print leggings and fuchsia-pink cropped top. You should have seen the joy on his face, Suzie. If Giorgos hadn't chosen that moment to join us, I think I would have crumbled to the floor from the shock.'

Suzie thought she knew the answer to her next question, but she had to ask.

'Do you know who she was?'

'According to Giorgos, it's Stefanos' ex-fiancée, Maria. Apparently, it didn't work out with Stefanos' cousin in Mykonos, so she's come back to ask Stefanos to give her another chance. Of course, I don't have to be a mastermind on the subject of romance to know what his answer was. Don't get me wrong, I knew he still had feelings for her, and I'm happy for him, I really am, but after last night... I thought... I thought he was ready to move on. It seems I was wrong.'

A fresh set of tears trickled down Katerina's cheeks.

‘I’m sorry, Kat.’

‘Thanks, Suzie. It might take a bit of time, but I’ll be fine.’ Katerina inhaled a deep breath, pushed back her shoulders, and sat up straighter in her chair, forcing a smile onto her lips, which, despite her anguish, were still perfectly outlined in a glossy peach colour. ‘Anyway, how are things with you? You looked upset when you came down the stairs. Is everything okay with you?’

Suzie’s heart softened. Amidst her own heart-wrenching distress, Katerina still had the compassion to notice someone else’s unhappy demeanour. She was about to brush away her enquiry, but then realised that true friends shared their troubles, which included not only offering but also *accepting* the subsequent support. Nevertheless, she didn’t want to make a big thing about what had happened as compared to Katerina’s discovery, it was insignificant.

‘It’s nothing, really. It just took me by surprise, I suppose.’

‘What did?’

‘I saw a guy on the terrace of the villa across the street taking photographs. It unnerved me a bit, that’s all.’

‘Oh, it happens all the time. The villa has one of the best views of the caldera and people think it’s okay to trespass on private property, despite the signs that ask them politely not to do so.’

‘The thing is, he wasn’t pointing his lens in the direction of the caldera.’

‘What do you mean?’

Katerina stared at her; her coffee cup paused at her lips.

‘I could be wrong, but I think he was taking photographs of my balcony, and not just that; he looked like one of the yacht guys who were at the taverna last night.’

‘Really? Maybe they’re renting the villa.’

‘But they told us they were living on the boat.’

‘Mmm, yes, that is strange. I think...’ She broke off as her phone rang and she checked the screen. ‘Oh, it’s Heidi calling. Did you see her dancing with Nathan last night? I think those two make a great couple, don’t you?’

Suzie smiled, pleased to see that Katerina’s mood had lifted. ‘Maybe.’

‘*Yassou*, Heidi, how are you.... Hey, slow down, slow down, I can’t understand what you’re saying.’ Katerina met Suzie’s gaze; her dark brown eyes filled with concern. ‘Stay there, we’ll be right over.’

Katerina jumped up from her seat, smoothed down the hem of her ivory shift dress with strips of gold ribbon sewn around the hem and the neckline – her despondency was clearly not being permitted to interfere with her sartorial stylishness – grabbed her quilted handbag and coffee cup, and headed towards the door.

‘Come on. Heidi needs us.’

‘What about the gallery?’

‘Put the “Back in ten minutes” sign on the door.’

Suzie did so and then hurried in Katerina’s Chanel N°5-infused wake through the cobbled streets of Oia to Heidi’s apartment, where they found her sobbing into the arms of her

flatmate, Ana. Suzie dashed forward, crouched down in front of Heidi, and took hold of her hands, her heart filled with dismay at the sight of her friend looking so young and vulnerable.

‘What’s happened?’

Heidi met her gaze, her makeup-free eyes swimming with tears. However, when she opened her mouth to speak, no words ensued, so she simply passed her phone over to Katerina and pointed to an image.

‘Who is it?’ asked Suzie, peering over Katerina’s shoulder.

‘It’s Miranda.’

‘What? Why is her face bright orange?’

‘I have no idea,’ said Heidi, her voice barely a squeak as tears trickled down her pale cheeks. ‘She sent me that selfie this morning after looking at herself in the bathroom mirror. The only thing she can think of is that it was somehow caused by the skincare products I used on her yesterday.’

‘But how can that be?’

‘It can’t, it absolutely can’t! There’s nothing in any of the ingredients that could possibly make anyone looked like that! Look at you, Suzie, look at Katerina, you’re both absolutely fine.’

‘Maybe she had an allergic reaction to one of the ingredients?’

‘I suppose it’s possible, but if she had, wouldn’t her skin be red and blotchy, swollen even?’

‘Yes, that’s...’

‘And I only ever use natural ingredients, don’t I, Ana?’ Heidi looked imploringly at her flatmate. ‘Aloe vera, sea salt, honey, yoghurt, cucumber, poppy seeds, seaweed, a few drops of essential oil. Who’s allergic to those?’

‘So what’s Miranda going to do?’

‘Well, because she has to open the bookshop, she put on an extra-thick layer of foundation and asked her friend Cynthia to cover the cash desk and deliver their customers their morning coffees. She’s assured me that she doesn’t feel any ill-effects, but she’s planning on staying “behind the scenes” until the colour wears off a bit. But what’s even worse, and much more upsetting, is that she’s threatening to cancel her date with Giorgos tonight.’

‘She’s going on a date with Giorgos?’

‘I wasn’t supposed to say anything, but when they were strolling through the olive grove last night, he asked her to join him for a boat trip around the island and she said yes. Oh, I feel awful, my careless mistake could just have cost them both a second chance at happiness. How can I ever forgive myself!’

‘Come on, I think we need to go over to the taverna for a restorative coffee,’ said Ana.

‘No,’ said Suzie quickly, earning herself a look of surprise from Heidi.

‘Why not?’

Katerina sighed and filled Heidi and Ana in on what had happened when she was there that morning, and it was Heidi’s turn to wrap her arms around her friend. ‘I’m so sorry, Kat. Okay, how about we head over to the bookshop instead? I’m



sure Miranda could do with some moral support, and I'll take my makeup trunk with me.'

'Great idea.'

The four women headed off to the book shop, conversation at a minimum as they descended into their respective thoughts. When Suzie walked through the door, she was pleased she wasn't the first person Miranda saw because she knew her jaw had dropped in surprise, and it took her a few moments to wind it back in.

Despite the extra-thick layer of foundation, Miranda's face still possessed a satsuma-esque glow, with particularly noticeable streaks around her laughter lines, along her forehead, and across her chest. However, her skin didn't look puffy or red, just as though it had been stained with an especially vibrant shade of self-tanning cream.

'Thanks for coming,' said Miranda, giving them all hugs before rushing into the bookshop's kitchenette to make coffee, the cups clinking in the saucers as her hand trembled when she delivered them. 'The sugar is over there.'

'I'm *so* sorry, Mirrie,' said Heidi, tears collecting along her lashes. 'I really can't figure out what could have happened.'

'It's fine, Heidi, these things happen when you're experimenting with a new product. It'll fade, I'm sure, and believe me when I say that it's not the *only* beauty disaster I've had to endure over the years. I once had a perm that made me look like I'd stuck my finger in an electric socket, and it took over two months to grow it out! Now, drink your coffee and let me see that wonderfully cheerful smile back on your face! Oh, look, there's Robyn!'

When Suzie saw Robyn approach their gathering, she just about managed not to expel her coffee and gasp the words “Oh my God!” out loud, but Heidi wasn’t so circumspect.

‘Oh Robyn, not you as well!’

‘Hilarious, isn’t it, darling? I look like I’ve been baked in an oven.’ Robyn laughed, a rich, deep throaty sound that made Suzie smile. ‘You have no idea how many people have checked me out on my way over here. Here I was, thinking that once I got to fifty I’d become invisible to the rest of the population – now I know *exactly* where I’ve been going wrong. I’m seriously considering making this part of my new look! Would you believe I’ve even had people photographing me on my way over like I was a celebrity from that fabulous TV makeup show!’

Robyn struck a pose, her hand on her hip and her chin raised haughtily as she swayed from left to right like a catwalk model, the skirt of her plum-coloured hippie dress whipping around her thighs, the tiny metal embellishments around the hem making a jaunty tinkling sound.

‘I’m really sorry, Robyn,’ Heidi muttered, tears starting to fall again.

‘Don’t be, darling! While I admit it was a bit of a shock when I looked in the mirror this morning, I’m keen to know which product you used so I can purchase a couple of jars from you for when I next need to garner attention from my adoring public.’

‘That’s just the thing. There’s nothing in any of my products that could have caused this. I definitely did *not* use

anything that's even remotely like self-tan, which is obviously what this is.'

'How did it happen, then?' asked Katerina.

'I don't know. I've prepared this particular recipe lots of times, and Ana and I have been using it on our faces for weeks, and *we've* never turned orange.'

'So you think it's a rogue batch?'

'Yes, that must be it.'

'Shame,' said Robyn, looking genuinely disappointed.

'Come on,' said Heidi, her face finally brightening. 'Why don't you sit down over here, and I'll do your makeup for you.'

'Oh, how fabulous!' Robyn declared, taking a seat in one of the bookshop's reclining leather chairs and tipping her face to the ceiling. 'Thank you so much, darling! Out of adversity springs opportunity!'

Heidi's smile returned as she set to work on Robyn's makeup, choosing a shade of foundation that enhanced Robyn's natural skin tone and adding a sweep of blusher to the apples of her cheeks to give her a radiant and healthy look. Next, she drew on a line of pale lilac eyeliner, blending and smudging to create the perfect frame for Robyn's blue-grey eyes, before turning to the glitzy eyeshadow she adored, giving her model first a swipe of lavender, then of rich dark magenta before finishing off with a thick layer of lash-lengthening mascara.

'Wow, Heidi, you're a cosmetics maestro!'

‘Thanks, Robyn. Mirrie, why don’t you let Ana add a little enhancement?’

‘Oh, no, I’m not sure I—’

‘I promise to stick to a more muted colour palette,’ said Ana, showing her a gold compact containing browns, beiges, and nudes with only a hint of shimmer. ‘What about these?’

Miranda beamed. ‘I love them! You know, I could get used to having my makeup done professionally. It’s such a treat. Roger always said that pampering was a waste of money.’

Suzie glanced across at Katerina and, to her bemusement, she saw that her friend had been watching the exchanges between Heidi and Robyn, and Heidi and Miranda, closely, her eyes narrowed, her forehead creased in thought, and when she took her coffee and pastry to a table in the bookshop’s courtyard, she followed her.

‘What’s wrong, Kat?’

‘I’m not sure, it... well, it just seems so unlikely.’

‘What does?’

‘Well, first there was the message on the mirror and now there’s the tanning incident...’

Katerina left the insinuation hanging and shockwaves ricocheted through Suzie’s brain.

‘You mean... you think someone might be targeting Miranda?’

Katerina sighed. ‘I don’t know. Maybe it’s just my imagination playing tricks on me.’

‘But how can that be right? Robyn has an orange face, too.’

‘Has anyone spoken to Diana yet?’

Suzie peered through the bookshop’s open doorway, smiling when she saw how attractive Miranda looked after the subtle makeover. Ana was now in the process of combing the fringe of Miranda’s caramel bob back from her face and giving it a softer, more tousled look.

‘Wow, Miranda, darling, you look amazing!’

‘Thank you, Robyn. Actually, I *feel* amazing. I wish I’d known before how a little powder and lipstick can give the spirits such a wonderful boost. If I had, I might have ignored Roger’s dismissal of pampering as indulgent and joined my friends at all those spa days they used to enjoy.’

To cover for the surge of emotion her belated realisation had clearly caused, Miranda muttered something about replenishing their coffees and disappeared into the kitchen, returning with a cafetiere and pouring Suzie and Katerina a fresh coffee.

‘Erm, Miranda,’ said Katerina, after taking a gulp of her drink. ‘Have you heard from Diana this morning?’

‘No, why do you... Oh, do you think she might be orange, too?’ Miranda laughed.

‘Maybe.’

‘I’ll give her a call.’

When Miranda returned, she was grinning broadly.

‘You’re right. She’s orange, too. I invited her over to the bookshop to complete our Tango Trio, but she said she’s too embarrassed to go out in public. When I told her that was

ridiculous, and that if she didn't come over right now I'd ban her from book club for the rest of the year, I'm pleased to say she changed her mind and has promised to be here in the next ten minutes. Heidi, do you think you could—'

'Oh my God!' Heidi exclaimed, her eyes glued to her phone, her face a sickly shade of white. 'I knew it! I knew something like this would happen!'



# Chapter Twenty

‘Heidi? What’s going on?’

‘Look!’

Heidi thrust her phone towards Katerina, and everyone crowded round to watch *HolsHacker*’s most recent upload in dismay. He’d just published a special edition of his popular travel vlog because Santorini had, in his words, “so much to offer the discerning traveller who enjoys a bit of comedy thrown in with their sun, sea, and sand vacation”.

Suzie’s stomach curdled as she watched the camera frame an image of the front of the book shop, its whitewashed facade looking almost mystical in the soft ivory moonlight. As the person behind the lens descended the short flight of steps into the courtyard – the very place they were currently sitting – it was clear that the door was not just ajar, but wide open, inviting any passer-by to come inside, which is exactly what the intrepid filmmaker decided to do.

After showcasing the extensive bibliographic selection housed on the floor-to-ceiling shelves – as well as scattered around on the floor – the vlogger then took a tour of the backstage area, starting with the storeroom, the tiny kitchen, and then, to everyone’s horror, they pushed open the door to the bathroom where they proceeded to film the special effects that had been daubed across the mirror.

‘Is that lipstick?’ asked Robyn, peering at the screen.

‘Yes,’ said Miranda, her voice tight.



‘What does it say?’

‘It says “*Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo*”.’

‘A strange choice,’ Robyn mused. ‘Graffiti artists in my day leaned more towards Dondi and Bando than Shakespeare. Oh my God, are those kisses made with real lips?’

‘Yes.’

‘I take it you knew about this?’

‘Yes, I did.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me? Have you informed the police?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because...’

Fortunately, Miranda was excused from having to explain her regrettable error of forgetting to lock the door behind her because Robyn had expelled a loud shriek of shock.

‘Oh my God!!’

The video had recalibrated, and they were now watching a woman sashay down the one of Oia’s cobbled streets wearing a plum-coloured hippie dress, its embellishment glinting in the sunshine as she moved towards the camera. Seconds later, there was a close-up of Robyn’s orange face that [\[ED2\]](#)Suzie suspected had been manipulated to look even more neon-bright that it actually was, something she hadn’t thought possible.

‘Is... is that me?’

‘It certainly looks like you,’ said Miranda, a note of caution in her voice.

‘Well, don’t I look amazing, darling!’

Suzie was in two minds. Robyn was clearly thrilled that she was the star of the show, and she had to admit that, apart from the orangeness, she did look very striking in her long floaty dress with her halo of blonde curls bouncing around her face. She certainly didn’t look her age! However, she was horrified that Miranda and Robyn had been innocent victims of what was clearly *HolsHacker*’s modus operandi of seeking out unfortunate events and uploading them to the internet without the “stars”’ express consent. Then something else occurred to her.

‘Robyn, did you see the person who filmed this?’

‘It must have been the guy who I thought had taken my photograph on the way over here.’

‘So it was definitely a man? What did he look like?’

‘I... Hmm, to be honest, I didn’t really take much notice.’

‘Can you remember *anything* about him? What was he wearing? Did he have red hair and freckles? Was he—’

‘Hang on, guys, the vlog isn’t finished yet,’ said Heidi.

The image on the screen had switched to a very picturesque square in the centre of Oia, surrounded by a plethora of lively bars and restaurants, before panning out to include the glistening Aegean Sea, its surface an exquisite shade of sapphire blue under a dusky aquamarine and pink-streaked sky. After a few moments lingering on one of the most famous views in the Mediterranean, the mini-movie took the viewer

on a trip down one of the town's many cobbled streets, pausing in front of the occasional shop window to illustrate the wide variety of products that were on offer to the discerning visitor.

Suzie's heart rammed hard against her ribcage as the camera came to a stop in front of *Katerina's Art Studio* where the vlogger took his time showcasing a variety of the colourful ceramics on display in the window – bowls, jugs, decorative plaques, small marble statues – before focusing in on the centrepiece that was proudly exhibited on a raised wooden plinth, its gem-encrusted rim sparkling in the early evening sunshine.

‘Does anyone else think that vase looks like a—’

However, Ana's observation was cut short when a film-star-esque man appeared behind the vase holding a piece of cream-coloured card, which he proceeded to prop up in front of the pedestal before allowing himself a satisfied smile. The camera focused on Christos' handsome face for what felt like an inordinate amount of time, before zooming in on the words that he'd written on the card.

A wave of nausea rolled through Suzie's body. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. She felt like she had strayed into a particularly distressing nightmare, except this wasn't a nightmare, it was real life, and her personal details – her name, where she was from, and the fact that she was involved in the jewellery business – which she had always guarded so zealously, had been splashed all over someone's YouTube channel for his many current, and future, subscribers to see.

The recording came to an end, and all eyes turned towards Suzie. She lowered her gaze, swallowing down hard on the cauldron of emotions that were swirling through her chest: shock, embarrassment, indignation, alarm, anger, and finally – and most acutely of all – panic.

‘Are you okay, Suzie?’ asked Miranda, reaching out to take her hand in hers and giving it a gentle squeeze. ‘You look dreadful. Can I get you a glass of water?’

‘No, I...’

Suddenly all the breath seemed to have been sucked from her lungs and she needed to get away, to attempt to douse the increasing helix of panic before it overwhelmed her, which she couldn’t do while her friends were staring at her with a mixture of expressions ranging from curiosity to amusement.

‘Sorry, I need to get some air.’

She took the steps from the courtyard two at a time, pausing briefly in the street that ran along Oia’s clifftop, for once oblivious to the view spread out in front of her. Her knees felt shaky, her heart was pounding so hard it hurt, and she was having difficulty breathing, which was making her feel lightheaded.

Her worst nightmare had come to pass.

Her details were on a YouTube video!

Anyone who had followed her story the previous year would surely know it was her, and it was only a matter of time before they came to look for her, taking photographs, demanding an interview, asking probing questions like how she could afford such a glamorous, all-summer-long trip.

Her head started to spin, and she realised that if she continued to allow her demons free rein, she would succumb to a full-blown panic attack. So, with every last ounce of effort she possessed, she began to follow the routine that Amber had taught her when things had been at their worst.

First, she inhaled several long, slow, deep breaths, counting to four on the inhale and four on the exhale. Then, she picked out five separate objects – she was fortunate to have plenty to choose from – and considered each of them for a short while, before moving on to identify four distinct sounds and pinpointing where they came from. Next, she touched three objects, noting their texture and what they were used for, and picked out two different smells floating in the air around her – a warm sugary aroma from the bakery next to the bookshop and a floral scent from a nearby potted geranium. The final task – the one she had always found the hardest to do – was to identify a taste in her mouth, and her lips twitched into a tentative smile when she realised that she could taste the remnants of the coffee Miranda had made for her. When she was done, she found that her heartrate had slowed and her head had cleared.

Even though she had managed to avoid a full-on panic attack, she still felt jittery, and as she made her way back to her studio, she couldn't stop worrying that someone would step out of the shadows of Oia's labyrinthine streets and thrust a microphone in front of her, bellowing rapid-fire questions at her until she thought her brain would explode.

Who was this vlogger?

Why was he doing these things?

Did he think his videos were funny?

Finally, she reached her studio – without being door-stepped by a rampaging horde of paparazzi – and dashed up the steps, slamming the door firmly behind her. All she wanted to do was curl up on the sofa and hide from the world but what good would that do? Suddenly she was desperate to share her ordeal with someone who would understand, someone who would empathise, then offer the most sensible, practical advice.

Amber.

She dialled her sister's number and when she answered immediately, the relief on hearing her voice had a further calming effect, like a soft balm on a paper cut. In one long, uninterrupted sentence, she told Amber about *HolsHacker* and then waited for what felt like hours while her sister watched the video.

'Wow, that vase looks like a—'

'Ambie, please, I can't—'

'Sorry, sorry. Look, if you want my honest opinion, I really don't think you have anything to worry about. Your details were on screen for only the briefest of moments, and it's quite hard to make out the writing, too. You might not agree, but what happened was a *long* time ago, Suzie, and no one is going to connect the creator of a piece of art in the window of a gallery in Oia with what happened at a jeweller's shop in Mayfair. Anyway, it's not just the quirky vase in that video, is it? There's other stuff, too. I mean, what on earth happened at the bookshop?'

By the time Suzie had finished telling Amber about Miranda forgetting to lock the door after their literary cocktails night, and that Robyn's orange face was the result of another of Heidi's new business ventures, she felt much better and was able to put her fleeting appearance in a travel vlogger's video into perspective.

'I miss you, Ambie. When are you coming back to Santorini?'

'Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that.'

Suzie's stomach dropped. She could tell from the tone of her sister's voice that she might not like what she was going to say, but it was her turn to be supportive.

'What's going on?'

'Oh, Suzie, you're not going to believe it. Mum's arranged for me to do a couple of volunteering sessions at the animal sanctuary with her! Did I tell you they have tigers there? And monkeys, and zebras, and hippos, and bears. So... I was thinking of staying on in Bali for another month.'

'Another month!'

'But if you need me to come back, I will.'

Despite her dismay, Suzie knew she couldn't deny her sister the chance of experiencing something that had been on her wish list for as long as she could remember. Amber loved tigers; they were what she drew when her friends were drawing cats, dogs, mice, and hamsters, not to mention the fact that she had given up so much of her time to support Suzie the previous year when she should have been heading for a relaxing two weeks in Bali.

‘No, no, of course not. Another month is not a problem.’

‘Have you talked to Christos about what happened?’

‘About the vlog?’

‘No, about what happened in London.’

‘No, I haven’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’m... I’m too ashamed.’

‘You have nothing to be ashamed of! Suzie, I’ve told you a thousand times, *it wasn’t your fault!* Why can’t you believe that? Anyone in your position would have done the same; I would, Mum would, and Annoying Adam certainly would. Remember what Mum always used to tell us? A problem shared is a problem halved. I don’t know why you insist on carrying this burden around with you, hugging it greedily to your chest, allowing it to squeeze the enjoyment out of everything that’s good in your life.’

It was the first time her sister had berated her, even gently, and Suzie was shocked, but she could see things from Amber’s perspective. On the rare occasions when she was able to look at the situation from the point of view of a neutral bystander, she agreed with every word her sister had just said. It wasn’t as though she hadn’t *tried* to move on – she had, really hard – it was just that nothing she did could eradicate the ever-present feeling of guilt that smouldered in her chest. It had become a part of who she was.

Was Amber right?



If she shared her story – the whole story, not just the bare facts – with someone who had not been directly involved, or who hadn't read any of the sensationally embroidered news articles that had been written about her, would that help? Would the leaden weight in her chest ease sufficiently enough to allow her to take the first steps towards a new future?

'Talk to him, Suzie,' said Amber, her voice gentle and filled with compassion. 'From what you've told me about him, he sounds like a decent guy.'

'I'll... I'll think about it.'

'Good. Okay, I've got to go. Love you.'

'Love you, too.'

The moment she disconnected the call there was a loud knock on the door and even though talking to her sister had calmed her swirling emotions, her heart still gave a jolt of alarm. She tried to peer out of the patio window, but she couldn't see who the visitor was. She briefly contemplated hiding behind the sofa, hoping they would think she wasn't in and go away, until there was another, much more insistent, knock.

'Suzie? It's Christos. Are you in there?'

She opened the door to find him standing on her doorstep, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, elbows flapping nervously at his waist, guilt scrawled across his features. She invited him in, grabbed a couple of cold beers from the fridge, and suggested they sat on the balcony.

'I'm so sorry, Suzie. I should have told you.'

'You should have... What do you mean? Told me what?'

A thunderbolt of shock hit her square in the chest. Was *he* the anonymous travel vlogger? Had *he* uploaded the video? But she realised immediately how ridiculous that was. How could it be Christos when he had been the vlog's star?



# Chapter Twenty One

‘Oh God, it’s all my fault!’

Christos’ demeanour was uncharacteristically agitated; he was clearly distressed, his hand trembling as he lifted the bottle of beer she had given him to his lips and took a long gulp.

‘I’m sorry, Christos, I don’t know what...’

‘I’ve just bumped into Heidi, and she told me about the vlog.’

‘Yes, I—’

‘I can see how upset you are, and I should never have got you involved. This is the last thing I wanted to happen! It’s the reason I’ve been keeping a low profile while I’ve been on Santorini. Giorgos’ Greek dance class was the first time I’ve socialised with a larger group of people since the beginning of summer, and I should have known what would happen.’

Suzie stared at Christos, completely bewildered, her recent anxieties retreating to second place as she tried to figure out what was going on.

‘Christos, I really don’t—’

‘I’m a musician.’

‘Ok...ay.’

‘In a band.’

‘Right...’

‘Quite a successful band. One that fills stadiums in Athens, Thessaloniki, and Crete.’

‘That sounds like lots of fun.’

‘It was... When we started out it was *lots* of fun, a dream come true. We met so many of our idols, even got to play gigs alongside some of them. That’s how I met Dexter Hawkins – we were one of the support acts when he came over to Athens a couple of years back and it was a highlight of my career. But as our fanbase grew, so did the pressure. Petros and the other guys felt it, too, but not as much as me.’

Christos paused to take another mouthful of beer.

‘Everything started to get to me; the lack of privacy, the constant scrutiny of my private life, the fact I couldn’t go anywhere without getting stopped for a photo-op or an autograph. Would you believe that someone even helped themselves to a lock of my hair!? I couldn’t let my guard down for a second otherwise what I said, or what I did, would be splashed across someone’s social media account within the hour. It wasn’t about the music anymore. Every interview we did focused almost exclusively on our personal lives: who we were dating, whether we were serious, planning a secret wedding, having a family. One journalist even asked Petros what he’d had for breakfast that morning! I mean, who’s interested in that?’

Christos’ jaw tightened and Suzie saw the same expression in his dark eyes that she’d noticed the first time she’d met him.

‘It was totally overwhelming, and things got crazier and crazier. I knew I needed to take a break – so did Petros – but we kept putting it off, knowing that we were living the dream

we had craved for so long, one which hundreds, if not thousands, of other bands would give their right arm for. Then I had an almighty bust up with my family, and everything unravelled from there.'

'What kind of bust up?'

'I told you my parents started a publishing business after resigning their posts at the university, but what actually happened was they bought two newspapers and a couple of glossy magazines. When the band started to get a little attention from the press, Dad promised me, and the other guys, that they would never run anything about us in any of their publications. I trusted him, and to give him his credit, he stuck to his word... Until six months ago, when they published a lengthy piece in one of their Sunday magazines, written by someone using a pseudonym. How ironic is that? Happy to write a whole load of personal stuff about someone without their consent, but not willing to reveal their own identity! I was livid! I couldn't believe my family would betray me in such a flagrant way.'

'Did you find out who'd written it?'

'Unfortunately, I did. After some digging, I found out that it was co-written by two people I thought loved me, who I thought would always have my back no matter what. But I was wrong, and the pain of discovering that my girlfriend and *my own sister* could do such a thing was more than I could bear. But you know what the worst thing about the whole episode was?'

Suzie shook her head, even though she knew it was a rhetorical question.

‘When I confronted my parents, they sided with *her*! They pointed out that everything in the article was true and played down the effect the contents had on my emotional wellbeing. I flipped. We had a blazing row, everyone said things they shouldn’t have said, and I stormed out of their house, went straight round to see Thea, told her we were finished, then caught a flight over here to Santorini.

‘Looking back, I accept that my mental health at the time played a part in how I reacted, but what they did was cruel and exploitative, and for the sole purpose of selling a few more newspapers. I’m working on my forgiveness skills, but I’m not there yet, and seeing this vlog has brought everything tumbling back.’

‘I’m so sorry, Christos.’

‘I know Heidi’s been following this guy’s vlogs for a while. Does she have any idea who *HolsHacker* is?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Do you?’

‘No, I...’ Suzie paused, remembering the guy she had seen on the roof opposite where they were sitting at that very moment, pointing his camera in her direction. Was he *HolsHacker*? Had he been taking photographs of her because of her connection with Christos? Although she was indignant on Christos’ behalf, she had to admit that the possibility did alleviate a little of her own anxiety. ‘Actually, when I was on the balcony this morning I saw a guy on the terrace over there taking photographs of me. I could be wrong, but he looked like one of the guys who came for dinner at the taverna last night, the one they called “Captain Ted”.’

‘So you think he’s *HolsHacker*?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Well, I hope for his sake they’ve sailed off to another island by now.’ Christos growled, a muscle in his cheek working overtime. ‘And that the overlap between people who are interested in holiday hacks and people who are into Greek rock music is minimal.’

Christos paused to take another sip of his beer as he wrestled to control his emotions.

‘You know what the worst thing about all this? I’ve not picked up a guitar since I left Athens. I’m sad to say that I’ve lost my love of music and I don’t even miss it. Fame is not all it’s cracked up to be; it takes its toll, and I’m exhausted with the whole business. Being here, spending time on the boat, I’ve had plenty of time to think. I really want to do something different, something that lights up my life, and there’s something I used to love just as much as music, if not more, that I want to pursue.’

‘Sailing?’

‘No, something more creative.’

‘Pottery?’ said Suzie, trying to put the smile back on Christos’ face.

‘I won’t rule it out.’ Christos laughed, before becoming serious again. ‘I’ve had a taste of what a normal life is like, and I like it. I like having normal relationships with people who want to be with me for who I am, not *what* I am. I’ve never told any of my previous girlfriends about my animal phobia before. I’ve never felt able to confide in them for fear



of them talking to the press about it when our relationship ended, or as it turned out with Thea, *while* we were still seeing each other!’

Christos eyes lingered on the horizon where the glistening azure blue of the Aegean Sea met the cloudless cerulean sky, his thoughts clearly on another time, another place.

‘Do you have any idea how it feels when the person you thought you were going to spend the rest of your life with treats you with such callous disregard for your feelings?’

Suzie couldn’t fail to hear the sadness in his voice, and what he’d said struck a nerve. She remembered what Amber had said to her about talking to Christos, and this was as good a time as any to do that. He’d opened up to her, now it was her turn to open up to him. She took a quick sip of her beer to give her the courage she needed to squeeze out the words that were spiralling around her brain, and, ignoring her racing heart, she said, ‘Actually, I do.’

Christos met her gaze. ‘You do?’

‘It’s not the same as what happened to you, but...’

Her voice faltered as her insecurities threatened to overwhelm her.

Could she do it?

Could she tell Christos about Adam? She’d only known Christos for a matter of weeks, but she had felt a connection with him from the moment they’d met, the moment he’d wrapped his arms around her waist and held her tight so she didn’t fall. She felt safe in his company, like she could say

anything and he would understand, so she shoved away her doubts and launched into the story.

‘Adam, my fiancé, he didn’t support me when I needed him most, either. In fact, he wouldn’t even speak to me. He refused all my calls and ignored all my texts, and when I went back to the apartment we shared in Wimbledon, he’d changed the locks and I couldn’t even get into my own home. Not only that, he also emptied our joint bank account, leaving me with no money and nowhere to go. I lost count of how many voicemails I left for him, and the only response I ever got back was that if I didn’t stop harassing him, he’d be forced to take legal action. I was devastated and if it hadn’t been for Mum and Amber, I don’t know what I’d have done.’

‘Suzie, I’m so sorry you had to go through that.’

Silence descended over the balcony, as even the cicadas seemed to understand that their song wasn’t appropriate. She knew that Christos was waiting for her to expand on the reasons Adam had treated her in such a cold and heartless way, but at the final hurdle, she just couldn’t bring herself to do it.

She wanted to; she really did.

But it was like there was a voracious monster living inside her, feeding on her confidence and self-esteem. She was desperate to evict it, yet she just didn’t seem to have that last molecule of the strength she needed to do what was necessary. She knew she was a coward, but unlike Christos – whom she assumed had initially courted the media, maybe even enjoyed its attention, and was now angry with its servants for invading his privacy – she wasn’t angry, she was scared. No, she was *terrified* of them.

Whilst she was relieved to know that the focus of the YouTube video had been Christos and not her, his celebrity meant that more people would now know he was living in Santorini, which meant there would be an increased likelihood of fans, and reporters, turning up there, hoping to “bump” into him. Even if he kept the lowest of profiles, there was still a chance there would be more vlogs, reels, and posts on social media channels, and she just couldn’t take the risk of those videos including her.

She had grown close to Christos over the last few weeks, and his presence in her life had helped her to start to think she might be able to put the trauma of her past behind her and move on to a more carefree future, but she had been fooling herself. The fear was still there, and while it broke her heart, she knew that the only thing she could do to protect herself from a return of the nightmare she’d endured twelve months ago, was to distance herself from him.



## Chapter Twenty Two

A few days later, against her better judgement, Suzie agreed to have a drink with Christos at the taverna. She'd been busy at the gallery, and he'd had a spate of last-minute bookings for sunset cruises and day trips around the coast, and if she was honest with herself, she'd missed him, she'd missed him a lot. However, she intended to use the opportunity speak to him and suggest that for the time being it was probably best if they remained friends.

Christos met her at the top of the dusty driveway that led to *Taverna Giorgos*, the smile on his face telling Suzie everything she needed to know. When he laced his fingers through hers the way he always did, she realised that her feelings for him had progressed well beyond the realms of friendship. With him walking by her side, she felt as though she could conquer anything, even the actions of opportunist photographers and unscrupulous vloggers.

It was late afternoon, the sun had lost its vigour, and there was a welcome breeze rippling through the leaves of the olive trees that lined their route. Birds flitted from branch to branch, following their progress with interest and chirping their encouragement, before flying off in search of that day's dinner.

The season was almost at an end, and only a handful of customers were enjoying a drink on the veranda, which, to her surprise, didn't include Nathan and his trusty notebook. She was about to follow Christos to their usual table in the corner when she noticed Giorgos slumped on a stool at the end of the

bar, his handsome face solemn as he stirred his coffee, round and round and round, looking as though all the troubles of the world were on his shoulders.

‘Hey guys,’ said Heidi, bustling over to greet them, her makeup as sparkly as ever but her mood more subdued than usual. ‘What can I get you?’

‘Just a coffee, please,’ said Suzie.

‘Christos?’

‘Yes, please. Thanks, Heidi,’ said Christos, relaxing back into his chair.

‘What’s wrong with Giorgos?’ asked Suzie.

‘Haven’t you heard?’

‘Heard what?’

‘Miranda’s husband turned up last night.’

‘What?’

‘Apparently he’s “seen the error of his ways” and wants her back.’ Heidi wrinkled her nose. ‘He told her that his midlife crisis is over, and that he decided to split up with his much younger girlfriend when he realised what he’d lost. He’s promised her a fresh start when they get back home to Bristol.’

‘What’s she going to do?’ asked Christos, glancing across to where Giorgos was still stirring his coffee, his spoon clinking disconsolately against the cup.

‘I don’t know. I haven’t heard from her all day.’

‘And Giorgos?’

‘They went out on their boat trip yesterday. He took her to his favourite cove where they swam and relaxed on the beach, before heading over to his brother’s restaurant in Pyrgos for dinner. I think he likes her. I think he likes her *a lot*, and I think Miranda likes him, too. I know I’ve only known Giorgos for a few months, but I’ve spoken to Stefanos, and he said it’s the first time he’s taken someone to meet his family since Anya.’

‘I have to admit, they did look really happy together at the Greek dance night.’

‘I agree. I really hope she doesn’t go back home with Roger. He doesn’t deserve her. He’s had his fun – did Miranda tell you that he bought a bright red Porsche because it was his *girlfriend*’s favourite car? – and now that Bella’s ditched him, he comes crawling back and expects Miranda to just welcome him with open arms.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Suzie, smiling when Heidi rolled her eyes in disdain. ‘I’m sure Miranda will make the decision that’s right for her.’

‘I hope so. I see Kat isn’t with you... again.’

Suzie sighed. Katerina had steadfastly refused to step foot in the taverna since Maria had arrived, relying instead on Suzie to make the regular trips to satisfy her caffeine addiction. She had to admit she’d been worried when, in the middle of one afternoon, Katerina had suggested she might like to try one of Amber’s peppermint teas, and she couldn’t help but laugh when Katerina declared that it tasted like something from the local swamp.

‘She’s spending a lot of time over at her studio, painting and glassmaking.’

‘Well, as long as her pictures don’t turn out like those depressing canvases in the room at the back of the gallery, I suppose that’s okay.’

Heidi took a step back so that a clearly very happy Stefanos could deposit two mugs of rich, dark Greek coffee on the table in front of Suzie and Christos. After murmuring a brief ‘*Kalispera*’, he headed into the restaurant to take an order from a recently arrived couple, unconcerned that he was the only member of staff diligently carrying out his duties, and not even batting an eye when Heidi dropped into the seat next to Suzie.

‘You know, I’m thinking of giving up my skincare business. In fact, I’m thinking of ditching *all* of my businesses. None of them have worked out like I hoped they would, and what happened with Miranda and her friends last week has freaked me out a bit. What if I’d caused them serious harm? I’d never forgive myself. No, I think I’ll just stick with being the best waitress in Oia,’ she declared, ignoring the arrival of a group of men who were hovering at the door waiting for someone to acknowledge them and show them to a table.

‘Sounds like a...’

Suzie’s phone buzzed and when she glanced at the screen, she was surprised to see that it was Holly. She was about to excuse herself so she could talk to her in private, when Christos abruptly scraped back his chair, his eyes fixed on the recently arrived men. When Suzie glanced over her shoulder, she realised they were the guys from the yacht.



‘Is that the guy you saw taking photographs?’

Now that Suzie could see him at close quarters, she was certain he was the ginger-haired photographer she’d seen pointing his lens at her when she was sitting on the balcony the day after their Greek dance night. Her phone buzzed again, but this time she declined the call.

‘Yes, it is.’

Christos jumped from his seat, his face thunderous, his fists clenched at his sides. Giorgos looked up from his coffee cup in surprise, his expression morphing into concern when he saw Christos and he strode across the veranda to join them.

‘What’s going on, Christos?’

‘Suzie saw that guy over there taking photographs of her and I reckon it’s the same guy who messed up the bookshop *and* took the video of me at the gallery!’

Heidi gasped. ‘You mean he’s... he’s *HolsHacker*?’

‘Yes, and I’m going to have a few harsh words with him.’

‘No, please, Christos,’ Suzie began, reaching for his arm. ‘It doesn’t matter, it’s—’

‘It matters to me.’

And before anyone could stop him, Christos marched towards the table where Stefanos was in the process of handed round menus. It took a few moments for the group to realise that Christos was standing at the head of their table, his face a deceptive mask of calm, with Giorgos standing on his right, clearly making sure that things didn’t get out of hand. Suzie

exchanged a glance with Heidi, and they quickly scrambled to join them.

While everyone spent a few seconds staring at each other in curiosity, Suzie felt her phone buzz in her pocket for a third time, and when she surreptitiously glanced at the screen, she saw that Holly had sent her a text that simply said ‘Call me’ with three exclamation marks. She hesitated for only a moment before returning her phone to her pocket so she could give her full attention to the drama that was unfolding in front of her.

‘You!’

Christos pointed at the ginger-haired guy who was the only one of the party still reading the menu and oblivious to the fact that their table was surrounded by the taverna’s staff and their friends.

‘I think he means you, Eddie.’

Eddie took his time closing his menu before raising his eyes to meet Christos’ gaze, a rather insolent smile playing around his lips.

‘What’s going on?’

‘You *know* what’s going on!’ said Christos, clearly struggling to keep his temper under control.

‘I’m sorry, mate, no offence, but I have no idea who you are, or what—’

‘But we know who *you* are!’ Heidi blurted, her voice shrill.

‘And who’s that, then?’

‘You’re *HolsHacker!*’

The smile vanished from Eddie's face and his jaw slackened. That was clearly not what he had expected Heidi to say.

'Who the heck is *HolsHacker*?'

'Very funny,' said Christos, staring at Eddie as though he'd crawled out from under a stone. 'We know it was you who took that video in the bookshop... after you'd trashed the place and scrawled that distasteful graffiti on the mirror.'

'What's he talking about, Eddie?'

'I have no idea, Josh. Look, I don't know what's going on here, but okay, now that I've had chance to see you properly, I admit I might have seen you the last time we were here, so when I said I didn't know who you were, I concede that I was mistaken. However, I have no idea why you've decided to come over to our table and rudely interrupt our meal, so, if you'll excuse us, we'd like to...'

Suzie saw that Christos' resolve had started to falter and he looked confused. It was obvious from the man's expression that he didn't have any idea who Christos really was, or what he was upset about, nor did he know who *HolsHacker* was. However, one thing she was certain about was that Eddie was the man she had seen on the terrace opposite the studio the following morning.

'But it *was* you I saw taking photographs of me the next morning.'

The man was no actor, and she knew straight away that she had scored a direct hit when he averted his eyes and his freckled cheeks flooded with heat.

‘Why were you taking photographs of Suzie?’ asked Christos.

‘I really don’t think that’s any of your business.’

Christos took a step towards Eddie, which caused all five men at the table to rise from their seats, and Stefanos to come out of the kitchen with a watermelon in one hand and a rather large carving knife in the other.

‘Everything okay, Giorgos?’

‘Okay, okay.’ Eddie held up his palms in semi-mock surrender. ‘I thought I recognised her, but I wasn’t sure, so I sent a couple of snaps I’d taken at the party night to one of my colleagues back at the agency. Fergus agreed with me, but he wanted more proof, so yes, I took a few photographs of her lolling around on the balcony of her luxury apartment, sipping cocktails as though she didn’t have a care in the world.’

All eyes swung towards Suzie.

She tried to respond, to tell him that Amber’s studio was *not* luxurious, and that she had been drinking peppermint tea, not cocktails, but she discovered that every bone in her body had frozen, her brain had stalled, and she was unable to process even the simplest of thoughts.

‘Oh, and I’m happy to inform you that I got a great price for the photos.’ Eddie smirked. ‘Almost covered the cost of our entire vacation.’

Suddenly, all hell broke loose.

Christos launched himself towards Eddie but was held back by the swift action of Stefanos who grabbed him before he could land a blow and guided him firmly away to the safety of

the kitchen, talking to him in scattergun Greek. Heidi slid her hand into Suzie's and led her back to the table they'd been sitting at earlier where they watched in silence as Giorgos and two of his *tavli* friends escorted the yacht guys from the premises, before apologising to the remaining patrons for the disturbance and offering them glasses of vintage Santorini wine on the house.

'Suzie? I don't understand,' said Heidi, completely bewildered by the incident. 'Why did Eddie want to sell photographs of you? Are you famous or something?'

'No, I—'

Suzie's phone buzzed again and this time when it stopped ringing, it started again immediately. She sighed. Holly was clearly desperate to get in touch with her, and her call gave her the excuse she needed to escape Heidi's questions. She loved her friend, but she really didn't have the mental bandwidth to explain what was going on until she had worked it out herself first.

'Sorry, Heidi, I really have to take this.'

Suzie all but sprinted from the taverna, only stopping when she was halfway down the pathway towards Oia, where she leaned against a collapsed wall that had been colonised by a profusion of weeds to return Holly's call.

'Hi, Holly, is everything okay?'

'Oh, Suzie, thank God. I've been trying to ring you to warn you.'

'Warn me? Warn me about what?'

Suzie gulped down on an upswing of nausea. Even though she had a good idea what Holly was going to say, she couldn't help hoping she was wrong.

'You really need to take a look at the link I've sent you. I'm so *so* sorry, Suzie. If there's anything Oscar and I can do to help, you only have to ask. We're here for you. Come home. Stay with us at the *Fox & Fiddle*. Don't forget, we love you.'

'Thanks, Holly. I'll call you back.'

'Promise?'

'Promise.'

With shaking hands, Suzie clicked on the link in Holly's text, and through a blur of tears she read the newspaper article, which featured one of Eddie's snapshots of her sitting in the sun on the balcony of Amber's "luxury" studio, looking relaxed and carefree, with the headline "Suzie Sandringham enjoys her spoils in Santorini!". The article didn't contain anything she hadn't read before – it was a simple rehash of old news – apart from the non-too-subtle inference that she was in Santorini because she could afford to splash out a lavish trip to one of the most expensive islands in the Mediterranean.

She was mortified, heat flooding her cheeks, until she read the final paragraph and her knees buckled beneath her and she crumpled to the ground.

*"Readers might like to know that Suzie Sandringham is now in charge of an art gallery in Oia, surrounded by the precious paintings and ceramics that members of the local community have spent weeks if not months creating. They clearly have no*

*idea who they've entrusted their cherished artwork to. Perhaps someone should tell them."*

She had no idea how she managed it, but she struggled to her feet and ran as fast as she could back to her apartment, stuffed as many of her possessions as she could into her rucksack, and hurried to find a taxi in Oia's main square.

Praying that she hadn't chosen anyone related to the driver who had brought her here, she asked him to take her to the airport. As they drove, she sent up a silent missive to the director in charge of her fate to take pity on her, for once, and make sure there was a seat on a flight – any flight – back to the UK that night.





## Chapter Twenty Three

When Suzie arrived at the airport, she was horrified to see that unless she wanted to fly to Edinburgh, there were no flights until the next morning. Not having thought of a Plan B, she spent a few minutes wandering around the check-in area, the neon glare of the overhead lights making her feel exposed and vulnerable, as though everyone queueing at the desks was staring at her, judging her. So, with her head lowered, she scuttled back outside, relieved when she spotted a rather dilapidated *kafenio*. She chose a seat in the shadows at the rear of the wooden cabin-like structure and sipped a coffee – which tasted like lukewarm dishwater – in relative safety.

She felt like a fugitive.

The thought caused a sudden wave of nausea to rise up inside her, so strong she almost cried out loud. She inhaled several long, slow, deep breaths, and eventually she managed to regain control of her emotions, but her stomach continued to churn with anxiety, causing her to feel queasy and lightheaded.

What had she been thinking?

There was no way she could escape her past; the scandal would follow her everywhere she went, that much was obvious. There would always be someone, somewhere, who recognised her, no matter where she went or how low a profile she kept. The words in the article ricocheted around her head like lemmings, the inferences clear, and the accusations the same as they had always been in every newspaper column

she'd read – that she, Carmen, and François were in some way personally involved in what had happened.

Shame gripped her.

What would her new friends think of her?

Would Katerina have to close the gallery?

Would Amber lose her job?

She had hoped – perhaps naively – that she might be able to make a fresh start in Oia, but of course that was wishful thinking. She knew she would never be able to move on with her life until the investigation into the events of that day reached a satisfactory conclusion, and so far, there were still too many unanswered questions for that to happen.

She also had to accept that the fact she had left London at the earliest possible opportunity also made her look guilty, even though she'd had no choice after Adam had changed the locks on their apartment and emptied their joint bank account, leaving her penniless. And she wasn't on Santorini to enjoy the high life. She was here because she'd lost her home and all her belongings in a freak equine-instigated accident!

It really wasn't fair how journalists twisted the facts to fit the story they wanted to tell, but this wasn't the first time it had happened, and she knew it wouldn't be the last. No matter where she went, there would always be people willing to sell a photograph to the tabloids to make a few pounds for themselves, oblivious to the havoc their actions would cause in someone else's life. She should have known this would happen and planned more carefully, staying in her studio instead of

thinking she could enjoy sunset cruises or a night of Greek dancing with friends.

But was that how she wanted to live for the rest of her life?

Was she prepared to miss out on all the amazing experiences that were out there because she was fearful of what strangers might think of her? If she wanted to fulfil her dream of running jewellery-making workshops she needed to develop a thicker skin, otherwise things would be just like they were in Blossomwood Bay, where she went to great lengths to check out the identity of her clients before agreeing to take their commissions.

How could she do that with jewellery classes in Santorini?

Those who loved her – her mum, Amber, Holly, Beckie, Opal, even Carmen, who now lived in Brisbane – constantly told her that none of it was her fault, so why didn't she believe them? Why didn't she have more faith in herself, more respect? Instead of maintaining a dignified silence, why hadn't she spoken out? Why hadn't she given interviews, lots of interviews, to the press about what had happened, and used the opportunity to tell her side of the story so that the articles they published were more balanced, more *truthful*?

She should have stood up for herself. Acted, not *reacted*.

And that's what she needed to do now in order to slay the monster who'd had a strangle-hold on her emotions for far too long. She needed to take control. She needed to start asking questions, instead of trying to block out the whole agonising nightmare in the hope it might all just go away, because now she knew that it wouldn't.

In order to have any chance of moving forward, she had to force herself to think about every second of that fateful day – from the moment she woke up until the moment she collapsed sobbing into Carmen’s spare bed – and dissect every detail, over and over and over again until she got the answers she needed, the answers she *deserved*. Otherwise, she was doomed to live her life alone, sculking in the shadows of a scruffy *kafenio* drinking insipid coffee instead of sitting in the sunshine enjoying a rich, dark *metrios* at *Taverna Giorgos* with people who meant so much to her.

A tickle of indignation started to agitate in her chest.

It was time to do things differently.

But how?

She was no private investigator. If the police hadn’t been able to make any progress over the last twelve months, how could she expect to do so? But then, they didn’t have as much invested in the outcome as she did. Whilst what had happened to her had terminated her career and destroyed her reputation – and lost her employers a great deal of money – that paled into insignificance compared to the other crimes that had taken place in the capital that day, and at least no one had been injured, or worse, died!

Nevertheless, she had to be more proactive. She had to be *seen* to be pursuing the truth because she had nothing to hide. It would be difficult, but nothing worthwhile was ever easy, and she had to accept that running away could have given the impression she was in some way connected with what had happened. She needed to come up with a plan of action, but before she did that, she had to be honest about what had

happened and the part she had played in it, and she couldn't do that sitting outside the airport.

With a spurt of determination that shocked her, she abandoned her coffee and made her way to the taxi rank, giving the driver the address of the gallery before her new-found courage failed her.

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She had just alighted from the taxi and was making her way through the archway when her phone started to buzz. Smiling wryly – her sister always did have immaculate timing – she perched on the wall outside a souvenir shop and swiped her finger across the screen.

‘Hi, Amber.’

‘Holly called. I’ve seen the article. Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Really?’

‘Well, not fine exactly, but I’m not a sobbing mess either. Ambie, I’m sick of running away. I’ve decided to do things differently this time.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m going to ask Katerina to meet me at the studio. I’m going to show her the article before someone else does, and I’m going to explain what happened. Did you see what the reporter said? That someone should warn her about letting me

work at the art gallery? I need to put her mind at rest before she freaks out.'

'Suzie, it's okay. You don't need to do that.'

'Yes, I do, I really—'

'I'm sorry, I should have told you. Katerina knows.'

'She knows about the article?'

'No, she knows about what happened at the jewellery shop.'

Suzie gulped. 'All of it?'

'Yes, all of it. Actually... don't be mad... I told her when I came back from getting you settled in Blossomwood Bay. She's my best friend, Suzie, she saw how upset I was, and... well, it all just came tumbling out.'

'Okay. So, what you're saying is that Kat had no problem with me coming over to Santorini to take over from you at the gallery, even though she knew that I—?'

'Of course not! I keep telling you and telling you, Suzie, you, and Carmen did nothing wrong! Katerina knows that, too.' Amber paused. 'I might have told someone else, too.'

'Tom?'

'As well as Tom.'

Suzie groaned. 'Who?'

'Giorgos.'

'Oh my God! What must he think of me?'

'I wish you'd stop saying that; Giorgos didn't think anything! I know how awful it must have been for you, Suzie,

I really do. It's a truly terrible experience to have to go through, and most people are sympathetic about the effects such an incident would have on those involved and they are angry on your behalf about the soul-destroying things you had to endure afterwards. *Everyone* is on your side! In fact, the only person I can think of that blames you, apart from you yourself, that is, is Adam, and you know what I think about him.'

'So you don't think Katerina will mind if I continue to work at the gallery?'

'I think she'd mind if you didn't.'

'Thanks, Amber.'

'But I do think you need to think about getting some kind of help.'

'I agree.'

'You do?'

'Yes. I'm going to do my own investigation. As you said, Carmen and I had nothing to do with what happened, but someone connected to the shop did, and I intend to find out who.'

'That isn't what I meant.'

'The first thing I'm going to do is sit down with a pen and paper and write down every painful second of that day from start to finish, then I'm going to trawl through every detail, bit by bit, to see if there's something I could have missed. I was hardly thinking straight when I made my statement to the police. I was frightened, and stressed, and completely overwhelmed, and there was probably a lot of things, things I

thought of as inconsequential at the time, that I forgot to mention that could be important.'

'And are you going to do that by yourself?'

'Yes, why?'

'You can't think of anyone to bounce ideas around with?'

'You mean Katerina?'

'No, I mean Christos.'

'Oh, no, I—'

'If there's anyone who understands what you're going through right now, with the publication of the article, it's Christos. From what you told me, he knows exactly what the press are like, and he knows how they can twist and turn and bend the facts for their own purposes. It's probably happened to him lots of time, and it's happened to him recently, too, on that travel vlog. Talk to him. Tell him the truth. Everything.'

'But what if he hates me afterwards, like Adam?'

'He's not Adam, Suzie. You can trust him.'

'I'm not sure.'

As Suzie considered what her sister had said, she glanced down to the end of the street where she saw a dark figure approach the blue gate at the side of the gallery that led up to her studio and pause, his head tipped back as he strained to see the windows, which were currently hidden behind sealed shutters.

'I'll call you later, Ambie. Love you.'

'Love you too, Sis.'



She slid her phone into her pocket, inhaled a steady breath and strode purposely towards Christos, her heart thumping against her ribcage, but her head held high as she gripped tightly onto her resolve. As she drew near, she realised that Christos was nervous, reluctant to push open the gate and climb the steps to knock on her door. However, when she glanced at his feet, she realised what had caused his hesitation; the feisty gang of neighbourhood cats had chosen to take up residence on her doorstep.

She was about to rush forward to help him, but stopped when she saw him square his shoulders, twist his neck from left to right, before reaching out to take hold of the latch and slowly open the gate, gingerly step over the cats, then bound up the stone steps like an Olympic gymnast in search of a gold medal.

Suzie smiled for the first time since Holly's call telling her about the article. She crossed the street, shooed the cats away, and climbed the steps behind him, more determined than ever to be brave and share her story with him. When she saw the smile of relief on his handsome face when she invited him into the studio, she knew she'd made the right decision, because she also knew that, without meaning to, she had fallen in love with him.

If she wanted a future with Christos, then it was time to become her true, authentic self.



## Chapter Twenty Four

‘Suzie? What’s going on? Why did you leave the taverna without saying goodbye?’

She could see the genuine concern for her wellbeing deep in Christos’ eyes and her resolve strengthened, but she also relaxed, knowing she could trust him and remembering that she had thought the same thing the very first time she had met him. After making a cafetiere of coffee, she suggested they sat on the balcony. The air was still warm, and, as the sun sank towards the horizon, sending streamers of mauve and violet across the darkening sky, she began to tell her story.

‘When I lived in London, I worked at a high-end jewellery store in Mayfair. I loved it; the company was generous, the products were stunning and a pleasure to sell, and the manager, François, was great to work for, full of amazing anecdotes about the glitzy holidays he had at his family’s villa in the south of France where celebrities would pop by for a glass of Champagne whenever they were in town. Every August he would pack his Louis Vuitton suitcase and fly over to Cannes, where he’d spend two weeks soaking up the sunshine with his friends, revelling in the lifestyle he loved: fast cars, sleek yachts, trips to the Casino in Monte Carlo, and reacquainting himself with *proper* French cuisine.

‘Last year was different, though. It was his father’s seventieth birthday and a huge party had been organised with a guest list that featured a Who’s Who of the Riviera’s rich and famous – or so François would have had us believe. He’d

talked about nothing else for weeks, and to say he was excited was an understatement; his outfit was planned down to the Cartier cufflinks, he'd booked a whole host of beauty treatments, and he'd even invested in a bottle of customised cologne from Paris.

‘The only fly in the ointment was that just two days before he was due to head off for the most exciting social event of the decade, he got a call from Head Office to tell him that something had come up and the relief manager couldn't start until the following Monday. As the store didn't shut until six o'clock on Saturday, it meant he wouldn't make it to the airport in time to catch the plane to Nice, which meant he would miss the birthday celebrations.’

Suzie paused to take a sip of her coffee. Now that she had started to recount her story, she felt strangely disconnected from reality, as though she was a voice-over artist narrating a drama that was being played out on a screen in front of her. She could see the expression of anguish on Francois' face as though it were yesterday, and just as it had then, her heart gave a sharp nip of sadness for his predicament, and yet she still wished with every fibre of her body that she and Carmen had taken a different route.

‘François was devastated. There were tears, then fury, then despondency. It was Carmen who suggested a solution, but I agreed with her, even though it was completely against company policy, and we knew we would get into trouble if anyone found out. However, we thought the likelihood of that happening was slim, so we told François that we would cover for him, that he should leave the shop a couple of hours earlier

than scheduled on the Saturday so he could catch the plane, and we would handle the usual lock-up routine.

‘Of course, he hesitated; he knew it was a risk, but he was so excited about the party, and Carmen and I assured him over and over again that we would follow the protocols to the letter, so he relented, and we waved him off, telling him to send us lots of photographs.’

As she had convinced herself that she was the narrator of the story and not one of the characters, Suzie was able to smile when she recalled the jubilation on François’ face when he climbed into the back of a black cab, along with three, packed-to-the-brim suitcases and a Gucci carry-on bag, telling them that they were the best friends he’d ever had and he would make it up to them when he got back.

‘The last hour of trading was slow, with only two or three customers coming into the store, none of whom bought anything. Carmen had planned a night out at the theatre with a couple of friends and was chatting about what she was going to wear and which new cocktails she wanted to try at her local wine bar before the show. Adam was supposed to be meeting me at work to take me to dinner at his favourite restaurant in Kensington, but thirty minutes before the store was due to close, he texted me to tell me that something had come up at the office and he had to work late.’

Suzie could feel her heartrate start to rise. Despite regular sips of her now-cold coffee, her mouth was dry, and she could no longer delude herself that what she was saying was fiction. But she wanted – needed – to keep going until the whole sorry saga was out in the open. She knew Christos was staring at

her, but she couldn't face meeting his gaze for fear of what she might see.

'I was disappointed that Adam had cancelled our dinner date. It was the second time that week, and I'd been hoping to talk to him about fixing a date for our wedding, something he'd been avoiding doing since he'd proposed to me at the beginning of the year. Carmen was sympathetic and tried to cheer me up by inviting me to join her and her friends at the wine bar, showing me the menu of cocktails on her phone, so I suppose we were both a little distracted. Then, five minutes before closing time, the door opened and...'

She stopped, her chest tight as all the air was sucked from her lungs. She could remember the precise moment her life changed forever with crystal-clear clarity; it was an image she knew would stay with her, scorched into her mind's eye, for as long as she lived. She swallowed down hard and forced herself to continue.

'Three men came in, their faces covered with the medical masks that some people still preferred to wear after the pandemic. Carmen and I didn't think anything of it; we smiled and welcomed them, asked what we could help them with, and they.... and they... pulled guns on us.

'What happened next is still a little hazy. I think my brain must have stalled from the shock of being threatened with instant death. I'm ashamed to say that neither Carmen nor I moved a muscle, and all we could do was stand by and watch as they smashed the glass cabinets and helped themselves to over two dozen watches worth hundreds of thousands of

pounds before just walking out of the store and driving away. I can't even remember what sort of car it was they were driving.

'It was the most terrifying experience, like something out of a horror movie, but it was over so quickly, and to be honest, what came next was just as bad, if not worse. The police arrived, and we had to give statements, and of course it came out straightaway that we'd persuaded François to leave the store early. When the press got hold of the story, photographs of Carmen and I were splashed everywhere, speculation ballooned, and there were whispers that one or both of us had orchestrated the manager's absence and the robbery was what they called an "inside job".

'But nothing could have been further from the truth! We had no idea who those men were, or how they knew that it would be just me and Carmen in the store that day. I hadn't told anyone what we'd done, apart from Adam, and Carmen swears she hadn't told a soul and I believe her. That only leaves François, but I don't think it was him, either; if anyone at the company had found out he'd left early that day he would have definitely lost his job. However, whilst we hadn't been involved in the actual crime, we knew it was our fault because if we hadn't encouraged François to go to his father's birthday party, things might have turned out differently.'

Suzie sighed and shifted slightly in her seat. She couldn't see the sunset from the balcony of the studio, but she knew the sun must have disappeared behind the horizon because dusk had descended, casting a soft golden glow across the Oia rooftops, and a light breeze lifted the canopy over the leather accessories shop across the street. Still unable to chance a glance at Christos, she continued with her story – the part that

had caused her the most pain – and tears collected along her lower lashes.

‘As Adam was an accountant at one of the big accountancy firms in London, he knew lots of lawyers, some of whom were experts in the field of litigation, both civil and criminal. I was desperate for some professional reassurance, and I naively assumed that he could contact one of them to arrange a meeting so I could ask questions and find out what the procedure was when something like this happened. However, when I called him to tell him what had happened and to ask for his help, he told me... he told me we were finished, that if anyone found out his fiancée was a suspect in a robbery, it would severely jeopardise his hopes of a partnership. He used the word “thief”! Okay, I admit that I was stupid, careless, and negligent, but Carmen and I are *not* thieves! I’ve never stolen anything in my life!’

The tears now trickled down her cheeks, but she brushed them away with the back of her hand. She had shed so many tears over the last year, she was surprised she had any left to cry. But the most traumatic bit of the story was over, and the final chapter was in sight.

‘Mum was in the middle of exams and couldn’t fly back from Bali, so Amber flew from Santorini and took charge. She organised a solicitor to act for me and Carmen and eventually, after what felt like weeks, the police told us they had all the details they needed, and they would be in touch when they had any news. Of course, they found no evidence whatsoever to link us to the raid because there wasn’t any, but they did say that they suspected those responsible had received a tip-off that there would be just two young women in charge of the



whole store for the last couple of hours that day and had decided to take a chance.’

She felt something touch her hand and when she looked down, she saw Christos had handed her a bunch of tissues that he’d pulled from a box that she’d left on a table in the corner of the balcony, alongside numerous other bits of random paraphernalia she knew Amber would be horrified to see. She dabbed away her tears, blew her nose, and carried on.

‘The owners of the store were sympathetic, which is something, I suppose, but they told us they had a reputation to protect so had no alternative but to let all three of us go. François was mortified and high-tailed it back to France, Carmen went to stay with a cousin in Brisbane, and as I had no home and no money, Amber suggested I go to Devon for a while where Opal, a friend of hers, said there was a tepee I could stay in. At the time, I wasn’t really thinking straight, and everything was such an effort, so I just did what Amber told me to do.

‘With Amber’s support, I confided in Opal about what had happened, and she was great, not judging me or blaming me at all. Then, a couple of months later, a beach hut on the Blossomwood Bay boardwalk came up for rent. Opal persuaded me to take it, and I started my own jewellery-making business, keeping a low profile, though, making sure I didn’t go to places where there would be a lot of people, and checking out my clients’ background to make sure they really were just interested in commissioning a piece of hand-made jewellery.

‘I met and got to know, and like, the other beach hut owners – Holly, Freya, Tilly, Rachel, Chloe, Poppy, and Beckie – and life started to feel normal again, but the fear was always there, like a lump of ice that would never melt. Wherever I went, I was constantly looking over my shoulder, terrified that someone would recognise me, and I’d be tossed back in the maelstrom of notoriety again. The last thing I expected was for my past to catch up with me here in Santorini instead.’

She took out her phone, found the article Holly had told her about, and passed it across to Christos, holding her breath while he read it, a vice-like grip squeezing her temples as she waited to hear his verdict. Would he react the same way as Adam? Would he mutter an excuse to leave and never come back?

But Christos did neither of those things. Instead, he got up from his chair, knelt in front of her and pulled her into his arms, holding her there and whispering soft Greek words as he stroked her hair, the aroma of his cologne soothing her raging thoughts. Eventually, he drew away and held her gaze, his eyes serious, his expression sincere.

‘I’m sorry you had to go through that, Suzie. Do the police have *any* leads?’

Suzie gaped at him, unable to believe what she was hearing. There’d been no judgement, no blame, no accusatory questions or statements, just a practical enquiry about what the current situation was. She heartrate slowed, and relief flooded her body, along with a tiny spark of hope.

‘I don’t think so. To be honest, I haven’t kept in regular contact with the police. Mum and Amber have been doing that

for me, and they would have told me if there was any news.’

‘A year is a long time for there to be no progress. Maybe you need to arrange a meeting with them to get an update.’

The thought of meeting the police caused her stomach to curdle.

‘Oh, no, I really don’t—’

‘None of this is not your fault, Suzie.’ Christos paused, his eyes narrowing. ‘The police are right, though. The people responsible must have had a tip-off from someone connected to either you, Carmen, or François, and you should ask them what they’re doing to follow that up. I’ll come with you, if you want me to, and I’ll be right by your side for as long as it takes to bring the whole saga to a conclusion.’

‘Thanks, Christos,’ she murmured, still trying to get her head around the fact that Christos hadn’t made his excuses and left. ‘I thought you’d... you’d hate me?’

‘Hate you? Actually, the way I feel about you is the complete opposite! I was going to tell you when we were at the taverna tonight, but other things—’

They were interrupted by a loud hammering on the door.

‘Oh God, who do you think that is?’

Christos gave her hand a squeeze. ‘I’ll go.’

Suzie remained seated on the balcony, straining her ears for an indication as to whether her visitor was friend or foe. She heard mumbled voices, then the discussion became more vocal.

‘Miranda, please, I don’t think—’

But Miranda had pushed past Christos and rushed towards Suzie. ‘Heidi told me you were upset about something. I came to see if there was anything I can do. What’s going on? Tell me everything!’

‘I’ll make some coffee, shall I?’ said Christos, shaking his head in resignation.

Suzie hesitated for only a millisecond before relenting and giving Miranda a brief outline about the article, playing down the trauma it had stirred up, sticking to the bare facts, and saying that she had hoped the interest in the story would have gone by now. Then, before Miranda could fire a scattergun of questions at her, she quickly changed the subject.

‘Where’s Roger?’

‘Oh, I sent him packing.’

‘You... what?’

‘Well, first I gave him the opportunity to say what he’d come all this way to say – that he needed time to discover who he was after the twins left home, that he’d regretted what he’d done, that he missed me, that he was sorry and that he won’t do it again. Apparently, he thought what he wanted was a fresh start – with Bella – but it didn’t take him long to realise that the grass is never greener in a fellow amateur thespian’s bedroom. Then he begged me to take him back.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I told him I want a divorce.’

‘Wow, how did he react to that?’

‘I think the word “gobsmacked” describes his expression perfectly, especially when I told him I was putting the house in Bristol on the market and relocating here to Santorini.’ Miranda grinned as she sipped the coffee Christos had handed her, completely relaxed with the momentous decision she had made. ‘I’ve *also* had a little time to think carefully about what I want to do with whatever time I might have left, and it doesn’t feature Roger. I love it here. I feel so alive! Like the Miranda I used to be before my life was filled with responsibilities. Here I can be just plain Miranda – not Roger’s wife, or the twins’ mother, or Angie’s colleague, or Delia’s neighbour. We only have one life, and I’ve been given a chance to live the next stage of mine surrounded by beauty, and sunshine, and joy, and perhaps, if I’m lucky, with a very handsome taverna owner.’

Suzie hugged Miranda. ‘I’m so happy for you,’ she whispered.

‘Thank you, Suzie. Oh, yes, there was another reason I came round to see you. I think this belongs to you. You must have dropped it when you were at the book club. I found it the following morning, but what with the mirror incident and realising I’d left the door open, then all the excitement of the Greek dance night, I completely forgot to give it to you.’

Miranda handed Suzie a silver chain with a tiny book charm dangling from it. Suzie stared at it, the cogs in her brain sluggish from everything that had happened over the last two hours.

‘This isn’t mine, Miranda.’

‘Oh, sorry, I thought it was your phone charm?’

She reached out to take it back, but Suzie held onto it.

‘But I think I know who it *does* belong to.’

‘You do? Who?’

‘Nathan.’

‘The guy Heidi was dancing with at the lesson who she said makes her heart sing?’

Suzie nodded.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, I noticed it when I first met him. I tend to remember these things because... well, because it’s what I do, I suppose.’

‘Oh no!’ Miranda’s hand flew to her mouth. ‘Do you think he could have had something to do with what happened at the book shop?’

‘I think it’s a possibility.’

Suzie’s brain was now up to speed and working overtime as the facts fell into place.

‘What about Heidi’s skincare debacle?’ asked Miranda, her eyes widening.

‘Maybe. Remember when Heidi was showing us the labels Darius had printed for her? The cardboard boxes containing the little jars of cleansers, toners and moisturisers were scattered all over the table in the corner where anyone could have had access to them. Was Nathan at the taverna that day?’

‘He’s there *every* day!’ said Christos, who had been listening to everything they were saying. ‘I think we need to go over there right now and have a chat with him.’



## Chapter Twenty Five

When they arrived at *Taverna Giorgos*, unfortunately there was no sign of Nathan and when they asked Stefanos if he'd seen him, he told them he'd hadn't been in all day. Suzie realised that the last time she'd seen him was at the Greek dance night when he was laughing at Heidi's attempts to teach him to dance, and they had ended the evening with a romantic smooch, which Heidi had been delighted about.

While they were talking, Giorgos emerged from the kitchen, and when he saw Miranda was with them, he hesitated, unsure whether to approach them. Miranda smiled and strode straight towards him, greeting him with exuberant cheek kisses – before whispering something in his ear – and his whole face lit up with such joy that Suzie thought her heart was going to burst. Miranda then linked her arm through his and led him back to the group.

‘Giorgos, which hotel does Nathan work at?’ asked Suzie.

‘The Atlantis in Perissa. Why?’

‘Because we're going over there to talk to him,’ said Christos, his tone inviting no argument. ‘Come on, Suzie, let's go. It's a thirty-minute drive over to Perissa at this time of night.’

Suzie took Christos' proffered hand, and they headed across the veranda, but their exit was barred by the appearance of Heidi whose face showed a myriad of emotions as her eyes flicked from Suzie to Christos and back again.



‘What’s going on, guys? Where are you going?’

Suzie hesitated. She knew Heidi had feelings for Nathan, and she was reluctant to involve her in their foray to the east coast of the island in case it turned out that they were wrong about him.

‘We’re heading off for a drink.’

Heidi’s eyes narrowed. ‘To Perissa?’

Suzie groaned. Heidi had obviously overheard some of their discussion.

‘Yes.’

‘But it’s on the other side of the island.’

‘We just wanted a change, so...’

‘*Yassou,*’ said Katerina, bounding up the steps to the veranda clutching her coffee mug.

For the first time since Suzie had met her, her sleek, polished appearance had been replaced by a more dishevelled exterior; tangled hair gathering into a high ponytail, paint splattered across her face and the backs of her hands, and her manicure chipped. The one saving grace was that her eyes were sparkling with renewed energy. However, her smile slipped a little when she saw Heidi standing firmly in front of Suzie and Christos, an indignant expression on her face. Suzie tried to send a covert warning signal to Katerina, but unfortunately it didn’t work.

‘What’s going on? Why is everyone looking so... shifty?’

‘Suzie and Christos are going for a drink in Perissa.’ Heidi raised herself to her full height and folded her arms across her

chest. ‘But they’re not going anywhere until they tell me what’s going on.’

Suzie sighed. She wished she shared Heidi’s talent for tenacious questioning. Maybe if she did, her life would have been different and she wouldn’t have spent the last year cowering away from the innocent curiosity of strangers, or potential customers. She met Heidi’s green eyes and was left in no doubt that while her friend couldn’t physically *prevent* them from leaving the taverna, she wouldn’t put it past her not to hail a taxi and follow them. She glanced at Miranda, then at Christos, both of whom nodded their agreement.

‘Okay, okay, we think we might have found out who was responsible for the incident at the bookshop, and—’

‘Oh my God! Really? Who?’ said Heidi.

A wriggle of discomfort made its way through Suzie’s chest as she tried to decide how much she should reveal. She decided to go with the bare minimum.

‘Of course, we could be completely wrong, which is why we wanted to have a chat with him before we said anything to anyone.’

Heidi’s eyes narrowed as the cogs in her brain started to tick over and she began to put two and two together.

‘If you’re going to Perissa that means...’ Her eyes widened. ‘Oh my God! You think it was Nathan? No way! It can’t be him! He’s a mixologist, not a stupid prankster. You’re wrong, there’s no way he would have done something like that, he just wouldn’t.’

‘That’s why we didn’t want to say anything until we’ve had chance to speak to him,’ said Christos.

‘But what makes you think it’s him?’

Suzie reached into her pocket and took out the bracelet Miranda had given her.

‘What is it?’ asked Katerina, taking the silver chain from Suzie and inspecting it closely.

‘It’s a bracelet; but more importantly, it belongs to Nathan.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, I’m sure. I’ve seen him wearing it.’

‘But that doesn’t mean he was responsible for—’

‘Sorry, Heidi,’ said Miranda, unhooking her hand from Giorgos’ and going to stand next to her. ‘I found it on the floor of the bookshop’s bathroom the morning after our book club, just before I discovered the writing on the mirror.’

Heidi gasped, but she rallied immediately.

‘In that case, there’s absolutely no way you’re leaving here without me. I’m coming to Perissa with you. I want to hear first-hand what he’s got to say for himself! I actually thought we might have... Never mind. I’ll figure out what I’m going to say to him on the way over there.’

‘I’m coming too,’ said Katerina.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t think we’ll all fit on Christos’ scooter,’ said Suzie, resigned to the fact that it was going to be more of an expedition than a quiet drink in a hotel bar where they could weave a few questions into their conversation with the bartender over a couple of his signature cocktails. She was

relieved that she'd decided not to reveal that they thought Nathan was involved in more than just the bookshop incident. 'Can we take your car, Kat?'

'Actually, I've walked over here. My car's in the garage.'

Undeterred, Heidi pulled out her phone. 'Then we'll just have to call a—'

'Why don't I give you a lift?'

All eyes swung towards the doorway of that taverna where a tall, dark, and very attractive guy was standing, dressed in a smart powder-blue shirt, its cuffs rolled back to reveal tanned and toned forearms, his hair styled with a smidgeon of gel and exuding a delicious aroma of spicy cologne. Suzie recognised him from the day he'd paid a visit to the gallery looking for Katerina, but this time his nervousness had abated, and he looked relaxed and in complete control of his emotions.

'Sorry, I couldn't help overhearing. I'm happy to drive you over to Perissa.'

'Leo? What are you doing here?' Katerina took a step towards him, then paused.

'I thought I might find you here. I was hoping to persuade you to have a drink with me before I fly back to Thessaloniki tomorrow. I think it would be good if we could talk, clear the air.'

'I—'

'But it seems you have other plans, and if you're in need of a vehicle, then my hire car is at your disposal.'

‘Great,’ said Heidi, pushing past them and heading towards the car park. ‘It means we don’t have a wait for a taxi. ‘Which one’s yours, Leo?’

‘The red Jeep.’

‘Cool. Come on, everyone. We need to get over to the Atlantis – that is, if Nathan really *does* work there. You know, I’m having trouble getting my head around why he would do such a childish thing. I mean, it’s not as though the bookshop is some kind of commercial threat to the hotel or anything, is it?’

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They piled into the Jeep and Leo drove them at speed to Perissa. It didn’t take them long to locate the hotel, and Leo found a parking space a few metres away from the largest ornamental fountain Suzie had ever seen, featuring a white marble unicorn as its centrepiece, the water spouting incongruously from its pointed horn. The pool around it, shaped like a scallop shell, was almost big enough to swim in.

‘So, what’s the plan?’ asked Katerina, as they jumped from the Jeep.

Now they were there, Suzie regretted their haste. Why hadn’t they waited until Nathan came back to the taverna? They could hardly go storming into the hotel lobby, demanding to have an audience with their bartender, like a scene from an action-adventure movie and as far out of her comfort zone as it was possible to get. But when she looked at

her fellow “action heroes”, she saw that she was the only one having second thoughts. In fact, Heidi was already marching towards the smiling receptionist in the cream tunic dress with navy-blue edging.

‘*Kalispera*. Welcome to the Atlantis Hotel. How may I help you?’

‘*Kalispera*. Can you point us in the direction of the bar, please?’

‘Of course, madam, it’s just over there to your left, through the glass doors.’

‘*Efharistó*. Oh, and is Nathan working tonight?’

‘I’m sorry, who?’

‘Nathan Ellis, your *award-winning* mixologist.’

‘I’m sorry, no one of that name works here.’

Heidi gaped at the receptionist. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, I’m sure, but I can assure you that Nikos is an excellent bartender. He trained at a world-renowned hotel in Singapore, and I’m confident that he’ll be able to prepare your favourite cocktail, if you’d just like to...’

But Heidi had already spun on her heels and was marching back to where Suzie, Christos, Katerina, and Leo had been listening to the exchange with mounting incredulity.

‘Okay, so he lied to us about being a mixologist, which explains why he was so vague when I asked him for tips for my literary cocktail night at the book shop, and he lied about working at this hotel, too. In my opinion, the only reason he would do that is because he has something to hide, which

means that it's more likely your suspicions about the mirror incident are true, and that makes me wonder what else he's responsible for.'

Suzie linked her arm through Heidi's and guided her from the hotel's lobby to the enormous fountain where they all perched on the surrounding wall. The rhythmic splash of the water was a soothing balm to her raised anxiety levels and she exchanged a glance with Christos, who nodded his agreement. She inhaled a breath before speaking.

'There's something else.'

'What do you mean?'

'We think Nathan also had something to do with your skincare products.'

'What? No—'

'And... I think he might also be *HolsHacker*.' It was a theory that had occurred to her on the ride over and given that they now knew Nathan had been lying about where he worked, it seemed even more probable.

After a few moments of silence while Heidi digested what Suzie had said, she jumped up from the fountain's wall and turned towards them, seemingly unaware that she was standing in the middle of the road. When she spoke, her voice was filled with anger, her Welsh accent no longer soft and lilting, but strident and firm.

'Then we need to find him. I've got some questions I want to ask him!'

Suzie heard the loud rev of an engine and as she looked over Heidi's shoulder she saw a black sports car racing

towards the hotel, its speed only slowing when the driver realised there was someone standing in his path. Fortunately, he managed to swerve to avoid a collision, which enabled both Suzie and Heidi to see who was behind the wheel.

‘That’s him! That’s Nathan!’ Suzie cried.

Clearly shocked to encounter Heidi and her friends outside the Atlantis Hotel, Nathan spun round the fountain like it was a miniature roundabout, a manoeuvre that forced Leo to lean sharply to his left to avoid being hit, causing him to lose his balance. Instinctively, Leo reached out to grasp hold of the nearest person for support, and inadvertently sent Katerina tumbling backwards into the fountain, arms flung wide, legs akimbo, while Leo managed to just save himself from a certain dunking.

‘Argh!’

After a few long seconds, during which she struggled to get her footing, Katerina emerged from the water like a glamorous water nymph. She was soaked through, her hair falling in wet ringlets around her face, her skin glistening under the neon lights of the hotel’s portico as she stared disbelievingly at Leo. With his lips twitching in amusement, he offered Katerina his hand to help her from the pond, but she ignored his peace gesture and continued to glare at him.

‘It’s not funny, Leo!’

‘Sorry,’ he said, clearly no sorry at all. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m soaked to the skin. What do you think?’

‘*Quid pro quo.*’

‘What does that mean?’



‘Remember when we went over to your aunt’s house for Easter, and you turned the sprinklers on me?’

‘We were thirteen!’

‘Revenge is a dish best served cold!’

Katerina gawped at Leo. ‘So, does that mean you pushed me in on purpose?’

‘Of course not, but you have to take your chances when you can, don’t you think?’

‘Oh, yes, I completely agree, which is why...’

Before Leo knew what was happening, Katerina had seized his hand and yanked him into the fountain, scooping up armfuls of water to toss over him so he was as wet as she was. Laughing as he sat cross-legged in the middle of the pool, he pushed his dripping hair from his eyes before making a lunge for Katerina and dunking her head under the water. In other circumstances, Suzie would have enjoyed watching the two childhood friends reconcile – and maybe finally realising what everyone else but they could see; that they clearly loved each other – but she could see that Heidi was agitated.

‘Are you okay?’

‘I can’t stay here. I’m going after him.’

Without waiting for Suzie’s response, Heidi marched to where Leo had left his Jeep. However, before she could climb behind the wheel, Christos intercepted her, clearly worried about her demeanour.

‘Want me to drive?’

Heidi nodded. ‘Please. I don’t trust myself.’

Christos jumped into the driver's seat, started the engine, and drove the few metres to the fountain where Katerina and Leo had paused their water-fight mid-splash. Katerina was staring at Leo, his white cotton shirt clinging to his muscular torso like a Greek version of Fitzwilliam Darcy, rivulets of water dripping down his cheeks as he waited to see what Katerina would do next, both of them oblivious to the fact they had attracted an audience of the hotel's returning residents.

'Coming?' Christos asked Suzie.

Suzie nodded and jumped into the back of the Jeep, turning round in her seat to watch out of the rear window as Katerina raised herself onto her tiptoes, slid her hands around Leo's neck, and pulled him towards her, slowly, leisurely, until their lips finally met, their kiss thrumming with a passion that had been years in the making.

Suzie's heart ballooned with joy, until reality burst through the romantic image when Christos jammed his foot onto the accelerator and drove like Lewis Hamilton's Greek cousin towards the road that led from Perissa to Oia, in an attempt to catch up with the man who had treated all of them with such staggering contempt.



## Chapter Twenty Six

‘Oh my God, Christos! Slow down!’

Suzie clutched the edge of her seat to stop herself from sliding to the other side of the back seat, but she didn't think Christos had heard her, and even if he had, Heidi was sitting next to him, urging him to drive faster. Fortunately the traffic was light, and Christos knew the roads well, enabling him to overtake when it was safe to do so, and less than ten minutes later, Heidi sat up straight and pointed through the windscreen.

‘That's him!’

Christos increased his speed and started to press his horn and flash his headlights before, to Suzie's consternation, veering onto the other side of the road so that Heidi could shout out of her window for Nathan to pull over. At first, Suzie thought he was going to ignore her, but to her relief, when a roadside taverna appeared up ahead, Nathan turned into the car park and the two cars came to a stop next to each other.

Soft bouzouki music drifted from a small decking area that had been built in an orchard at the back of the rustic taverna, the branches of the trees entwined with strings of fairy lights that gave the area a romantic, almost magical ambiance. A waiter greeted them warmly, ignoring the daggers Heidi was sending in Nathan's direction, and showed them to a table under the awning of a heavily laden orange tree. After taking their drinks order, he headed back into the taverna, leaving Heidi free to say what she was clearly bursting to say.

‘I thought you liked me!’

‘I *do* like you.’

‘When you kissed me goodnight after the Greek dance night, you said you wanted to see me again.’

‘I did... I do...’

‘But it was a lie!’

‘No, it...’

‘You told me you worked at the Atlantis Hotel.’

‘I...’

‘That’s a lie, too.’

‘Okay, I admit...’

‘And you told me you were a mixologist, which turns out to be *another* lie!’

‘I’m sorry, Heidi, I...’

‘That’s enough lies from one person for a whole lifetime! But we’ve found out who you really are, we know about the terrible things you’ve done, and what we want to know, right here, right now, is *why*! And we want the truth this time, if you even know what that is.’

Suzie thought for a moment that Nathan was going to try and bluff his way out of the situation, so to save time she reached into her pocket and handed him the silver bracelet Miranda had found at the bookshop.

‘I believe this is yours?’

‘Yes, where did you find it?’

‘At the bookshop in Oia.’

Nathan grimaced and Suzie could see the previous bravado drain from his body. Whilst she had known she was right when she had told Miranda that the bracelet belonged to Nathan, it gave her no pleasure to be proven correct definitively, especially when she saw Nathan lower his gaze, shame and embarrassment written across his face.

‘Okay, I admit it.’

‘So you *are* HolsHacker?’ Heidi demanded.

‘Yes.’

Heidi gasped out loud, and Suzie’s heart gave a nip of sympathy when she realised that her friend had actually been expecting – no, *hoping* – that Nathan would deny it, that he would deliver a totally believable explanation as to why he couldn’t be the person who had published the highly intrusive video on YouTube and upset her friends in such an appalling way.

‘So you admit you broke into the bookshop, trashed the place, and wrote those words on the bathroom mirror?’

Nathan gawped at Suzie. ‘I didn’t break in! I would never do anything like that! And I certainly didn’t trash the place! I was on my way home after more than a few ouzos with a bunch of friends, and I saw that the door was wide open. As it was two a.m., I went down the steps, intending to close it, but then I thought I’d better take a quick look inside first, just to make sure there was no one in there, even though the place was in darkness. I wasn’t sure what to think when I saw all the books scattered across the floor. I just assumed the owner had

decided to have a reshuffle of their stock or something like that, but now I realise that someone must have been in there before me. Anyway, I... I needed to use the bathroom, and when I was in there an idea came to me, so I... well, I assume you know the rest.’ [\[ED3\]](#)

By now Heidi had recovered from the shock of Nathan’s admission and her eyes were blazing. Small dots of red had appeared on her cheeks, and her hands were curled into tight fists in her lap, but when she spoke, her voice was surprisingly calm.

‘And my skincare products? Was that you, too?’

Nathan’s lips twisted with regret as he nodded. ‘Sorry, Heidi.’

‘And what *exactly* did you do to them, might I ask?’

‘I just added a squirt of self-tan to a couple of jars.’

‘Oh my God! I was *mortified* by what happened to Miranda, Robyn, and Diana!’ Heidi cried. ‘You made me think I had caused them serious harm with my products. I was seriously thinking about giving up on something I love doing! And not just that, but *all* of my business ideas! How could you do that to me? I don’t understand.’

‘I’m so sorry, Heidi, that’s the last thing I wanted. When I saw those cardboard boxes on the table in the taverna, I asked Stefanos what was in them, and when he gave me a long and very detailed lecture about them being organic beauty products, made using only natural ingredients – many of which had been sourced from the island – I assumed they had something to do with him. I was horrified when you arrived at

the taverna and started to wave them around, offering them to your friends to try out.'

'But why, Nathan?' asked Suzie, softly. 'Why *did* you do those awful things?'

'It was just a bit of fun. I didn't set out to hurt anyone.'

'But you *did* hurt people,' Heidi whispered, holding his gaze.

'I know, I know, and I'm truly sorry, and if I could turn back the clock and do things differently, then I would.'

'So, are you going to explain?'

Nathan sank back into his chair and expelled a long breath, his hand shaking as he ran his fingers through his thick sandy hair while Heidi continued to stare at him, her eyes narrowed, her jaw tight, clearly determined not to let him off lightly. After a few seconds of thought, he grabbed one of the bottles of beer the waiter had left on the table, took a long gulp, and when he started to speak, his voice was low, clear, and measured.

'Two years ago, I thought I had the best life. I had a great apartment, a bunch of friends I'd known since school, a silver Audi Coupe I'd coveted for years, and a fulfilling career as an investigative journalist for a local TV news programme. I loved what I did; it was a dream job that I'd worked hard for, and without wanting to sound boastful, it turned out I was good at it, too. Over the five years I was there, I chased down some important stories; uncovering the identity of serious fraudsters, thieves who stole a disabled kid's specially adapted



wheelchair, jobs who had broken into a food bank and caused mayhem just for the kicks.

‘Then, last summer, there was what the management euphemistically called a “business reorganisation”, and I, along with a couple of my colleagues, were made redundant. Just like that. I was devastated. I thought I’d get another job, but it proved difficult, and a few months later I was climbing the walls with boredom, so I booked a cheap weekend away in Prague and decided to vlog about it, giving tips, tricks, and hacks on how to travel, pack, and sightsee smartly, and posted it on my YouTube channel. To my astonishment, I got lots of subscribers after just one video, so, the following month I booked another trip, this time to Madrid, and things just snowballed from there.’

The waiter arrived with a tray of replacement beers and handed them round, together with a few plates of the taverna’s mezze, but while the beer was gratefully received, no one touched the food, everyone waiting for Nathan to continue with his explanation.

‘Doing the vlog was lots of fun, but then the numbers started to fall, and so I searched around for something different, something that would give me an edge on all the other travel vloggers out there who were doing similar things. I had no idea what that would be until I took a weekend trip to Capri. While I was filming all the expensive yachts moored in the marina there, I inadvertently caught on camera a young couple having dinner at a restaurant overlooking the harbour when a one-legged pigeon landed on their table and started pecking at their food. It was comedy gold! But the best bit was that it turned out the couple were none other than Crystal

Carlson and her new boyfriend, Brett Harper. The vlog went viral.’

‘Oh, yes, I saw that one!’ said Heidi, her lips twitching as she tried not to laugh. ‘I loved how Brett shot up from his chair and tried to hide behind Chrystal like he was frightened of that pigeon. I mean, he played a gladiator in his last movie!’

‘There’s nothing wrong with maintaining a respectful wariness of the avian population,’ Christos mumbled.

‘I knew I’d found my new angle, but, of course, it’s difficult to replicate those sorts of incidents on a weekly or even a monthly basis. So, against my better judgement, I... well, I started to give them a bit of a nudge.’

‘Staging them, you mean?’ said Suzie.

‘I suppose you could say that.’

‘Without any concern for the effect it would have on the people involved?’

‘As I said, it was never what I set out to do. However, the views started to increase again, as did the number of subscribers, so I just kept on doing it, trying ever more convoluted escapades. Some worked, others didn’t. It wasn’t until I heard what that Eddie guy from the PR agency did to you, Suzie, that I realised I was no different from them. As a serious journalist who used to work hard to bring down scammers and money-laundering gangs – people who did truly nasty stuff – I’d always loathed the paparazzi and their scant regard for privacy and the truth, but here I was, even worse than them, just a sad, pathetic prankster.

‘Anyway, I’ve taken the vlogs down, all of them. I’ve booked a flight back to the UK at the end of the week, and I’ll start looking for another job, if not in TV, then I might go freelance. It’s something I’ve been thinking about for a while. There are a lot of stories out there that need to be told, and one of the things I’m really good at is pulling at a loose thread and following wherever it leads me, then forensically examining the results, which nine times out of ten are about money or relationships, or both. I want to tell stories that really matter to people, not post juvenile videos on the internet that upset or embarrass those in them.’

Nathan paused to finish his beer in one long draught. This time, when he combed his fingers through his hair, his hand was steady, and he finally found the courage to meet Heidi’s eyes.

‘Believe me, Heidi, you are the last person I wanted to hurt.’ Nathan pushed back his chair and stood up, looking from Christos to Suzie and back again. ‘Am I free to go?’

‘Actually, no, you’re not free to go just yet,’ said Suzie.



## Chapter Twenty Seven

While Nathan had been talking, the kernel of an idea had sparked in her brain and continued to flourish until he'd reached the end of his soliloquy with a heartfelt apology. Old Suzie would have tossed the idea aside as reckless, outrageous even, but New Suzie was bouncing up and down telling her that this was her opportunity to be brave, to speak up and prove to herself that she'd changed.

It could make things worse, a lot worse.

But it could also make things better.

And what had skulking in the shadows done for her so far?

Before she arrived on Santorini, her life had been filled with apprehension, anxiety, and fear, forcing her to avoid places and situations where she might encounter crowds – or strangers who could have become cherished friends. It was time to do things differently, and that meant tearing away the mask of anonymity and asking for help from someone who could actually make a difference as she began her journey towards a hopefully happier future.

Still, it was a huge risk.

Nathan was a journalist, and until that evening they had been the enemy; individuals who had destroyed her life for the sake of a few more views, a few more clicks, a few more subscribers, and judging by his recent behaviour, Nathan was no different. And yet, maybe she could turn his desire for success to her advantage for once and ask him to consider

approaching his next journalistic adventure from a new angle, even if it meant poking her head above the parapet and risking adverse exposure.

After all, life was full of risks, risks that often led to discoveries that changed the world.

She glanced at Nathan and saw that he was staring at her, his eyes filled with curiosity, and she knew then that she had to tell him her story. If her decision blew up in her face, she knew that Christos, Katerina, and Giorgos – the people in Santorini who knew what had happened – would be there to help her pick up the pieces, which gave her the spurt of courage she needed to continue.

Asking for help was hard to do, but the potential rewards were great.

‘You said you were considering going freelance?’

‘Yes, it’ll take some time to establish myself in the field of investigative journalism again, and I might have to deal with some ribbing from former colleagues if they find out I was behind the *HolsHacker* vlog, but, as they say, that’s karma. I still have some professional contacts from when I worked at the TV studio who will help me find my feet, but what I really need is something I can get my teeth into to reignite my passion for ferreting out the truth.’

This was it, the invitation she needed.

‘Well, I might just be able to help you there.’

‘Suzie?’ Christos leaned forward in his seat and placed his hand on hers, shaking his head slightly, his eyes wary as they met hers. ‘What are you doing?’

‘It’s okay, Christos.’

‘Are you sure?’

She smiled at him and nodded, grateful for his solicitude.

‘I’m sure.’

So, as they sat there in the rustic little taverna, the fairy lights twinkling in the trees, a posse of local cats drowsing on the kitchen step, and the drone of the night-time insects providing a muted backing track, she told Nathan – and a wide-eyed Heidi – her story. She stuck to the facts, recounting the sequence of the events from the moment she left home that fateful morning to the moment she and Amber caught the train to Devon. She told him what she had seen, what she had heard, and what she had done, unencumbered by the details of her emotional response to what she – and her colleagues – had endured at the time.

When she had finished, she felt drained, but also suffused with a curious sense of buoyancy. Over the last twelve months, every move she’d made, every decision she had taken, had been with reference to what had happened at the store that day, and now that the shackles that had bound her to the incident had been broken, she was free to fly. It was an amazing feeling.

‘Oh my God, Suzie,’ Heidi blurted, her eyes filled with sympathy as she reached out to pull Suzie into her arms and give her an extra-tight hug. ‘Why didn’t you say anything? I can’t believe you’ve been carrying all that trauma around with you and not shared the burden with your friends. Does Kat know?’

‘Yes, Amber told her.’

‘Well, that’s something, I suppose,’ said Heidi, before turning to face Nathan. ‘Okay, so are you going to help Suzie find out who’s responsible for stealing all those expensive watches?’

Suzie laughed. Trust Heidi to get straight to the point.

‘Well, I *did* say I wanted something interesting to get my teeth into, but—’

‘Don’t worry, I don’t expect you to find out who committed the crime, just any evidence that points to the fact that those responsible had a tip-off that Carmen and I were going to be alone in the store that day. You could then publish a report on what you’d found, which might go some way to eliminating us both – and François – from the list of suspects the rest of the media insist on referring to whenever they write about the incident. A sort of rebalancing of the narrative.’

‘Have the police made *any* progress in identifying who’s responsible?’

‘No.’

‘Did they recover the watches?’

‘No.’

‘And you’re absolutely sure that neither you, Carmen, nor François mentioned anything to *anyone* about his leaving early to catch the plane to the south of France that day?’

‘Well, I know I didn’t – apart from Adam – and both Carmen and François said the same when the police interviewed them. The three of us worked together for over five years; we were not just colleagues, we were best friends, and if they said they didn’t tell anyone, then I believe them. I



mean, why would they lie? They were just as traumatised by the incident as I was. Even now, we're all still struggling with residual feelings of guilt about what we did.'

'You mean about letting François leave early?' Nathan asked.

'Yes, that, but also that we didn't do anything to stop the robbery.'

'But what could you have done?'

'I...'

'Surely the procedure in these situations is to do what bad guys tell you to do?'

'It is, but—'

'They had weapons. Did *you* have weapons?'

'No, of course not.'

'Then you did exactly what you should have done. Why do you feel guilty about following an industry-standard protocol?'

'Because allowing François to go early *was* against the rules.'

'Okay, so if François *had* been there, would there have been a different result?'

'I'm... I'm not sure.'

'Would he have leapfrogged over the counter, wrestled three armed gunmen to the ground, and made a citizen's arrest?'

An image of François floated across Suzie's mind's eye; petite, slender, frightened of spoiling his manicure whenever it

was his turn to use the espresso machine. There was no way he would have done something as stupid, or athletic, as Nathan had suggested. In fact, when she and Carmen had talked about the what ifs – which they had done almost ad infinitum – they had both agreed that François would probably have fainted from shock when the men pulled out their guns.

‘Of course he wouldn’t.’

‘Then how could his absence have had any impact on the outcome? Robberies happen all the time at places that sell expensive luxury items, especially cars, antiques, paintings, *and jewellery*. It was unfortunate that François wasn’t there, but it was probably a coincidence, not the *catalyst* for what happened.’

‘Does that mean you’ll make some enquiries for Suzie?’ asked Heidi, her green eyes holding Nathan’s gaze, making it clear that she expected him to do so.

‘You know, now I come to think about it, I do actually remember reading about the case at the time, but as you’ve pointed out, Suzie, the reporting was skewed to make it look like it was some kind of inside job, which, sadly, always fascinates people. Have the police been keeping you updated with how their investigation is going?’

‘Until now, Mum and Amber have been dealing with that side of things for me, but...’ Suzie paused to cast a glance at Christos. ‘I’m happy to give them a call to find out what the current situation is.’

‘Great. I’d also like to speak to Carmen and François, if that’s possible.’

‘Neither of them lives in the UK now, but I do have their contact details.’

‘And what about...’ Nathan hesitated, and Suzie could almost see the cogs in his brain whirling as he revisited the sequence of enquiries that he was in the habit of making when he was working in TV news journalism, but there was also a suspicion of reticence there. ‘What about your ex-fiancé, Adam? You said you’d mentioned François’ absence to him? Could he have told anyone?’

‘I don’t think so. Why would he do that? He’s an associate at an accountancy practice, and he’s well-versed in the importance of maintaining confidentiality in the business world. Anyway, like I said, as soon as the rumours started that one of the staff might have been involved in the robbery, he cut me from his life and I’ve not been able to speak to him since, not that I would want to, now.’

‘Okay,’ said Nathan, finishing the last dribble of his beer. ‘Well, you’ve certainly fired up my investigative instincts, and I have to say, it feels good, really good. Thank you, Suzie. I realise how hard it was for you to talk about what happened, and I promise to be discreet while I do some digging. I wouldn’t want to inadvertently stir up any renewed interest in the case, especially if the criminal investigation side of things is still ongoing.’

‘And you must promise not to publish anything – anything at all – without Suzie’s express permission,’ said Christos, his tone brooking no refusal. ‘It’s important that she has the final say on what you’re going to print about her and her friends.’

‘I give you my word.’

‘We’d rather have it in writing,’ Christos said, firmly.

‘Sure. I don’t have a problem with that.’

‘Right answer,’ said Heidi, her expression softening a touch.

Nathan grinned as he met her gaze. ‘Would you allow me to take you to dinner before I leave as an apology for my misdeeds?’

Suzie admired his courage. She would never have had the nerve to issue an invitation to dinner after admitting what Nathan had. She looked across at her friend, her face a picture of astonishment, and to her surprise, she saw her frown melt into a smile.

‘I know the perfect place.’

Nathan’s eyes lit up. ‘Where?’

‘The Alexandros Winery. The food there is the best on the island.’

‘It’s also the most expensive,’ murmured Christos.

Suzie glanced over her shoulder to where the waiters – and the chef – of the little roadside taverna were leaning against the bar, enjoying a glass of ouzo, clearly waiting for them to call it a night so they could go home to catch a few hours’ sleep before they returned for the breakfast rush.

As Suzie strolled back to where they’d left Leo’s Jeep, with Christos’ arm slung protectively over her shoulder, she had no doubt whatsoever that she had made the right decision to trust Nathan. She smiled; if someone had said to her an hour ago that she should share her deepest darkest secrets with him, she

would have told them they were delusional. And yet, that was exactly what she had done, and the result had left her feeling optimistic.

Life could spin on a penny.

One minute everything was rosy, the next, everything you had taken for granted was gone.

But the opposite was also true.

Life could be miserable, frightening, unbearable even, and then something happens – or someone special comes along – and there's a beacon of light shining in the distance, beckoning the weary traveller towards a new, more joyous tomorrow.



## Chapter Twenty Eight

‘Are you ready?’ asked Katerina, standing next to Suzie as they took a moment to appreciate all the hard work they’d put in to transform the gallery into a welcoming and inspiring space for their launch of the *Brushstrokes & Beyond* series of workshops.

‘I am.’

Suzie couldn’t believe what they had achieved over the course of the last two weeks with the help of Christos and Leo. Working in choreographed efficiency, they had disposed of the wilting plants, tidied up the toppling mounds of stationery, and cleared away the glass desk and display units so they could arrange a collection of easels – complete with canvasses and paint palettes – behind which that morning’s watercolour enthusiasts would sit to create their masterpieces.

In the space next to the window was a large wooden trestle table they’d brought over from Katerina’s studio where Suzie would deliver her very first jewellery-making class after their students had indulged in a sumptuous lunch at *Taverna Giorgos*. She was nervous, but also keen to get started on the next stage of her rollercoaster career, this time as a tutor instead of a creator, which was something she had always dreamed of doing.

The place looked clean, fresh, and more importantly, it was clutter-free! There was only one thing preventing it from being perfect.

‘It’s a shame we can’t do something with those gloomy paintings,’ said Katerina, wrinkling her nose as she glanced at the drab artwork that still hung on the walls in the alcove at the back of the shop. ‘I really don’t want my students to think that’s the kind of artwork we’re aiming to creating today – or worse, that I’ve painted them!’

‘Are you sure we can’t take them down, just for the duration of the workshop? Or what if we cover them up with a white sheet? Or even better, switch them for a selection of your amazingly vibrant paintings of Santorini, which would certainly get their creative juices flowing.’

Katerina shook her head and sighed. ‘I’d love to, but I don’t want to risk it. Don’t forget, I pay a reduced rent on the understanding that those canvases remain on the walls. But I love your idea of covering them with a sheet. Let’s do that!’

After draping a large white dust sheet over the offending paintings, the gallery was ready to welcome the eleven people – it should have been a round dozen, but someone had cancelled at the last minute – who had signed up for a week of fun-but-instructive sessions in all things creative.

‘Do you think we should move that spare easel?’ asked Suzie.

‘Good idea. We don’t want it to look like a potential participant has seen the reviews and decided not to come,’ Katerina joked, but Suzie detected a slight wobble in her friend’s voice as she helped her to drag the twelfth easel into the back room before returning to the gallery to finish her coffee. ‘Yes, that looks much better.’



‘The whole place looks amazing, Kat. It’s going to be a fabulous week.’

Katerina had told her that, if the first course was successful, she hoped to expand the off-season programme by adding other classes to the itinerary, such as textile printing and mosaic designs, and Suzie had been thrilled when she’d asked her to consider variations on the silversmithing course she had planned. Miranda, too, had got behind the initiative and had suggested running creative writing workshops, and Giorgos had shown an interest in offering more Greek dance classes.

‘I wish Heidi could have been here to celebrate with us,’ said Katerina, sipping her *metrios*.

‘Me, too.’ Suzie sighed. ‘I spoke to her yesterday and it sounds like she’s already taken Cambridge by storm with her new business venture. That girl can pivot on a pinhead! I don’t think Nathan knows what’s hit him. Not only has she taken over his spare room to create her quirky wind chimes, but she’s also roped him into helping her with the marketing side of things until he finds some regular freelance work. She’s even found a space in her schedule to take a trip down to Devon.’

‘Has Holly got everything sorted?’

‘Yes, the paperwork is in order and Archie will be travelling with them when they come over for Giorgos and Miranda’s engagement party at the end of the month. I can’t wait. I miss him so much!’

Suzie couldn’t help smiling when she recalled the night at the taverna the previous week when, in front of family and friends, Giorgos had proposed to a clearly ecstatic Miranda.

She had accepted immediately, and after an impromptu twirl around the dancefloor, the couple had been congratulated warmly by everyone present and then showered with a confetti of rice. Miranda looked like a new woman; happy, relaxed, and at least ten years younger than when she had arrived on Santorini to look after her cousin's bookshop, wondering what her future held.

However, Miranda and Giorgos weren't the only ones who were engaged.

To Suzie's absolute delight, under the pretext of witnessing one of the beautiful Balinese sunsets together, her mum had been able to live-stream the moment when Tom had gone down on one knee – on the spectacularly picturesque Balangan Beach – and asked Amber to marry him. Beaming, Amber had flung her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately, before being scooped into Tom's arms and, to shrieks of objection, unceremoniously dunked into the sea to seal the deal. Suzie couldn't wait to congratulate her sister in person, and she and Christos planned to fly over to Bali for what she knew would be an emotional Christmas reunion.

'I absolutely adore the dress you've designed for Miranda to wear at her engagement party. She looks like a real Greek goddess.'

'Thanks, Suzie, that means a lot. Okay, shall we—'

Katerina's question was interrupted by Christos and Leo hauling two extra-large canvases, wrapped up in brown paper and string, into the gallery, huffing and puffing under the strain.

‘Hey, you can’t bring those in here. There’s nowhere to put them. The gallery is a clutter-free zone now! Anyway, what are they?’

‘It’s good to see you, too.’ Leo grinned, sliding his arm around Katerina’s waist and kissing her decisively, a gesture that caused her indignation to dissolve immediately. ‘And for your information, they’re not mine, they’re Christos’.’

‘Christos?’ asked Suzie, experiencing a fizz of attraction when he tossed his hair away from his face and she saw the sparkle in his dark brown eyes. She knew he was thinking of the previous night when they’d taken his friend’s boat into the caldera to watch the sunset with a bottle of Champagne, before heading to a secret cove where they’d strolled hand-in-hand along the beach, the waves caressing their ankles. As the light melted from the sky, Christos had drawn her into his arms, kissed her softly and told her that he loved her. She had responded with her own heartfelt *s’agapó*, and since then she’d had to pinch herself to believe that she hadn’t somehow strayed onto the set of a romantic comedy. ‘What’s going on? What’s in the parcels?’

‘Wait and see. Oh—’

Christos’ gaze was fixed on the entrance to the back room.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Katerina, following his line of sight.

‘I see you’ve covered up the paintings.’

‘Oh yes, it was Suzie’s idea—’

‘Well, actually, it was a joint—’

‘Don’t you think the gallery looks much more inviting without them looming over us like a dark and stormy sky?’ Katerina continued. ‘I want our students’ experience here to be uplifting and joyful, not miserable and depressing.’

‘So you think the paintings are miserable and depressing?’

‘I think—’

‘What about you, Suzie, do *you* like them?’ Christos pressed.

‘I think they’re...’

Suzie scoured her brain for something positive to say about the sombre artwork she and Katerina had been so keen to conceal, but decided at the last minute that it was always better to tell the truth, especially to the person you loved.

‘I think they’re interesting. In the right place, with the right lighting and the right backdrop, they’d certainly appeal to those people who are looking for something more... melancholic. It’s just that today’s watercolour workshop is all about having fun, making new friends, and celebrating the beautiful scenery of Santorini; the blue-domed churches, the whitewashed villas, the maze of cobbled streets, the pink blossom of the bougainvillea, the sparkling caldera playing host to gently undulating boats.’

‘I’m happy you said that because...’

Christos gave Leo a clearly pre-rehearsed nod and together they ripped away the brown paper that encased the two canvasses.

‘Ta da!’

Suzie stared at the paintings. They were colourful, energetic, and reflected the natural and architectural harmony of the landscape she had just described perfectly.

‘What do you think of these?’

‘Absolutely stunning,’ said Katerina, stepping forward to scrutinise them more closely. ‘It’s obvious they’ve been created by a very accomplished artist who knows the island well.’

‘Does that mean you’d be happy to display them in the gallery?’

‘Of course.’

‘Great. Come on, Leo, help me hang them.’

Christos strode into the alcove, yanked away the dust sheets that covered the dark, cheerless paintings and began to remove them from the walls, making no allowance for their preservation.

‘Hey, Christos! You can’t do that.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because the owner of the gallery insists that we...’ Katerina stopped and stared at Christos, who had paused mid-removal, a smile playing around his lips as he waited for her to continue. It took Suzie a few more seconds to catch up, and when she did, she gasped.

‘Are you... are you saying those paintings are yours?’

‘I’m afraid so. In my defence, they were painted when my life was in turmoil. I’d left the band and fallen out with my girlfriend, my sister, and my family. This was how I saw the

world then – dark, dismal, and depressing. It’s safe to say that things have changed recently. I’ve never been happier, and I hope that’s reflected in my new work.’

Suzie held Christos’ gaze. ‘So does that mean the gallery....?’

Christos lowered the canvas he was holding onto the floor and perched against the table in the window. ‘My grandparents bought this building over sixty years ago and during that time it’s been everything from a fruit shop to a bakery, but when my grandfather died and my grandmother went to live with my parents in Athens, she decided it was best to close it down. She rented out the studio occasionally, but the shop remained empty until five years ago when you, Katerina, expressed an interest in acquiring a lease to open a gallery, not only to sell your own work, but that of local artists, too.’

‘What changed her mind?’

‘*Yia-yia* used to love dabbling with a paintbrush, creating scenes from her childhood on Santorini before the island became so commercialised. She was good, but no one took what she created seriously, especially her family. So, when I announced to my parents that I had no intention of following their footsteps into academia and told them that it was my dream to make music and create art, she was the only one who supported me. Of course, when I left school it was the music part of my dream that took off, but *Yia-yia* promised me that if I ever wanted to switch to art, then she would do everything she could to help me on my way.’

Suzie smiled. ‘Your grandmother sounds like an amazing woman.’

‘Oh, she was, and it was her idea to add the clause in your lease, Katerina. Sadly, she passed away last year, and the gallery and the studio went to my uncle who lives in Sydney. He has no interest in the place but was happy to continue with his mother’s wishes to support local artisans in their quest to make a living from their work, which unbeknown to him, included his nephew.

‘I’m sorry you had to display my paintings in your gallery, Kat, but I’m truly grateful to you for doing so, especially as they’re the complete opposite to the aesthetic you are trying to create here. I want you to know that from now on you are no longer obliged to adhere to the clause in your lease, and you only have to display my artwork if you want to.’

Katerina selected one of Christos’ new canvasses and hooked it on the wall where one of the old paintings had been, before taking a step back and really scrutinising the painting’s composition. A few moments later she was joined by Leo, then Suzie, and finally Christos took his place in the line, and the four friends stood there in silence like a quartet of seasoned art critics.

‘You have talent, Christos. I’d be honoured to showcase your paintings in my gallery.’

Christos beamed. ‘Thank you, Kat, that means—’

‘Hello? Is anyone... Oh, hi, is this where the watercolour workshop is taking place?’

‘Yes, it is. Welcome to *Katerina’s Art Gallery*. I’m Katerina Loukas, and I’ll be your tutor for this morning’s session, and this is Suzie Sandringham, who will be running the jewellery-

making classes in the afternoon. Come in, come in, make yourself comfortable at one of the easels.’

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Ten minutes later, all eleven students had arrived, and Suzie had just finished handing round their coffees – a mixture of *sketos*, *metrios*, *glikos*, and *variglikos*, with one person asking for a cup of her peppermint tea – when she saw someone walk past the gallery’s window, stop, turn round, then walk past again, before doing the same thing two more times, clearly unsure whether to come in. There was something familiar about the dark-haired woman in white cotton dungarees and gold sandals, but that didn’t prevent Suzie from pulling open the door and greeting her with a smile.

‘*Kalimera!* Would you like to join us?’

‘Oh, no, I’m not.... Is this an art class?’

‘Yes, it is, and we have a spare easel, if you’re interested.’

The woman hesitated, then smiled. ‘You know, I think I *will* give it a go.’

‘That’s great. I’m Suzie, by the way.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Suzie. I’m Collette.’

After settling their last-minute arrival in front of her easel, Suzie made her a coffee then went to stand at the back of the room to watch Katerina welcome everyone to the inaugural *Brushstrokes & Beyond* workshop.



She was proud of herself; a month ago she wouldn't have had the confidence to approach a complete stranger and invite them into the gallery, and when she glanced at Christos, she saw that he, too, understood the significance of what she had just done. He reached out and gave her hand a squeeze, before lowering his head so that his lips were level with her ear, his warm breath on her cheek sending delicious tingles through her body.

*'S'agapó, Suzie.'*

'I love you, too, Christos,' she whispered.

They were building a new life together in Santorini; a place where she could be the real Suzie Sandringham, lover of sunshine, and sailing, and cute dachshunds, and murder mystery novels, and peppermint tea, and not the person who had been held back by a debilitating sense of misplaced guilt.

Often, the hardest person to forgive was yourself, and though it would take her some time to eradicate the memory of what happened that day in London – maybe she never would – with Christos' support she had taken the first steps on that journey. There would be obstacles along the way, but she was determined to face them with courage and optimism, and to remember that every moment was precious and should be savoured, not spent lurking in the shadows.

Sunsets were fleeting; they were gone within minutes and left only darkness behind. But they also heralded a new dawn, an opportunity to press the reset button and write a new story, one filled with music and laughter, hope and joy, and, if you were brave enough to take a risk, with love.

## The End

Did you enjoy reading *Suzie's Santorini Summer*? Are you wondering what happened to the other beach hut owners at Blossomwood Bay? If so, perhaps you'd like to follow Rachel's journey as she swaps drizzly Devon for the beautiful Amalfi Coast in the next book in the series, *Rachel's Riviera Retreat*.

Here's the link:

UK: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/B0CGRN6JQG>

US: <https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0CGRN6JQG>

Or, if you fancy a trip to gorgeous Corfu, why not head over to *The Hummingbird Hotel* and join Abbie and Nikos as they run one of their fun-filled retreats amidst the stunning countryside of the Ropa Valley? Here's the link:

UK: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/B0846LN57K>

US: <https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0846LN57K>

# Acknowledgements

This summer I had the pleasure and the privilege of attending the fabulous wedding of Paige and Joseph Ezzard on the stunningly beautiful island of Rhodes. It was a wonderful and emotional day, filled with family and friends, love and laughter, and memories that I will cherish forever. I've dedicated this book to them and would like to wish them a long and happy life together.

## Author's Note

Thank you so much for reading *Suzie's Santorini Summer*. I really hope you've enjoyed spending time with Suzie, Christos, Katerina, Heidi and Giorgos in gorgeous Santorini. While I was writing this story, I made sure to taste-test as many Greek desserts as possible - my absolute favourite has to be galaktoboureko - just so I could describe them as authentically as possible.

As always, I would love to hear your comments. Have you holidayed on the Greek Islands? Do you have photographs or anecdotes to share? What is *your* favourite foodie treat? Is it baklava, bougatsa, or kadaifi? Or maybe, like me, you're rather partial to a slice of galaktoboureko accompanied by a rich dark Greek coffee?

If you have enjoyed your trip to Santorini with Suzie, I'd really love it if you'd consider leaving a short review – one line is fine! I truly appreciate every single one, as well as every blog post, every retweet, and every Like on my Facebook and Instagram pages. You can also contact me via my brand-new website at [www.daisyjames.co.uk](http://www.daisyjames.co.uk) where you can also sign up for my monthly newsletter – *Notes from a Cookie Jar*. Your reviews and encouraging comments are why I keep writing (as well as getting to taste-test all the foodie treats that my characters create – only in the interests of authenticity, you understand).

Much love,

Daisy

XXX

# Also by Daisy James

## **The Blossomwood Bay series**

Tilly's Tuscan Teashop

Freya's French Farmhouse

Holly's Hawaiian Holiday

Suzie's Santorini Summer

Rachel's Riviera Retreat

## **The Hummingbird Hotel series**

Escape to the Hummingbird Hotel

Summer at the Hummingbird Hotel

Snowflakes at the Hummingbird Hotel

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Sunny Days at the Hummingbird Hotel

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## **The Cornish Confetti Agency series**

The Cornish Confetti Agency

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**The Paradise Cookery School series**

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**Standalones:**

The Summerhouse of Happiness

Christmas at the Dancing Duck

Sunshine After the Rain

There's Something About Cornwall

Lucie's Vintage Cupcake Company

If The Dress Fits

The Runaway Bridesmaid

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[ED1] This is a lovely dream but do need to flag that it isn't mentioned again in the story. Perhaps it's something that could be woven in at the end, when she's looking at her bright future and thinking about how she hopes to spend it? See what you think.

[ED2] As per previous comment, if this is in the video, he has to have only published it within the last few minutes as Robyn has been at the bookshop barely half an hour.

[ED3] Not clear if he means the idea for the message came to him or the idea for the video.

If the former, does that mean the mirror message had nothing to do with the trashing of the bookshop? If so, who did the trashing and when? (This is currently never explained so does feel like a hanging thread that could potentially frustrate readers. Perhaps it's that Nathan saw the perpetrators fleeing and that's what originally drove him into the shop? Maybe he could later tell Susie and co. that he's going to talk to Miranda about what he saw and see if she wants him to report anything he remembers to the police? See what you think.)