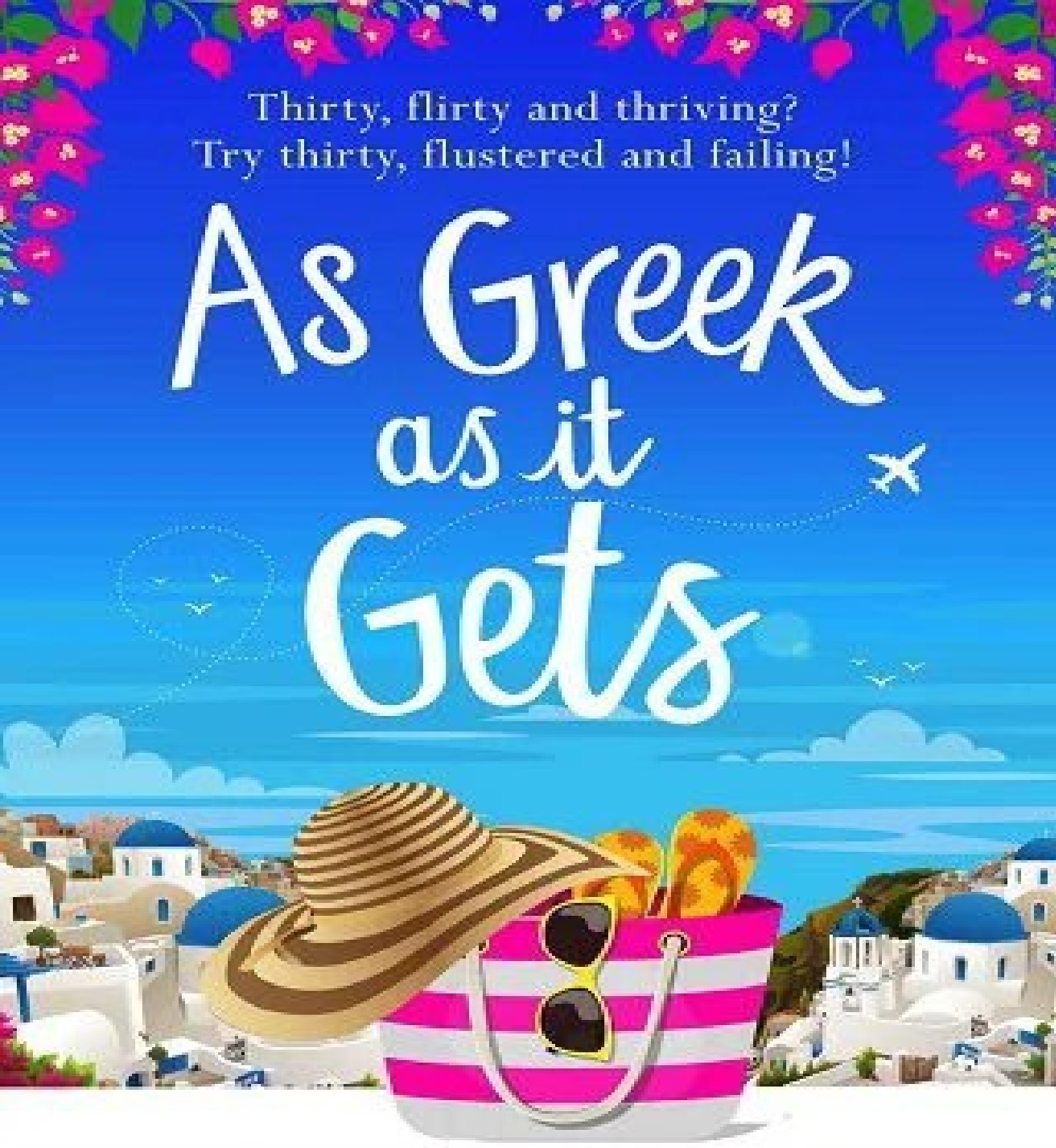


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As Greek as it Gets



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AS GREEK AS IT GETS

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For Richard Davis aka Reginald. In homage to his marvellous beard and six-pack.

PROLOGUE

The restaurant clung to a mountainside high in the hills of Crete, with a view of the sparkling Mediterranean below. Alice and Max sat beneath the shade of a vine-covered pergola and breathed in the stunning surroundings. The restaurant had no menu. Hunks of barbequed pork and chicken were offered, served with rice, Greek salad and chunky home-made chips. Red or white wine and local draught beer were the only drink choices. The sound of chatter and laughter from the other diners rang out around the restaurant and among the tables on the terrace.

The food was served on long, grey stone tables and benches, which somehow gave it all a medieval and magical feel. Alice sighed with contentment as she gazed across the table at her boyfriend, Max. They'd only been together for a year, but it felt like she'd known him forever. With his dark hair, handsome smiling face and bright blue eyes that crinkled at the corners when he smiled, he never failed to set her heart racing. Max leant across the table and clasped one of her hands in his.

'I could stay here forever,' sighed Alice, feeling herself relaxing into a second glass of crisp white wine.

'Me too,' said Max. He looked lovingly at Alice. Her blonde hair was falling in soft curls on her shoulders. Against her brown eyes and tanned skin, it made a striking combination. Max felt like the luckiest man in the world as he turned his head to follow her gaze across the mountains. The view to the left of the restaurant was of a deep sandstone gorge, where walkers could be seen in the distance hiking across a bridge flanked by climbing forest and deep ridges.

As Alice switched her gaze to the valley below, lost in a daydream, the sound of a guitar pulled her back to the present. She turned to see a smiling Greek man wearing a white shirt and a pair of black trousers slowly heading

towards them through a bougainvillea-covered archway, strumming a guitar and singing softly. Max had arranged for the pair to be serenaded and as the guitarist drew nearer, Max felt his mouth go a little dry.

Alice had just begun to wonder what on earth was going on, when Max appeared beside her and dropped down onto one knee on the crazy-paved floor, at the same time as producing a small velvet box from his pocket. As he slowly lifted the lid, Alice gasped in astonishment at the sight of a sparkling solitaire that glinted in the bright sunshine.

‘I love you, Alice,’ said Max, his voice almost breaking with emotion. ‘You’re everything I ever wanted. You’re beautiful, kind and funny and I want us to be together forever. Please say you will be my wife.’

‘Oh Max,’ said Alice, barely to take in what had just happened. ‘I... I... Yes, yes, I would love to marry you!’

Max silenced her with a kiss before slipping the diamond ring onto her finger and pulling her to him, kissing her deeply and squeezing her like he never wanted to let her go.

When they finally drew apart, they became aware of the whoops and applause of the diners, whose shouts of congratulations rang around the restaurant. Max had also arranged for a waitress, who appeared right on cue, to bring some champagne. She popped the cork and poured them each a glass, smiling as they clinked their glasses together.

Alice thought she would literally burst with happiness and struggled to stop tears of emotion, as in that very moment, she felt more love for Max than she ever thought possible.

Later, as they meandered through the cobbled streets back to their hotel, with the ring sparkling on Alice’s finger, she felt her heart swell with love. She’d fallen for Max the minute she’d laid eyes on him and she knew without a doubt that he was *the one*.

If only she’d been able to see then how different things would feel two years later...

ONE

TWO YEARS LATER

‘Don’t be such a bore, Alice. Everyone has a hen party.’

My friend Ria is sitting opposite me in a café near A Sense of Occasion, the shop in Liverpool city centre where I am currently employed part-time, enjoying a panini and a skinny latte. She’s wearing an olive-green dress and a scarf with shades of orange and brown, and a slash of peach lipstick that beautifully complements her copper coloured, curly hair.

‘Not everyone. My next-door neighbour didn’t.’

‘You know that doesn’t count. Iris is seventy-four. About the age you’re behaving at the moment,’ she teases.

My neighbour Iris met a man in the aisles of Sainsbury’s last year and they bonded over a conversation about the merits of microwave porridge and how it saved them so much time in the morning. Six months later they were married.

‘Don’t get me wrong, Ria, a getaway with the girls will be perfect. It’s just that I’d been thinking maybe a spa break at a nice hotel and a few bottles of Prosecco. I mean, Malia, really? Won’t it be full of over-indulgent nineteen-year-olds?’

My future sister-in-law, Molly, has arranged the whole thing, feeling excited that she’s bagged a bargain five-day bed-and-breakfast break in a hotel with a last-minute-escapes holiday company. She colluded with Max and then booked it as a surprise for me, knowing how much I loved my last holiday to the island of Crete.

‘It’s just a walk through the hotel gardens to the beach and it has a twenty-four-hour bar,’ she gushed. ‘Ooh, I can’t wait; we’re going to have a ball.’

I tried to quell the faint feeling of panic I’d had when she told me. I hope

the bargain break really is as good as it sounds, because it seems a little too good to be true and all I can think of is *The Inbetweeners Movie*.

Max had originally offered to pay for a five-star luxury hotel for my hen party, but I have never mentioned that to Ria. To be honest, I had been on the lookout for a bargain break myself. Although generosity is a fine quality in a future husband, and Max is an independent financial advisor so I know that he's good with money, I do worry sometimes that if he carries on with his spendthrift ways, we'll have nothing saved for our future.

What I just said to Ria was the truth. I'm not that fussed about having a hen party at all. Perhaps she is right though. Maybe I am behaving like a right old bore.

I never expected to be working in a gift shop, but it pays the monthly rent on my flat when sales are a little slow with the paintings I sell online. Or I should say it *used* to pay the monthly rent. I have recently moved in with my fiancé, Max, who appeared in my life like a knight in shining armour when I was feeling a bit down. It wasn't exactly a dream of mine to be selling overpriced (in my opinion) merchandise in a city-centre shop, although the owner, Gail, has been very good about displaying business cards for my online business at the checkout. Not to mention displaying some of my paintings, which have sold with modest success. The unique selling point of the shop is that it sells things for every occasion, which, as Gail says, 'you won't find anywhere else on the high street'. This is possibly true, as I can't think of anywhere else that sells leopard-print his-and-hers passport covers. We also sell huge, ornately framed mirrors, faux snakeskin lampshades and anything a Cheshire wife could possibly need. The shop is always really busy, so there's obviously a demand for 'elegant' glitz.

To be honest, I'd hoped that by the time I was thirty I would be a successful artist, with my own gallery and commissions rolling in. But that never quite took off for me and although I've built up quite a collection of paintings over the last couple of years, many of which are sitting in the spare room at home, at some point I let self-doubt get the better of me. Now the thought of showing off a whole room full of my paintings terrifies me. Silly, I know, when I sell them online but, well, maybe I can't hear people's reactions that way. They either buy the painting or they don't.

If I did pluck up the courage to open a gallery, I wouldn't want anything too fancy, just somewhere to exhibit my own work, maybe alongside the works of other local artists too. There was a gallery near my old apartment in

Liverpool that ran kids' activity clubs after school – messy play and coffee morning for young mums, that sort of thing. It was a great meeting place, but there's nothing similar around here at the moment.

It's always good to have a catch-up with Ria. She works for the Walker Art Gallery, running art classes and entertaining children on school trips, as well as part-time teaching jewellery-making at a local college. We studied fine art together at uni, after which Ria decided to specialise in jewellery-making. Now she exhibits her work in one or two gift outlets, including the art gallery shop.

'So, what are you making at craft club later?' I finish up my coffee and devour the last of a slice of delicious melt-in-the mouth chocolate cake, which arguably I shouldn't be indulging in if I want to fit into my wedding dress.

'Scarecrows. The kids love doing those. I like how they all look so different, although sometimes they can be terrifying.' She laughs. 'Last time, one kid painted black, angry-looking eyebrows on his and gave it spiky cardboard teeth. His mother said it would scare the postman out of the garden, never mind the crows.'

'He's creative at least,' I say. 'Was this the same boy who made a coffin with air-drying clay? You don't think he could be Happy Wilson's son, do you?'

We both roar with laughter. Ria once told me about a boy she'd sat next to at school called 'Happy' Harry Wilson. Apparently, he was a humourless character who'd informed her on a regular basis that the world would end the following day, and Ria would complain that it was never on a day when they had a double science lesson.

'That's the one, although to be fair it was a sarcophagus. He'd been learning about the Egyptians at school,' she says, smiling. 'By the way, I just saw the love of your life on the way over here.'

'Max?' I ask, surprised. 'I thought he had back-to-back meetings at the office all morning.' Max is never one to leave the office, apart from when he has a meeting with a prospective client.

'He said he'd just driven in on his lunch break, to pick something up from a shop. I'm sure he'll fill you in later. Perhaps it's something for the wedding. I can't believe it's only a couple of months away now. The time has just flown by. It feels like only yesterday that he doused you in ketchup at the park.'

I laugh at the memory. Ria was there the day Max and I met, three years ago. I hadn't felt like going out that day but Ria had persuaded me. Following a bout of pneumonia, I'd been a bit down and she'd told me that the fresh air would do me good.

Finding Max was like a gift from heaven at the time. My career was going nowhere and I'd taken a long time to recover from the pneumonia, which had completely knocked me off my feet.

I also had big problems with my flat that caused me additional stress as well, let's just say that the landlord's idea of maintenance had been to add another coat of paint over the damp walls. For a while, I'd noticed a damp patch on the ceiling spreading outwards, but the landlord had reassured me that he had checked it out and it was nothing to worry about.

One evening, as I sat alone, watching a Netflix series, I heard a rumbling sound above my head. At first, I thought it was the ancient boiler system groaning into life, but as the rumbling sound grew louder, I instinctively made my way to the landing outside, before hearing an almighty crash. I kid you not, when I returned there was a bath in my lounge. An actual bath, full-sized, which had crashed through the ceiling. Thankfully, no one had been sitting in it at the time, but it had obviously been filled as water had cascaded everywhere, completely flooding the lounge. As well as ruining everything in sight, the disaster finally sealed the fate of my previously half-dead house plants, drooping miserably in pots before the bath crushed them.

I had no choice but to move back home to my mum's. My sister Lexie was working away in Jersey as a nanny at the time, freeing up the second bedroom. It felt strange moving back home, like a failure somehow, despite the situation being thrust upon me. I remember feeling a stab of regret that Dad lived so far away in Edinburgh or I might have considered staying with him. He and I were always closer than I was with my mum.

One afternoon, when I finally felt like I was getting my strength back, Ria and I went to a food festival in Sefton Park and that was where I met Max. It was a glorious sunny day and we were standing next to Max, ordering a burger from a food truck, when Max managed to squirt a load of ketchup over me. He was mortified and paid for Ria's lunch and mine to make up for it. And when he tapped my number into his phone a while later, I realised that I was already looking forward to seeing him again.

We just sort of clicked from that first date, quickly realising that we had a lot in common. We're both foodies and love sampling all sorts of cuisine at

street markets. We also enjoy hikes through the local pine forests and moonlit walks along Formby Beach. Max really seems to appreciate the efforts I go to provide delicious picnics with home-made treats, in contrast to my previous boyfriend who 'didn't see the point of picnics'. Things with Max are so different. He even bought me a new picnic basket from Fortnum & Mason as a present for our first anniversary, which he filled with tasty treats that we ate leisurely in Calderstones Park overlooking the lake. As we sipped Prosecco and dined on salmon blinis and strawberries, I had never felt so content in all my life.

Max is always surprising me with his zest for life and it's one of the things I love the most about him. His gestures are not necessarily expensive (apart from the picnic basket), but might be a bunch of wild flowers, or perhaps a flavour of filter coffee that I'm particularly partial too. He once gave me a new pencil sharpener after I told him that I had mislaid mine and that my new eye pencil was now rendered useless. His gifts are thoughtful treats.

It's true that, as his financial advice firm has become more successful over the last couple of years, Max's gifts are also more generous: a weekend spa with my mum, which she cancelled at the last minute and so I took Ria instead; a Gucci bag from the *actual* Gucci shop. Previously, Ria and I would trawl shopping villages for designer-brand discounts and even that was only if we had a special occasion to attend. I was grateful for it all, really I was. It's just that sometimes I missed the thrill of bagging a fabulous bargain in a sale. Or feeling the excitement of winning an auction item on eBay.

I'm so happy, though, that at least one aspect of my life is going well and I'm sure that, given time, my professional life will give me the same sense of satisfaction.

'I know, I can't wait. Who would have thought I'd find the love of my life standing outside a fast-food truck?' I say now, with a happy smile.

'Gourmet fast food. To this day I've never tasted a burger as good as the one I had that day.'

We wrap up lunch and Ria tells me she's just popping into Monsoon as there's a sale on.

'There's always a sale on somewhere. No wonder you never have any money.'

'You can't take it with you when you go.' She waves her designer purse in the air and laughs.

Watching her walk away, her copper curls bouncing as she walks, I feel blessed to have such a great friend. She's seen me through so many ups and downs and her positive, upbeat personality shines through like a ray of sunshine even on the darkest day. We've been friends since the day she found me dithering in a corridor at university, looking for the canteen, and invited me to sit with her and her friend Kerry for lunch. I just can't imagine my life without Ria.

I always feel happier when I've had a catch-up with my friend and I head back to the shop with a spring in my step. As I walk back to work, my thoughts return to my forthcoming hen party and I tell myself I should make the most of it and count my blessings that I have such wonderful women in my life to celebrate with. Ria, Molly, Kerry and my sister Lexie will be joining me, so it should be a lot of fun. And Crete is a beautiful island, which will always hold a special place in my heart as it's where Max proposed.

I do need to try to be more positive. It's been a good week so far: I've sold two of my paintings online, not for an awful lot of money, but I was thrilled to sell them all the same. One was of some tall ships at the Royal Albert Dock, the other was a painting of the Metropolitan Cathedral set against an orange sunset, which was one of my favourites. I rarely do portraits of people, as I never feel that I've quite captured their likeness. Unlike Ria, who can sketch a perfect likeness of someone even with an ordinary pencil, which I consider to be a real talent.

Arriving back at work, I find the rest of the day passes quickly as I ring up a couple of purchases of some black and white city prints (painted by yours truly) and an assortment of gifts and wrapping paper. As I serve a customer with some crystal champagne flutes, my thoughts turn to my wedding dress, which is currently hanging in Boutique Brides of Crosby, which is in a nearby village. As soon as I saw it, I knew it was the one and was thrilled when I tried it on and it fitted like a glove. It's a long, ivory, off-the-shoulder number with a slight fishtail. Mum came dress shopping with me and preferred a fuller, meringue style that I'd tried on, calling it 'a proper wedding dress', but I stuck to my guns. I was pleased that she'd been with me that day and hadn't had to dash off somewhere. It had ended up being a really lovely outing and we had even enjoyed lunch together at a vintage tea room close by. But, for some reason, thinking about wearing that beautiful dress in front of a room full of people all staring at me now fills me with anxiety that I force myself to shake off.

My fiancé Max runs his own financial advice business in Formby village, a suburb of Liverpool, which is also where we live. We bought our three-bedroomed home last year at a bargain price as it needed a lot of modernising. When I say ‘we’, Max put the deposit down although the mortgage is in both our names. I’ve regularly saved a little money from a young age and I offered to contribute to the deposit, but Max wouldn’t hear of it. I think he’d heard me talk too many times of one day having enough money to open my own gallery. I love him for his generosity and how he supports my ambition, yet I still have to shrug away a feeling of things being unequal sometimes.

I use one of the bedrooms as my painting studio, when I’m not at work, as it overlooks a small park and lets in beautiful natural light. Sometimes I get lost in my work and Max has to remind me to eat as the hours slip by.

The village centre has lots of restaurants and trendy coffee bars, flanked by streets full of beautiful houses. There are currently no art galleries so, who knows, maybe one day I might fulfil my dream of having a small place of my own.

Max Jenkins’ Financial Planning Solutions opened its offices in a converted Victorian building in the village centre two years ago and with Max’s driving passion and business acumen, it wasn’t long before serious investors were placing their money in the company. I’m so proud of Max, who has no trouble attracting clients, as his warm, genuine personality would gain the trust of any prospective client. Unlike me, he thrives under the attention of a room full of people.

I’ve remembered that we have a reservation at a swanky restaurant tomorrow evening, and I guess that Max has probably nipped into town to buy something new to wear, which is why Ria saw him in the city centre earlier today. If I’m honest, I don’t know how I feel about spending what could be a week’s salary to some people on an evening out, but Max has persuaded me that we both deserve it. ‘What’s the point in earning all this money if you can’t spend it?’ he’ll say every time I appear a little cautious. We didn’t have much money when we first got together so we’d favoured middle-range Italian restaurants or even the local Indian. As things have taken off for Max, he’s really been splashing the cash.

‘It’s so hard to get a reservation at this place since they won Best Restaurant in the North. You’ll love it there, I promise, and it’s on me so no

worrying,' Max told me a few days earlier, before heading off to work.

'I bet they've put the prices up since they won Best Restaurant, that's for sure,' I said.

'Why would they do that?'

'Keep the riff-raff out. In fact, do you think they'll even let you in now?'

Max grabbed a cushion from our huge corner sofa and threw it at me, quickly ducking out of the room, laughing, before I could retaliate.

'We've got to enjoy the good life before any kids come along. Have some fun, live a little. No one likes a party pooper,' he said over his shoulder, as I followed him out to where he retrieved his keys from the hook in the Victorian tiled hallway. Then he turned and gave me a kiss goodbye.

As he left, I looked at his brown, slightly floppy hair and huge grin, which remind me of a young Hugh Grant, and thought how much I loved him.

Maybe that's exactly what I was being: a party pooper. Most women would dream of being wined and dined in a Michelin-starred restaurant with their husband-to-be, and having their hen party at a swish hotel, wouldn't they? Don't get me wrong, I enjoy having a good time as much as the next person. It's just that, well, let's just say I've seen how being foolish with money can leave you with nothing.

TWO

We're seated in the sumptuous yet cosy surroundings of the restaurant, as the waiter presents us with the first course.

'What do you think then? It's pretty special here, isn't it?' says Max as he forks some duck liver parfait and beetroot meringue into his mouth.

I glance around at the softly candlelit space, which has exposed brick walls hung with forest prints, and dark wooden tables glowing beneath orange pendant lighting. 'It's lovely. Modern but cosy.'

At the next table, there's a party of eight people surrounded by several large foil balloons emblazoned with the number sixty. Looking at the group, it's impossible to tell whose birthday it is, as people look so youthful these days.

'I'm thinking maybe one weekend we could spend a couple of days in Carmel in the Lake District. I'll see if I can get a table at L'Enclume, although there might be a waiting list,' Max says in between mouthfuls of food.

The fact that we haven't even finished our meal here yet and Max is already thinking of his next culinary experience makes me smile. As I look across at my handsome, smartly dressed fiancé, I suddenly remember what Ria told me at lunchtime.

'Ria said she saw you in town yesterday, shopping. I thought you might have been after a new shirt for this evening, but that's not new, is it?' I say, gesturing to his blue designer shirt.

'No, but I wasn't shopping for myself. I was collecting something. A surprise for you, actually.' Max puts his fork down and smiles broadly.

'A surprise? But it's not my birthday.' This is typically generous of Max.

'It doesn't need to be your birthday. I don't need an excuse to give my beautiful fiancée a present.'

‘Well, in that case, when do I get it?’ I clap my hands together in excitement.

‘Tonight, actually. I was about to order some champagne, but now you’ve gone and ruined the moment.’ Max pushes his bottom lip out.

‘Really? Oh, I’m sorry Max. I had no idea.’

I’m wondering what on earth Max is up to. He’s usually rubbish at keeping secrets so he’s done well to hide any sort of surprise from me.

‘It’s the third anniversary of the date we first met tomorrow. But as it’s a Sunday, I thought we’d celebrate tonight instead.’

‘The day you doused me in ketchup.’ I smile at him.

I feel embarrassed that I’d forgotten the exact date of our first meeting in Sefton Park, but I’m not surprised that Max has remembered it. I also feel slightly anxious that I haven’t bought him a gift.

‘The luckiest day of my life.’ He takes both of my hands in his with a huge smile on his face. ‘I knew as soon as I saw you that I would marry you.’

‘You mean you fancied me. You can’t really know if you’re going to marry someone before you get to know them. I might have been a complete nightmare,’ I point out, but I can’t help but smile at his words.

‘Nobody’s perfect.’

But if anyone is close to perfect then you are, Max, I think to myself. Handsome, generous, funny and kind just about covers it. I think *I’m* the lucky one. In fact, sometimes I wonder what he sees in me, as I’m sure he could take his pick from the entire female population.

As our plates are cleared away, Max orders a bottle of vintage Veuve Clicquot champagne, which the waiter goes off to retrieve.

‘Vintage? Pushing the boat out, aren’t we?’ I say, thinking the champagne probably cost nearly as much as the taster menu we’re currently savouring.

‘You deserve it. Besides I wanted something special to complement this.’

Max takes something from his pocket and I immediately recognise the eggshell-blue box.

‘This is for you.’ Max flips open the lid of the Tiffany’s box and I gasp at the huge diamond ring nestling on a velvet cushion.

He takes my hand and slides my engagement ring from my finger and replaces it with the Tiffany’s ring. The enormous diamond glints softly in the candlelit restaurant.

‘I thought you deserved an upgrade,’ he says, beaming.

It feels so heavy compared to the delicate single solitaire he presented me

with at the restaurant in Crete and, if I'm honest, slightly ostentatious.

'Max, it's stunning. Thank you so much.' Despite the generous gesture, I find myself forcing a smile on my face before leaning across the table to kiss him.

My mind roams back to the restaurant in Greece, the two of us sitting together beneath the vine-threaded pergola, where Max had slipped the original engagement ring onto my finger. I remember the guitarist walking through the flowered archway, serenading us, and the round of applause from the other diners. The whole day had been simply perfect.

'You do like it don't you?' Max asks, probably noting the slightly faraway look in my eyes as I reminisce about that holiday.

'Like it? Of course I do! Who wouldn't? It's absolutely beautiful. I'm just a little surprised, that's all. Thank you, Max.'

For a second, I worry that Max thought I wasn't content with my original ring, but nothing could be further from the truth. He was just starting out with his business then and money was a little tight, which for me made the ring even more special.

Two waiters arrive at our table together. One with the next course of turbot and the other with the bottle of champagne, out of which he pours us each a glass before placing the bottle in an ice bucket.

'Who'd have thought it, eh?' Max says, with a contented sigh. 'Two years into the business and making this kind of money. I could only have dreamt of living a life like this.' He raises his champagne glass. 'To us.'

It's two months until the wedding and each time I talk to Max he's splashing out on something else, as his level of excitement seems to be reaching fever pitch.

'To us,' I repeat, as we clink our fine-stemmed crystal glasses together.

It's testament to Max's drive and determination that he's doing so well and I feel a sudden surge of pride. I can hardly believe we've been together for three years. And he's right, of course. Things have gone incredibly well with his business. Things aren't too bad for me either really. I've moved in to a beautiful home with the man of my dreams and, although I'm not selling quite as many paintings as I would like, I still have my ambitions.

I'm tucking into the next course when my phone vibrates on the table beside me. It's my mother. I ignore it.

'Aren't you going to get that?' Max enquires.

'No, it can wait. It's Mum. She knew we were going out tonight. Not that

it would put her off phoning.'

Max takes another glug of his champagne and regards me closely. 'Are you still mad at her for cancelling the spa weekend?'

'No,' I reply, a little too emphatically.

'Really?' He raises an eyebrow and grins.

'Yes, really. I'm used to her cancelling arrangements if she has a better offer, that's just Mum.'

Which is true, by the way. And it's something that I tell myself doesn't upset me any more. That's just the way things are and I've got used to it.

'Anyway, tonight is all about us. Thank you for bringing me here and for this wonderful ring.' I stretch my hand out and admire the sparkle of the diamond on my finger. 'You spoil me.'

'You deserve it.'

It's almost eleven o'clock as we finish our evening with dessert wine and coffee before heading outside. It's an unusually warm evening for early June and we stroll contentedly arm-in-arm to a local taxi rank. The summer season is almost upon us and I am determined to make use of the picnic basket Max bought for me and organise some picnics for us at the park. Max is always so busy with work that it would be something to look forward to on a Sunday afternoon.

'Maybe we should walk home. Lose some of the calories.' Max pats his stomach.

'It's eight miles away,' I say, laughing. 'I just won't eat for the next week. You were right about that place though; the food was wonderful.'

We stop a few yards from a taxi point and Max puts his arms around my waist and pulls me to him. I can feel his heart beating next to mine. He still makes my head spin when he's this close and I hope we can have this feeling forever.

'I can think of a very pleasant way to burn off those calories,' he says before leaning in and kissing me slowly, running his fingers up and down my back. I'm meeting his passion with my own when my phone rings. It's my mother again, so this time I think I'd better answer it.

'So you do answer your phone occasionally, do you? What's the point in having a mobile, Alice, if you don't answer it?' I can imagine the roll of her eyes and her pursed lips.

'Hi, Mum. Sorry, I was in a restaurant. I told you Max and I were out this

evening. Is everything alright?’ I say brightly, while wondering exactly what the latest drama might be.

‘No, everything isn’t alright. I’m at the hospital. It’s Rex. I thought he’d had a heart attack. He’s just had an ECG and in fact, thank goodness, it wasn’t a heart attack after all and possibly—’ Mum gives a little cough. ‘Just indigestion. He’s still not himself though. Can you come?’

Rex is my stepfather, and given his penchant for rich food and gallons of red wine, I’m surprised this hasn’t happened to him before now. I’m glad to hear he’s okay, but it must have been scary for him and my mum, and I feel a stab of guilt for not answering my phone earlier.

‘Don’t worry, Mum, we’ll be with you shortly.’

I mouth ‘sorry’ to Max, who shrugs his shoulders.

‘We’re just waiting on a taxi. Is Lexie with you?’ I try for a reassuring voice.

‘No, I didn’t want to bother your sister. She’s out on a date tonight.’

I shouldn’t be surprised. Mum would like nothing better than for Lexie to settle down with a nice man, but Lexie is having fun dating guys until she meets the right one and I don’t blame her. I want the best for my little sister and hope she settles for nothing less than the man of her dreams.

‘I mean... I knew you were out with Max,’ she explains. ‘But your life’s all sorted, isn’t it? Lexie has been so unlucky in love. I didn’t want to spoil her evening in case things were going well. The bloke she’s meeting is a solicitor from Cheshire, you know.’ She says this with a hint of pride in her voice.

I suppress a sigh of exasperation. Either she was worried enough to need us or she wasn’t. ‘We don’t mind, we’ll be with you soon.’

I swear Mum has an innate ability to ruin any joyous moment in my life, which may sound like an exaggeration until you examine the facts. Out shopping for my high-school prom dress, she was bumped into by someone on one of those motorised scooters. She took a taxi home straight away, leaving me all alone with an overly helpful young assistant in John Lewis, who steered me in the direction of a shimmering blue dress, which, looking back on, I really could have done with someone talking me out of buying.

She turned up late to my graduation ceremony, actually missing me being presented with my certificate, because she had a flood in her kitchen. You get the picture. I couldn’t really get mad, because I knew none of it was her fault.

Yet somehow she always manages to make me feel like a secondary priority.

Her most recent cancellation was that weekend at a spa, which ended up coming second to a weekend in London watching *Blood Brothers* with my auntie Cathy after her friend cancelled. 'We couldn't let those tickets go to waste, love, but we'll have other times, won't we?'

I thought it would have been a nice bonding experience for us to spend a weekend at a spa and remember feeling a crushing disappointment, but I managed to hide it from her and tell her to enjoy her time in London.

'Thank goodness it wasn't a heart attack,' Max says when I fill him in about Rex. 'My mum thought the bloke next door was dying when an ambulance blue-lighted him to hospital last year, but it turned out to be wind. He waited on a hospital trolley for three hours just to be told that. I'd have been fuming.'

'About it not being a heart attack?'

'About having to wait that long to be told to take some Wind-eze.' He laughs.

We arrive at the hospital twenty minutes later to find Mum standing outside, smoking and talking on her phone. She's wearing a beige trench coat and her blonde hair is scrunched up on her head, held in place with a claw grip.

'Hi, Mum, how's Rex?' I ask, surprised that she's not inside with him.

'Waiting to be discharged. I just nipped out for one of these.' She takes one last drag on the cigarette before extinguishing it. 'I can't stand hospitals. They set my nerves on edge.'

'Oh, you're leaving already? Well, thank goodness he's okay. We'll pop in and see him now. Do you want to share a taxi? Rex might not feel like driving home,' I suggest.

'No, it's alright, thanks. We'll give you a lift. I'm sure Rex'll be fine. I've never heard of a bout of wind preventing someone from driving,' she huffs. 'Although I'll drive anyway.'

Max glances at me and a laugh escapes despite me trying to suppress it.

Oh, Mum, you have to see the funny side! But the main thing is that Rex is fine.'

'Well, I suppose so... but how embarrassing. Phoning an ambulance for a bout of indigestion. I don't know what those doctors must think of us. The sirens were going and everything.'

‘You mean, they had to step on the gas.’

To my surprise Mum bursts out laughing.

‘And honestly, Mum, they won’t think anything. It’s their job and I’m sure they’d rather be called out just to make sure, than that anything terrible happens. I’m glad you’re okay too. You sounded worried when you rang.’

‘More stressed than worried,’ she says, sighing. ‘I’m not very good with sick people.’

That I can vouch for. Lexie and I had full attendance for almost our entire school days and if any medication was required it would be given to the school secretary to be dispensed at lunchtime. Once, when I was told to ‘stop fussing’ over a pain in my wrist after falling over during a game of netball, it turned out to be broken. Although I must admit Mum did feel a little guilty about that one.

‘So, what happened?’

‘We were just sat watching *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* I never used to be keen on that Jeremy Clarkson, but he does a good job on that show. Anyway, there we were when Rex said he didn’t feel very well and suddenly started clutching his chest. He said he was in agony and he did go a bit of a funny colour. Thinking about it, though, he probably shouldn’t have eaten that cheese as it was after nine o’clock. Barry from Bristol was up to one hundred and twenty-five thousand pounds on the show too. I’ll have to watch it on catch-up now to see how much he ended up with,’ she complains.

Once inside A & E, we pass a waiting room full of people in various states of distress and are directed to a side ward, where we find Rex sitting on a bed and talking to a nurse.

‘Hi, Rex, how are you feeling?’ I breathe a sigh of relief to see Rex looking like a picture of health as the nurse tells him he can go home.

‘Oh, hello, guys, you didn’t need to come.’ He’s smiling broadly and thankfully not looking at all like someone who is very ill. ‘I’m feeling a lot better now, thanks, although I thought my number was up, I can tell you. I’ve never known pain like it in my life. The doctor said the symptoms of indigestion can be just like those of a heart attack. It’s a wake-up call.’ He nods thoughtfully as he puts his blue denim jacket on over his checked shirt. ‘I think I need to start looking after myself a bit more.’ He pats his rotund stomach. ‘I might even join a gym.’

Mum is pretty quiet on the way home and if Rex is looking for sympathy from her, it isn’t forthcoming. We have to pull in to a petrol station because

Mum's indignant that the hospital didn't give Rex an indigestion remedy and insists that he must buy one, as she doesn't want to 'go through all that again in the middle of the night'.

When Mum and Rex finally drop us off, it's well past midnight and we both collapse into our huge bed with the blue padded headboard that reaches right up to the ceiling. Max cuddles in close and slides his leg across mine, but I'm already struggling to stay awake. So much for a night of passion burning off all those calories.

As I drift off to sleep, I ponder my mother's words: *Your life's all sorted, isn't it?*

And I can't help thinking to myself: *Yes, Mother, I suppose it is. But no thanks to you.*

THREE

I decided from a young age that I was going to be an artist. According to my father, I demonstrated a flair for it as soon as I could hold a pencil. My work was always the first to be displayed on the school walls, proudly mounted to show it off to its best advantage. One of my proudest moments came when I painted a huge autumn tree with a kaleidoscope of colours, which took pride of place in the school entrance hall and drew admiring comments from visitors throughout the winter. I would use anything I could find to paint pictures. Mum tells of how, when I was three years old, she once found me using food colouring, which I'd taken from her baking cupboard, to paint patterns on the wallpaper in the hall. Not that she had much use for the food colouring herself. Any sweet treats usually came from a cake shop around the corner, where I would always select a chocolate éclair and Lexie would pick a red jelly topped with a swirl of cream and a sprinkle of green vermicelli.

Other than my dad, my family never took much notice of my passion for drawing. He was good at drawing and would teach me about light, shade and perspective as I looked out of the window and sketched whatever I saw. He taught me more than the teachers at school ever did, most of them confessing that they were useless at drawing. It was then that I realised that being able to create images on paper was a real talent that not everyone possessed.

At the start of his second year at art college, when Mum became pregnant with me, Dad dropped out of college and took a steady job working as a driver. Eventually, after Lexie was born, he returned to education and trained as a landscape gardener, using his creativity to design the most beautiful gardens in small spaces. Dad lives in Edinburgh now, in a stunning apartment off Leith Walk. He often gets commissioned to create gorgeous blooms for people's window boxes and balconies. We're both really busy with our lives,

but we have the kind of relationship that just comfortably picks up where we left off, with no expectations, and it seems to work really well for us. And I know we're both there if we ever need each other.

One autumn at parents' evening, when I was eleven years old, my mum seemed to express surprise when the art teacher told her he thought I displayed a real talent and casually stated, 'Hmm, well, she doesn't take after me.' I recall feeling annoyed that she never mentioned that my skill had come from my father – something she definitely knew about – but I said nothing. My parents had been separated for just over a year at the time, so with hindsight maybe Mum was still hurting over things. Still, I hated how she just tried to dismiss him from our lives once he left. I eventually went to university to study fine art and later began to sell my paintings online.

* * *

'So. Are you getting excited for your hen party yet?'

Kerry is another good friend from my uni days, who I don't see as often as I see Ria, but I'm just as close to. It can be weeks between our get-togethers, both of us being so busy with work and living in different parts of the city. When we do meet up, though, we chatter ten to the dozen, keen to fill each other in on what's been going on in our lives.

Today, Kerry and I are sitting in a coffee shop in Formby village, where I am enjoying a particularly delicious Blue Mountain blend with a giant slice of coffee-and-walnut cake. There can never be too much coffee, as far as I'm concerned. Kerry has travelled across the Mersey where she now lives with her architect boyfriend Hal, who's in Manchester today looking at eco-friendly housing pods.

'I'm trying to. It's just that I never imagined it to be in Malia, if I'm honest.'

'What's wrong with Malia? It will be fun. You should let your hair down for a change, Alice, before you get boring and married.' She takes a sip of decaf coffee and picks half-heartedly at a vegan muffin.

'Oh God, have I really grown old before my time?'

'No! I just mean you and Max work so hard in proper grown-up jobs, not like me.' She grins.

Kerry takes commissions for portraits, a large percentage of which are people's pet animals. She has a conservatory as her studio and often tells me it's not really like work as she enjoys it so much. I almost envy her, working from home and making a good living from doing exactly what she wants.

Most of the portraits are copied from photographs, although she had one pooch that unbelievably sat still for two hours, as the owner intermittently fed it cocktail sausages when there were signs that it was growing bored. The owner had wanted a genuine, live portrait and was thrilled with the result. Kerry really does seem to have everything sorted.

‘Besides,’ Kerry continues, ‘when was the last time we all had a girlie break together? I think it will be a lot of fun.’

‘I know it will. Maybe when I’ve picked up some holiday clothes later I’ll feel more in the mood.’ The truth is, having this break will probably make a little dent in my savings, but I guess all work and no play isn’t good for anyone. Max offered to pay for clothes shopping and some extra spends but I don’t want to be relying on him for everything.

‘That’s the spirit. I need a few more floaty kaftans to cover my porcelain skin.’ She strokes her pale complexion and smiles. ‘And factor fifty. I never tan, as you know. I just go an interesting shade of pink before turning white again. I wish I had your gorgeous skin.’

‘Maybe we’d better pop into Boots for some fake tanning mousse. But then, if you tan those never-ending legs, you’ll put us all in the shade.’

‘As if,’ she says, but with a huge grin on her face.

‘Seriously though, you have lovely skin. You’re a beautiful English rose,’ I tell her.

‘And this is why you are one of my best friends,’ Kerry says gratefully. ‘Hal never tells me I’m beautiful.’

I think Hal would probably be more appreciative of a beautifully furnished yurt, but I don’t say anything.

We finish our coffees and are heading off to catch the train into town, when my phone rings. It’s Mum. I consider not answering, but I know I will only spend the rest of the afternoon wondering if everything is alright.

‘Hi, Mum, how’s things?’

‘Alright, thanks, but I was just wondering have you heard from Lexie?’ There’s a slightly anxious tone to her voice.

‘No. I gave her a quick ring yesterday to ask how her date went, but I haven’t spoken to her today. Is everything okay?’ I hold my breath and pray that everything is alright.

Lexie told me her lawyer date had been disastrous as he had spent the evening droning on about a fraud case, while tapping the side of his nose and saying, ‘I’ve changed the names obviously.’

‘Yes, it’s just that she should have been here by now. We’re going out for lunch at Franco’s and they won’t keep the table for too long as it gets really busy at lunchtimes. She’s not answering her phone.’ Mum sounds exasperated.

I’m silent for a minute as I suppress a feeling of hurt that threatens to turn my voice into a shaking mass of emotion.

‘Alice, are you still there?’

‘Yes, Mum, and don’t worry. I’m sure she’ll be there soon. I’ll have to go, Kerry and I are heading into town.’

Hanging up before she has a chance to say anything else, I can feel tears pricking my eyes. Much as I love Lexie, she never really does anything for Mum, yet there Mum is, booking restaurant lunches with her. Every drama Mum has, however big or small, including the recent one at the hospital with Rex, and I’m the first person she phones. But she never seems to want to spend time with me otherwise.

‘Is everything okay?’ Kerry asks.

‘Yeah, just my mum asking me if I’ve heard from Lexie,’ I say as brightly as I can. ‘Right, come on then. We’d better get a move on if we’re going to catch that train.’

As we walk along the road towards the station, we pass Max’s office and the huge board displaying the sign *Max Jenkins’ Financial Planning Solutions* gives me a surge of pride, as it does every time I see it. Max now employs five staff, including an apprentice who has him in fits of laughter when he regales them with stories of his disastrous love life at the tender age of nineteen.

Sometimes I worry that Max works a little too hard, as it’s not unusual for him to arrive home after 9 p.m., with the phone glued to his ear, talking to a prospective client. But then he does like to relax at the weekends, when all calls are diverted to the office. I can’t help reflecting on how his professional life seems so fast-paced and exciting in comparison to mine.

‘How is Lexie? She is coming on the hen, isn’t she?’ Kerry’s voice interrupts my thoughts.

‘Yeah, definitely. She wasn’t sure she would be able to get the time off work initially, since it’s a fairly new job, but she’s good to go. It will be nice actually. We don’t get to spend that much time together.’

‘That’s a shame. You two used to be really close, didn’t you?’

Used to be. I have so many memories of our time growing up, recalling how I was the older, protective big sister, who used to stick up for her at the drop of a hat. It's funny to think that I disliked any sort of confrontation as I grew older.

At twenty-seven, Lexie is almost three years younger than me and now works as a buyer for a well-known high-street fashion store. She had no idea what she wanted to do with her life until I suggested working as a buyer, as she has the right sort of outgoing personality and a keen eye for fashion. When she was a young girl, I would often find her twirling around in front of the mirror wearing my clothes and a pair of Mum's high heels. As she grew older, she developed her own unique style, adding scarves or brightly coloured tights, which would transform even the simplest outfit into something that would give Gok Wan a run for his money.

She leads a rather frenetic life of socialising and can usually be found lurking under her duvet for most of the morning on a Sunday, exhausted. When she drags herself out of bed we regularly meet for lunch at a local pub, where she fills me in on her life and latest dating disaster. I sometimes worry that the man she would like to meet doesn't exist. Last time I saw her, just over a week ago, she was excited about having a date with the solicitor from Cheshire, although it turned out that they had nothing in common.

The train journey takes a little over thirty minutes and soon we are joining the throngs of pedestrians heading towards the shopping centre. The crowds are probably the only thing I don't like about the city centre, but I'm prepared to endure them because I love the shops and restaurants as well as the theatres and galleries.

'There's a sale on at Cricket if you fancy a look,' I suggest.

'Cricket, hey? You can tell you've gone up in the world. I remember when you used to head straight for Next.'

'I only suggested it because there's a sale on. You know I feel a bit guilty overspending.'

'I know. I'm just teasing. Although goodness knows why you feel guilty, it's your money.'

'That's what Max says. I don't know, maybe I have this feeling that one day it could all be taken away and we'll be left with nothing. Some weeks the sales of my paintings are better than others and we all know that working in finance can have its ups and downs.'

‘All the more reason to enjoy it while you can. Ooh, look at that.’

Kerry is definitely a ‘live for today’ kind of person who makes a lot of impulse buys, half of which she returns to the shops a few days later. She has just stopped to admire a designer handbag in a shop window. It carries a hefty price tag.

‘That’s leather. Hal would kill you if you took that home, Lexie. Plus would you actually use it?’

‘I wouldn’t buy leather myself. I’m just admiring the design,’ she says defensively. ‘Although, strictly speaking, leather is a by-product.’

‘A by-product from a cow that has been deliberately killed to satisfy the customer’s desire for a big fat steak? It’s hardly roadkill, is it?’

‘Bloody hell, have you been talking to Hal? I take your point, although no harm in me looking at it, I suppose. It’s gorgeous.’

Sometimes I’m not so sure if Kerry really is a vegetarian. I think Hal had a lot to do with her decision to ditch meat, as I have a suspicion she occasionally sneaks out to a local café for a bacon sandwich. I’m still not sure about her ‘vegan’ sausages that she served with breakfast when I stayed over one weekend when Hal was on a demonstration about the evils of fracking. They came from a ‘Yours is the Earth’ box but tasted suspiciously of good quality pork.

‘There’s an identical bag to that for twenty quid in H&M, which obviously won’t be leather but looks just as good,’ I suggest.

‘There’s nothing wrong with looking for bargains, but you should treat yourself from time to time. You deserve it,’ Kerry tells me.

Working part-time in a gift shop and selling a couple of paintings a week online, I’m not entirely convinced that I do, but it’s nice of her to say so.

After browsing the rails in Cricket and purchasing two gorgeous, heavily discounted summer dresses and a new bikini, we head off towards an independent fashion retailer that sells pretty clothes and accessories. Kerry buys some pastel-coloured capri pants, a floaty kaftan and a sun hat, while I buy another dress and a couple of vest tops. We then go to TK Maxx so that I can replace some sunglasses that I lost on my last weekend away. I haven’t found any that I like since, but I’ll definitely need a pair in that Grecian sun.

‘Right. Are we nearly done? I’m starving. Do you fancy Bistro Pierre?’

I nod and we make our way down the busy street towards the restaurant arm in arm.

‘I can’t wait to be lying on a beach in Crete, can you? We should have

booked a week instead of five days though. Maybe we can choose something a little longer next time,' Kerry says, sighing.

'Maybe. Although this was a special deal, wasn't it? Plus, I'm not sure we would all be able to get away for that long.'

'People are entitled to holidays, you know.' She laughs and rolls her eyes. 'Or maybe you'd hate to be parted from Max for so long while you're still all loved up. Give it a few more years!'

We settle into a corner table at the restaurant, which is accessed by a long, narrow, black staircase and looks down onto the busy street below, and order two large glasses of Sancerre and a jug of water.

'I can't believe you're actually getting married,' says Kerry, after we've given our food order to a waitress. 'You're the first one of us too. I remember at uni you swore you would never get married.'

It's true, all of us are thirty or approaching it and none of us is married. I guess all the conversations we had about not compromising and how we would only consider marriage if we met the one we couldn't live without are true. I feel so lucky to have found Max but as Ria says, 'Thirty is the new twenty, so there's no rush'.

'I know I did. But everything just feels right with Max. I just didn't expect the wedding to be such a big affair. You know what I'm like with crowds of people. Plus, the guest list seems to be growing by the day.'

'That's Max all over, generous to a fault,' Kerry says, grinning. 'He'd probably invite the whole city if he could.'

'You're probably right.'

I can't help smiling at the thought, though if he did anything close to it I'd be an absolute wreck. I can barely handle the number of people we've got coming as it is.

The waitress brings our meals and sets them on the table. There's a plate of tasty melt-in-the-mouth pork in a tangy apple-and-mustard sauce for me, and a delicious-looking parmesan-topped vegetable risotto for Kerry. My meal comes with a dish of dauphinoise potatoes and green beans that I'm happy to share as the portions are huge.

'Do you think you and Hal will ever get married?' I ask, as we tuck in to our food.

'I don't know, to be honest,' Kerry says. 'I'm not sure Hal really believes in marriage. He says you don't need a piece of paper to be happy. But we're fine as we are. Hal says there's so many things he wants to do before he

settles down for good.'

'Right.' It's hard to imagine Hal being in a rush to do anything, such is his laid-back attitude to life.

'So, how is the wedding planning going?' Kerry quickly turns the conversation back to my wedding plans, which makes me wonder whether marriage is a bit of a sticking point between them. 'I can't think of a nicer place than the Lake District. You're so lucky, the photographs are going to be amazing.'

I can't think of anywhere nicer than Cavendish House either. The Georgian mansion overlooking Lake Ullswater that we've booked really is a dream setting. We were originally marrying in the Rose Room, an intimate lounge with an antique fireplace and room for twenty-five guests. But as the wedding numbers have grown, we've had to change to the Green Room, a stunning space with floor-length windows that overlook a little jetty on the lake.

'We just have to hope the weather stays nice though. Late August can be stunningly beautiful or a real washout.'

I'm hoping it won't rain, as Max has included a pre-dinner boat trip around the lake with champagne for all the guests. To be honest, he has taken over most of the wedding planning, along with his sister Molly, who actually set herself up as a wedding planner last year. It is totally fine by me as I find the whole thing completely overwhelming.

The location is important to me – it was the place where Max and I spent our first weekend away – but I am less interested in table favours and all the other little things that send my head into a spin every time I think about them. I'd like to keep things simple, but it seems that these days guests have high expectations when attending a wedding, especially one held in a grand country-house hotel.

Kerry and I finish our main courses and sit back feeling completely sated. We decide to opt for a liqueur coffee instead of a dessert. Afterwards, we're just settling the bill when my phone rings. It's Max.

'Hiya, how's the shopping going?' My heart still does a little flip when I hear his voice.

'Good, thanks. We're pretty much done. Just paying for a lunch at Bistro Pierre.'

'Great. Well, I've had to make do with a sandwich from the deli today as I've been mad busy. I'll be done by seven o'clock though, so I'll pick up a

couple of steaks on the way home, if you fancy it?’

I’m still full from lunch but tell him that yes, steak would be perfect.

‘Anyway, I’m ringing because I’ve just had a client who’s an entertainment manager in the office. He’s got Stavros Flatley on his books and I think he’ll be able to get them for our wedding. I’ve invited him to the wedding too, if he can book them.’

‘Stavros Flatley?’ I say, in utter disbelief.

‘Yeah, you know, that father and son act. They were on *Britain’s Got Talent*. It would be a right laugh; they’d really get the crowd going. He said it would normally be a bit short notice but they’re performing in Manchester, which isn’t that far away, so it shouldn’t be a problem.’ Max’s voice is buzzing with excitement.

‘Yes, I know who they are but... is it really the right thing for the wedding?’

‘Of course it is! For the evening party, of course. The disco is all sorted and I just thought it would be a surprise for the guests. Can you imagine everyone’s faces when Stavros Flatley turn up?’ I can just see Max’s huge grin at the other end of the phone.

I suppose it’s a rather sweet idea, but I do worry about whether things may be getting a little out of hand. Our original plan last year was for twenty-five guests, who included immediate family and friends, but somehow it’s crept up to *eighty*. I quickly realised that you couldn’t invite one person from the wider family without inviting another or you would offend someone. Not that I should worry about offending my relatives, who are cast far and wide, most of whom I haven’t seen since I was five years old.

As I walk Kerry down to the ferry terminal at Pier Head, so that she can catch the ferry to Seacombe, I tell her all about Max’s latest idea for the wedding, and how he’s going to buy steaks for supper. She laughs and tells me I’m lucky to have such a generous fiancé and how she’s sick of scouring the supermarket late in the evening so that Hal can pick out the cut-price food. It’s not as if I need reminding of how wonderful Max is, yet in our relationship I’m usually the one looking out for bargains.

It’s a lovely afternoon with just a few wispy clouds drifting through a bright blue sky, although a slight breeze whips up as we approach the River Mersey. It’s been such a happy day with Kerry that I’m reminded how lucky I am and how I should cherish the close relationship I have with my friends.

Suddenly, I can't wait until we are all together in Crete.

'See you very soon,' I say, as I squeeze her in a hug.

Ria had planned to join us today but she had to go to the outskirts of the city to visit her mother, who had sustained a fall at her sheltered accommodation. Ria willingly does everything for her mum, who she has always had a good relationship with, and it's something I envy her for.

As Kerry waves from the ferry, which is leaving foamy white water in its wake, I find a bench and take my small sketchbook from my shoulder bag and a piece of charcoal from a tin that I always carry with me. I slide the charcoal across the page and draw the outline of the boat as it sails off into the distance, before sketching the buildings that surround the water. I'm lost in my drawing, when I feel someone looking over my shoulder.

'Oh, that's really good that, love.'

I swing round to find a grey-haired woman in a black fur-hooded anorak smiling at me. She has a young boy with her, who I assume to be her grandson.

'I wish I could draw like that.' She nods with approval. 'You could be a professional.'

'Thank you, it's just a rough sketch.' I tell her all about my online business and she listens with interest.

'Well, good luck with that. I do like a bit of painting myself, watercolour painting that is. There was a class at my local library every Saturday morning before it closed down. I'm not saying I was any good at it but I really enjoyed it. My grandson here loves art too. He likes going to the creative classes at the Walker Art Gallery, don't you, love?' The boy nods.

I tell her that Ria works at the gallery and it turns out he's been to one of the classes she runs.

'He made a lovely clay trinket pot there,' his grandmother tells me. 'It's got pride of place on my dressing table. Anyway, must be off. Keep drawing!'

As the woman and boy leave, my thoughts are returning to the conversation with Max about Stavros Flatley, when a text pings through on my phone. It's a picture message from Max showing a pair of owls.

What do you think about these to carry the wedding rings?

Although it's something I would never have thought of in a million years,

if Max is happy then I guess I should be too. Thinking about Kerry's comments, maybe I ought to be grateful that I'm not marrying a skinflint like Hal. Perhaps I should be happy to indulge Max's every whim. He's filled my life with such love and affection, I think I ought to allow him just about anything. Well, almost...

I decide not to reply to the text right away, but to continue with my sketching. I know the preparations are in good hands with Max and his sister Molly organising things. She has such style and an eye for detail. She was hating her job at a nursery before she decided to make a change to event planning, and I think it's the perfect job for her.

In truth, along with the choice of venue, I just wanted control over my dress and the flowers and very little else. Actually, I don't think there should be much else apart from some nice food and good conversation with loved ones who are all having a good time. I don't want my wedding to become a circus. I want the guests to remember the romance, laughter and love rather than all the additional extravagances. But I've signed over control to Molly and Max, so I have to let them get on with it.

Soon enough I have completed an outline of the scene in front of me, which I will fill in later. I also take a photograph on my phone, should I decide to add some colour to it.

After putting my sketching things away, I take a stroll along the Royal Albert Dock and inhale deeply, enjoying the feel of the bracing wind against my cheeks. It's one of my favourite places to be and these days it's surrounded by some nice eateries and the Tate Liverpool, where I am a regular visitor. I decide to stay a while and I buy a latte from a coffee van and take it over to the rail overlooking the water. There's something so soothing about having a break in the sun and I can't wait to spend some time on a sun-kissed beach. It won't be just a holiday though, it will be my hen party.

I'm really looking forward to marrying Max. I just need to put aside my concerns that we seem to have such different ideas of how a wedding should be. I've seen too many couples focus on the huge wedding thing only to get divorced a few years later once the post-wedding reality sets in. I'm not saying that would be the case with us but, well, it makes you think. I have a memory of my parents together in happier days when I was a young child and wonder if anything lasts forever...

I tell myself to stop thinking this way. I'm marrying the man of my dreams and I have a get-together with my best friends on sunny Crete to look

forward to first. Surely life doesn't get much better than this?

FOUR

‘Aren’t you hungry?’ Max asks, as he eats the last of his sirloin steak and eyes my half-eaten plate of food.

‘Not hungry enough to really appreciate this food after having had a big lunch. I’m so sorry, Max. It’s delicious too.’

I bought Max a celebrity cookbook last month and he’s steadily working his way through it, which is doing nothing for my waistline and I wonder, fleetingly, whether I will still fit into my wedding dress. Maybe I’d better be a little more serious about my running, as I once used to be. There’s a beach ten minutes away from home and a pair of running shoes sitting in the wardrobe, so I really have no excuse.

‘Not to worry. Shall we have a glass of wine and an early night then?’ he asks, already taking our plates into the kitchen to load the dishwasher. ‘Although, I do have an M&S chocolate cheesecake in the fridge. I didn’t have time to make one.’

‘Let’s save that for tomorrow. An early night sounds perfect,’ I say, as I wrap my arms around him and kiss him, enjoying the feel of my fingers toying with the hair at the top of his neck.

‘So, are you all packed?’ Max asks, as he loads the plates into the dishwasher.

‘Almost. Although it’s still a couple of days away and you know how I tend to leave things until the last minute.’

‘As long as you don’t turn up late to our wedding. I don’t want to be stressing at the altar.’

‘As if I would.’

‘Well, you’d better not. I’ll give you ten minutes then the wedding’s off,’ he says teasingly. ‘I still remember our second date. The staff were cashing up and putting the chairs on the tables by the time you turned up.’

‘Oh, very funny. As I recall, my train was fifteen minutes late. Were you panicking, thinking I wasn’t coming?’ I joke right back.

In reality, it was *me* who was panicking about being late. My stomach was churning as I headed for the restaurant, hoping he would still be there.

I step towards him now and look into his gorgeous eyes and he strokes my hair before kissing me softly.

‘No, I knew you’d turn up. How could you possibly resist?’

He sweeps his hair back and sucks his stomach in, making me laugh. But it’s true all the same; his soft kiss has made me faintly breathless.

‘Oh, I almost forgot to tell you,’ Max says, as he takes a bottle of wine from the wine rack. ‘You’ll never guess who I bumped into today. Do you remember Reggie who lived next door to us at the flat?’

I lived with Max for a while in his two-bedroomed flat before he sold it for the deposit on our house. Reggie was a good neighbour, although he did have a tendency to sing along loudly to the radio as he got ready for his early-morning shift as a postman.

‘Yes, of course. How’s he doing?’

‘Would you believe he’s moved up to the Lake District? Only a couple of miles from the wedding venue. I’ve invited him along,’ Max says matter-of-factly.

It’s funny how quickly the lovely evening has turned flat for me. *That’s eighty-one guests.* I can hardly believe what I’m hearing.

‘Really? Do you think the hotel will be happy with that? We can’t just keep adding people onto the guest list, Max.’

‘It’s fine. The wedding’s two months away. I’ve already phoned the hotel and sorted it. Molly said it wouldn’t make a difference.’

All I can think of is that it will mess the table numbers up. We have ten tables of seven people, who have been carefully seated, as well as the bridal table, and now we have an odd number. I can feel irritation rising inside me. Why hadn’t Max even discussed this with me? I know having a wedding planner means a lot of the details are taken care of, but I should still be consulted about who we invite, surely?

Max pours me a glass of red wine and hands it to me.

‘You’re not mad at me, are you?’ He’s looking at me with his soft grey blue eyes that seem to make me forgive him just about anything.

I try to temper my voice. ‘Not mad exactly, but Reggie was hardly your best friend though, was he? I’m just surprised you’ve asked him to our

wedding, that's all. I wonder how long this guest list will be by the time you've finished?

'I know, sorry, sometimes I just act on the spur of the moment.'

'Well, alright, but don't go inviting anyone else. Honestly, Max, I already felt nervous enough about saying my vows in front of a handful of people, never mind a room full of eighty people. Well, eighty-one now.'

'But why? Don't be nervous. I'll be standing right next to you. It's a celebration! The more people the merrier, as far I'm concerned. I want to show you, my beautiful bride, off to the whole world.' He takes the wine glass from my hand and puts it on the table, next to his. Then he lifts me off my feet and spins me round, making me giggle, and I laughingly slap him on the back as he throws me over his shoulder and attempts to carry me upstairs.

'I know you do.' I catch my breath as he tickles me before depositing me back onto the floor. 'And of course I want people to join in the celebrations. But I also want it to be something special to *us*. Promise me you won't add any more people to the guest list or we might have to look at a bigger venue. Anfield football stadium, for example.'

'Alright, I promise,' he says softly. 'Anyway, come on, let's take our wine to bed. I won't see you for five days when you're away. I don't know how I'll survive.'

I am about to say 'I'm sure you'll manage' but he silences me with a lingering kiss that sends shivers down my spine, before he picks up the wine glasses and we head off upstairs to bed.

Two hours later, I find myself wide awake just staring at the ceiling. Not for the first time, I wish we could just elope somewhere and tie the knot, but I know Max wouldn't hear of it. I've never really enjoyed being in the limelight, but I'd better get over that for my big day. Maybe this forthcoming hen party will help me to relax a little and gather my thoughts.

Max had his stag do last month. He went to Vegas and from what I could tell savoured every minute of the place, from visiting the casinos to taking a helicopter ride over the Grand Canyon, which would terrify the life out of me. At times, I wonder how on earth our relationship works as we are such totally different people.

We haven't decided on a honeymoon yet and there are still so many places in the world I'd like to visit, yet every time I think of a honeymoon I think of Greece and its sun-kissed beaches and friendly tavernas, all serving

the most delicious fresh food. It's just perfect. And I love the history too. Taking a stroll on the islands, you can find yourself stumbling upon ancient amphitheatres, or the remains of some crumbling monument or other at virtually every turn. I love everything about the place.

I first visited Greece when I was nineteen years old when Dad surprised Lexie and me with a trip to Elounda in Crete, where he'd rented a friend's villa. The three of us took mountain walks, sunbathed on the beautiful beaches and ate delicious food in lively tavernas as darkness fell. I will never forget that holiday, and of course Crete's the place where Max and I got engaged, so it will always hold a special place in my heart.

It's a little after three in the morning before I finally drift off to sleep again, thinking about how I'm going to be shattered when I work in the shop tomorrow.

FIVE

It's a sunny morning and I'm dreaming of cocktails and delicious Greek food as I work my last shift in A Sense of Occasion. It seems that half the city must be having babies and children christened as there's a steady stream of customers purchasing silver gifts ranging from money boxes to tiny silver bracelets. I've spent most of the morning tying pretty bows around an assortment of different coloured boxes and trying to stop myself from yawning.

'Phew, that was a mad rush.' I'm enjoying a coffee with Gail, my boss, during a bit of a lull in sales.

'I know. I'm not complaining though. I'm going to have to reorder a lot of christening gifts. There will probably be a rush on next week when many girls and boys make their First Holy Communion too.'

'Is that still a big thing?'

I remember watching a procession of Catholic children decked out in their finery when I was young. They were going to their church on a Sunday morning, before attending a huge party at the Community Centre. I asked my mother why we had to attend a Church of England school rather than a Catholic one, as the Catholics seemed to have all the fun.

'So it seems. I've seen photos of the dresses some of the customers have ordered for their daughters. They would put a royal wedding to shame,' Gail says with a laugh.

Obviously Gail hadn't thought about the shop being busy when she allowed me some annual leave, but she doesn't say anything. It's typical of Gail her to be so accommodating. I think it's because she can always rely on someone or other to cover a staff absence, as she seems to know everyone in the whole city. University students return every year to work in the shop over the summer season, when the shop business seems to get really busy,

although I think many of them treat her like a mother, as she readily dispenses sensible advice to them if they have something on their minds. At times I consider telling my own mum of the nerves I feel about my own wedding, but always decide against it. She'd probably think me ungrateful, in view of Max's generosity, and she'd tell me that Lexie would kill for a man like Max.

When I step outside as the shop closes, I find that a warm sun has broken through the clouds, which instantly puts me in a holiday mood. I'm thinking happily of all things Greek, when my phone rings. It's Lexie.

'Hi, sis, you're never going to believe what's happened. I'm at the hospital.' She sighs.

'The hospital? Oh no! What's happened?' I ask, panicking for a second, hoping it's nothing too serious.

'I've fallen downstairs and my leg's broken. It's going to be set in a full cast shortly. I'm so sorry, Alice, but I'm not going to be able to fly to Crete.' She stifles a sob.

I feel so sorry for my sister and also a searing disappointment, as I had really been looking forward to spending some quality time with her, just lounging on beaches and hanging out.

'What? Oh my gosh. I'll come and see you right now. Are you alright? Do you need anything?' I gabble.

'No, I'm fine, thanks. Mum's here. I think I'm still in shock. I'm so sorry, Alice.'

'What are you sorry for? It's hardly your fault, Lexie. Anyway, I'll see you in a bit. I'm on my way.'

As I head to the hospital, I can't believe Lexie won't be coming to Greece. The last full weekend we spent together was on my birthday three years ago, when we hired a house that overlooked the Conwy Estuary. One of her friends plus Ria and Kerry joined us too and we had the most wonderful time, walking through forests and drinking in the hot tub in the evenings. It was one of those special weekends that you never forget.

Walking along the busy corridors of the hospital, I think about how people's lives can change in the blink of an eye. Lexie could easily have broken her neck falling down a flight of stairs. Thank God she didn't.

A nurse directs me to her. She is sitting on a bed with a grey curtain

pulled around it. Mum is sitting on a chair next to the bed, dabbing her red-rimmed eyes with a tissue.

‘Hi, Mum. Oh no, Lexie... are you alright?’

‘Yes, thank goodness. I suppose it could have been a whole lot worse really.’

The nurse tells me that Lexie’s just returned from X-ray and is a little woozy on painkillers as she waits to be fitted with a leg cast.

‘I know, I was just thinking the same thing.’ I squeeze her in a hug.

‘Well, that’s the trouble with living alone, isn’t it? It’s dangerous. You could have been lying there at the foot of the stairs for days,’ Mum says theatrically.

‘Hardly, Mum. Someone in work would probably have called round. I was supposed to be at a fashion show in Leeds today. Plus, you ring me almost daily.’ She closes her eyes in an effort to stay awake.

‘Lots of people live on their own, Mum. I rented my own flat a while back,’ I remind her. *Where I certainly don’t remember any daily phone calls from you*, I think to myself.

‘Well, Lexie, you’re coming to stay with me until you get used to the crutches and that’s that. Plus, you won’t be able to get up those stairs to your first-floor apartment.’

‘There’s a lift, Mum,’ Lexie says. ‘Stop worrying.’ She looks at me. ‘I’m just so upset that I can’t get to Crete with you and the girls, Alice. But, don’t worry, we’ll make up for it when I’m mobile again. Hopefully the cast should be off in six weeks. I don’t want to be hobbling down the aisle. Those bridesmaid’s shoes are gorgeous.’ She manages a smile.

‘So, you’re not cancelling then?’ asks Mum, a surprised look on her face.

‘Well, maybe I would if it was just me and Lexie, Mum, but the girls have all paid. We’d never get our money back. Besides, it has taken months for us to arrange this.’

For a second, I do feel guilty for not thinking about cancelling, but then realise how unfair it is of my mother to suggest it.

‘I know it has and don’t be so daft, Alice. I wouldn’t expect you to,’ Lexie says. ‘As I said, we can do something together another time.’ Lexie pats my arm reassuringly and glances at Mum, who sniffs and picks up a magazine.

‘Well, I just think it’s a bit strange having a hen party without your sister and chief bridesmaid, that’s all I’m saying. But you go off and enjoy

yourself,' says Mum with a tight smile.

Count to ten.

I stay for half an hour, reassuring Lexie and trying to find neutral topics of conversation with Mum, before I say my goodbyes. I feel a little bad for Lexie, but I know she will be in capable hands with Mum fussing over her. I'll miss her being with us though.

As Mum nips out to the toilet, Lexie takes both my hands in hers. 'Listen... you make sure you have a great time. Don't let Mum get to you. Just make sure you message me lots of pictures of sun-kissed beaches and hunky Greek men. Then again, forget that. It might make me depressed.' She laughs.

'Okay. Thanks, sis. How exactly did you fall downstairs? Did you trip over on something?'

'I'm not too sure, to be honest. I went to the loo in the dark and obviously misjudged the top stair and must have just tumbled downstairs.'

Mum arrives back at Lexie's bedside and I hug her and Lexie, giving my sister an extra squeeze before making my way out of the ward. When I'm outside once more in the bright sunshine, it's with a heavy heart that I think about the forthcoming break without my sister and resolve to make it up to her. Things have changed a little between Lexie and me, and I'm aware that families tend to grow in different directions, but I don't want a gulf to appear between us. I can't bear the thought of losing the bond with my little sister. Maybe we can have that spa weekend in a nice hotel that I was thinking about in the first place. I'll have to try to make the best of things now, though, as I know the girls are really looking forward to us all spending time together.

SIX

It's just after five, on the morning of my flight to Crete for my hen party, and I'm making a coffee and yawning before I nip upstairs for a quick shower. I'll wake Max afterwards as he's driving us to the airport.

As I shower, I think about Mum, who rang me last night asking if I could take her into town this morning, having apparently forgotten we were on an early flight. She once again spoke of how sad Lexie was to be missing out, even though Lexie and I have agreed to make up for it another time. I wasn't certain if she was being thoughtless in mentioning it, or genuinely trying to make me feel guilty. Either way I'm determined to enjoy myself. She rang off saying, 'Well have a safe journey,' rather than 'have a good time' but I guess that's something.

An hour later, I'm downstairs when there's a knock on the front door and I can see the outline of Ria and Molly through the stained glass. Kerry is meeting us at the airport as Hal is dropping her off en route to a meeting.

'Hi, Alice, are you ready?' Ria drops her suitcase and crushes me in an embrace as I let her in.

Molly is following closely behind Ria. 'Oh, I can't wait to get away from this miserable weather. I need some sunshine!' she says, dumping her case next to Ria's in the hallway. She's wearing a bright pink dress with a white blazer over the top and a pair of high heels.

Molly's a pretty girl who looks very similar to Max with her long dark hair and ready smile and we get along pretty well... at least these days anyway. She'd been really close to Max's ex-girlfriend, Rachel, and was devastated when they broke up a year before we met. It seems that Rachel had been like the big sister Molly had never had and they would go shopping together and have girlie pamper evenings. She was clearly a hard act to follow, so I let things happen naturally between us, ignoring Molly's initial

coolness towards me and just being friendly. Thankfully – at least I like to think so anyway – we’ve become pretty close.

There’s still a slight drizzle coming from a gloomy sky, when Max comes downstairs, quickly downing a coffee I’d made him. He grabs our bags and puts them in the boot and the three of us clamber into the car.

‘So sorry to hear about your sister,’ Ria says to me. ‘I was sad to get your text last night. I really like Lexie.’

‘I know, it’s such a shame. Truth be told I feel a little guilty going off without her,’ I say with a sigh.

‘I know what you mean, but I’m sure Lexie wouldn’t have wanted you to cancel,’ Molly says, which I know to be true.

‘Hey! Remind me to get a bottle of gin at duty-free,’ Ria says. ‘They don’t have many of the flavoured gins in Greece and I’m a bit partial to a Parma violet gin at the moment.’

‘Me too,’ Molly says. ‘Although after last Saturday I swore I’d give up. I went to a wedding where there was a free bar and I got a bit carried away.’ She pulls a face. ‘I blame the bartender for letting me carry on drinking.’

‘You just can’t get the staff,’ Ria says, laughing loudly.

Just over thirty minutes later, Max is dropping us off outside the airport. While Ria and Molly grab their suitcases from the boot, he gives me a lingering kiss inside the car and I lean in close and inhale his smell.

‘Now, have a great time and try to switch off. I love you and I’ll miss you.’ Max pulls me into a final hug.

‘I love you too. I will do.’

‘You’re tense.’ He gently massages my shoulders. ‘Honestly, Alice, go and relax with your friends. You work hard and deserve a break. Go and enjoy yourself.’

‘I know. It’s just the flying thing. You know how I hate take-off. I’ll be alright once we’re airborne.’

The truth is, it’s not just the flight. It’s true enough that I don’t like take-off, but in reality my head is spinning with thoughts of everything that’s going on in my life. Thoughts of my sister laid up with her broken leg, dreams of opening my own gallery and wondering if I’ll be a sales assistant forever at the gift shop and of course the wedding day itself. Max is right, I need to try to relax and switch off. I jump out of the car and pull my case

from the boot, before blowing him a kiss and then hurrying after the girls.

We head inside the busy airport to where Kerry is waiting for us, grinning from ear to ear, near the check-in desks. I am suddenly surrounded by the sound of excited chatter and suitcases trundling along, and thankfully the holiday vibe begins to engulf me. I'm picturing myself sitting at a table overlooking the shimmering sea, with a gentle breeze wafting my hair as I eat a Greek salad and sip ouzo, and I can't wait to be there. The thought of the warm sun on my shoulders sends a slow smile across my face.

'Madam?'

The voice from the over-made-up lady at the check-in desk shakes me out of my daydream.

'Did you pack the case yourself?'

'What? Oh, yes, I did.' She looks me up and down before wrapping a tag around the handle of my case.

As the last of the cases chugs along the belt to be loaded onto the plane, we head inside the airport lounge to order some lunch, or, more accurately, an all-day breakfast.

While we are eating, Ria grabs the attention of a passing waiter. 'Right, then. Who's having wine?'

'Not for me, thanks,' Molly says. 'It makes me sick if I drink alcohol before I travel. Plane, car, boat, you name it. A few glasses of anything and I'm hurling into a paper bag for the duration of the journey.'

'Charming,' says Kerry, laughing, as she's about to take a mouthful of a hash brown.

When the waiter returns, Ria pours three glasses of pink fizz and raises a toast.

'To us. And our very dear friend Alice, who will soon be Mrs Jenkins. Although as the wedding is still two months away, there's time to change your mind.' She winks.

'I'll tell Max you said that. He thinks you like him,' I say, pretending to be cross.

We sip our drinks then head off to duty-free so that Ria can purchase a bottle of the Parma violet gin she's partial to and I can buy some Marc Jacobs Daisy that I'm running low on. Kerry buys another pair of sunglasses, confessing that they are her weakness and that at the last count she had sixteen pairs. I can't help thinking that, since we don't get that much sunshine

in the UK, you can't show them off like shoes or handbags. Unless you're a celebrity of course. Come to think of it, that's exactly what Kerry used to look like, with her long blonde hair and stylish clothes. That is, until she met Hal and had her hair chopped off and started to wear combat trousers and fleeces.

Soon our flight is showing on the departures board and we make our way through passport control and along corridors to where a queue of people are showing their tickets before boarding the plane to Crete. We have a pleasant enough flight, apart from a slight disturbance at the back of the plane, when the cabin crew had to confiscate some duty-free alcohol that a group of now rather raucous blokes had been drinking. Soon enough though, we're touching down in Crete.

The taxi ride from the airport to our hotel takes us along the city road, passing warehouses and petrol stations interspersed with roadside coach stops, until we are soon driving through small towns. The windows are down in the taxi and I feel the sultry, warm breeze on my skin as we speed along. We pass old, grey stone houses with flowers spilling from pots on balconies and shops with walls plastered with fading posters. Old men in flat caps sit outside village bars, chatting and playing dominoes, continuing traditions from many years ago. Soon enough, a stretch of beach flanked by hotels looms into view. I can't wait to be at our hotel and sipping a cocktail at the side of the pool or perhaps on a sandy beach.

The first sight of the Venus Hotel, a short walk from the beach, puts all of my worries about the bargain deal to rest; it looks absolutely stunning. It's a large, white, triple-storey building with wooden window frames and balconies outside every bedroom. Some rooms overlook beautifully manicured gardens that lead straight down to the sea, although every room will have a view of either the hotel grounds or the water.

'Oh my word, it's beautiful.' I breathe in the fresh air as a warm slice of sun peeps from behind a cloud, as if to welcome us to Greece.

As we enter the hotel, the foyer is even more impressive, with a grey marble floor and a huge chandelier centrepiece. To the right there's a sweeping staircase, covered in a red carpet, with dark wooden banisters and to the left of reception, there's a stylish bar area.

'*Kalispera.*' A handsome, dark-haired young man at a gleaming reception desk wishes us 'good evening' and checks us in before pointing us to a lift

adjacent to the desk. Upstairs on the second floor, we fling the bedroom doors open and are thrilled to find that the balconies in both of our adjoining rooms have a sea view, albeit a side sea view.

‘Oh my word, this is fabulous!’ says Molly with a squeal.

The rooms are cool and stylish, with crisp cotton bedding and modern bathrooms with huge, fluffy white towels. *Lexie would have felt right at home here*, I think to myself with a sigh.

‘I can’t believe it, Molly. You sure did get a bargain on Secret Getaways. I wasn’t expecting anything like this.’

‘What were you expecting?’

‘I’m not sure, but certainly not this.’ I quickly dispel any thoughts of rickety wardrobes and dodgy plumbing systems as I glance around the room.

I tap out a text to tell Max that we’ve arrived safely and he immediately replies saying *Missing you already. Have fun x*

Max always tells me to have fun even when I’m not with him. He’s so generous about life, hoping I will enjoy myself everywhere and with everyone and not just exclusively with him. In the past, I’d had boyfriends who were jealous of me having an evening out without them, never mind a holiday, constantly texting me throughout the evening. At first, I thought it cute and attentive, but I soon realised it was controlling jealousy. I wasn’t sure men like Max even existed until I found him.

I send a message to Lexie saying I hope she’s soon up and about, and she replies with a smiling face emoji and also tells me to have a good time.

‘Right, girls, let’s make the most of every minute. Time is precious. Who’s for the beach?’ Ria is already tossing her swimming things into her beach bag.

‘Definitely,’ I say. I can’t wait to feel the sun on my skin.

On our walk through the perfect garden, which has bursts of colourful plants and neatly trimmed hedges, we pass a gardener watering some exotic-looking plants. He nods politely as we walk past. The air is filled with a glorious scent that stirs the senses.

When we arrive at the beach, I’m delighted to find that it’s long and beautiful, covered with soft, golden sand and dotted with tavernas and beach bars. There are a few boats in the harbour; there’s one in particular I can’t help noticing, it being a party boat. We set up pretty close to a beach bar, so it isn’t long before a hunky barman heads in our direction to ask us if we would like a drink. Standing here on this beach, gazing out to sea, makes me feel

exhilarated and I wish I could capture this moment and have it with me forever. I look around and see the others have settled on sunbeds and are taking selfies.

‘Is it cocktails all round then?’ Ria asks as the hunk approaches and flashes a killer smile. I’m still staring at the sea, lost in my thoughts, when I hear my name.

‘Alice? Do you want a cocktail?’

‘What? Oh, yes, please. Pina colada, I think.’

The Greek god sweeps back his dark hair and winks before he disappears back towards the bar with our drinks order. Once there, he turns up the volume on some music until club tunes are gently pumping out across the beach.

‘What a poser,’ says Kerry. ‘If he was made of chocolate he’d eat himself.’

‘Phew, he’s a hottie!’ says Ria, staring after him. ‘I wouldn’t mind eating chocolate with him. Or off him.’

‘Ria, behave! We’ve only been here for five minutes. Anyway, I thought you were off men?’ I remind her.

Ria hasn’t dated anyone for over a year, following a couple of failed relationships.

‘Not *men* exactly. Just relationships. Things never stay as fun in long-term relationship,’ she says, with an exaggerated wink.

‘Oh, right, tell that to the girl who’s getting married, why don’t you?’ I say, laughing.

The guy from the bar returns with our cocktails and saunters back to the bar, probably thinking we are all ogling his firm backside. Which we are.

‘Besides, you and Max are different,’ says Ria. ‘Max is not a moody arsehole.’

Ria often used to tell me that she felt she was walking on eggshells with her last boyfriend, unable to gauge his mood or reactions to different situations. In the end it all became too exhausting, and the evening he sat in a sulk for hours because she had decided to cook something other than a particular meal he had been looking forward to, was the evening she called time on their relationship.

It’s true that Max is very laid-back, despite being driven in his work and great at organising things. He rarely gets angry and can light up a room with his ready smile. He’s the type of person that draws people towards him, and

sometimes complete strangers smile at him in the street, such is his magnetism. Max's organised yet easy-going approach to life perfectly sets off my slightly disorganised 'let's see what happens' attitude, which Max laughs about and says is the artist in me.

There are bronzed, lithe bodies strewn across the beds right along the beach and I feel as though I've stumbled into an episode of *Love Island*. Molly lowers her sunglasses to get a look at a muscle-bound Adonis as he slowly lifts his T-shirt over his head. The sun is warm and I enjoy the tingle of it across my skin as I settle down onto my sunbed with a book, already beginning to feel my worries wash away.

'Anyone hungry? We haven't eaten much since the plane. Maybe we could have a burger or something?' I suggest.

'Well, I wouldn't mind getting my teeth into something,' says Ria, as she eyes the Adonis.

The bar hunk returns to collect our empty glasses and we order more cocktails and burgers and fries all round. When Kerry discovers there are no veggie burgers, she shrugs her shoulders and says she'll have a 'normal' burger anyway.

'Fancy that tomorrow then, girls?' Ria asks, pointing to the blue-and-white party boat, where two guys wearing caps are leaning over the side chatting. I'm thinking it will probably be full of kids or this *Love Island* lot but why should that hold us back? This holiday is all about spending time with my friends and getting away from everything after all.

'Go on, then. As long as it's not an eighteen-to-thirty thing. I might be too old.'

'I won't be. I don't turn thirty until August. We'll check it out then. Who fancies heading towards the harbour for dinner tonight? I spotted a gorgeous-looking place on the way here.' Ria is planning all sorts of things, such is her excitement, and we've only just arrived here.

'Sounds good. Bar street after that though?' suggests Kerry, who is always up for a drink.

We enjoy our food when it arrives, along with another delicious cocktail before settling down on the sunbeds, Kerry to read under a parasol and the rest of us to work on our tans.

It's a little after seven o'clock but the sun is still warm as we pack up our

things and head back to the hotel. It seems that a few hours of the sun massaging my shoulders and a cocktail or two have done me the world of good as I can already feel their soothing effects. During those hours at the beach, just by closing my eyes and listening to the sea, or watching the people on the beach, all stressful thoughts of the wedding have dissolved.

After we've all taken a long shower, we meet in the room I'm sharing with Ria, glowing, refreshed and ready to hit the town.

Ria opens her bottle of violet-coloured gin with a flourish. 'Right! Who's for a quick one pre-dinner?'

She pours us each a drink into a plastic glass from a set that Molly thought to pack and we admire each other's outfits, three of which are colourful sundresses. Kerry, though, is wearing a cropped top and tiny miniskirt, which shows off her long, lean legs to perfection. I find I'm not too taken with the gin, and pour it into Molly's cup.

I'm glad Molly hasn't expected me to wear a wedding veil with L-plates attached to it, or something similar, as I'm not sure I would have liked all the attention, but I'm prepared to try and embrace my inner party girl... without the veil, that is.

It's just a short walk to the Apollo taverna, which is a white-painted villa surrounded by black railings. It has an upstairs seating area with a panoramic view of the harbour. Pots of plants bursting with colour are dotted about the terrace and the lights of the harbour are twinkling down below as dusk gently draws in.

As we peruse the menu, the waiter tells us about the speciality of the house, which is an oven-baked fish dish marinated in lemon and saffron. It sounds perfect so I opt for that, while the others go for a creamy moussaka. We also have a huge Greek salad in the middle of the table to pick at, along with some bread, as we wait for our main course.

'Isn't this heavenly.' Ria sighs contentedly as she peers across at the twinkling lights on the boats bobbing in the harbour. 'I wonder if you'd ever get tired of living in a place like this?'

'I'd need lots of sun hats. Oh, and a good excuse to buy more of these.' Kerry adjusts her sunglasses. 'But I think I could sit here all day long and paint that view.' She sighs as she glances at the scene.

Sitting here in the taverna, my thoughts turn to the restaurant in the mountains where Max proposed. It's actually not too far away from here, just outside Hersonissos in a little village called Koutouloufari. I'd love to return

there again with Max someday. It was definitely one of the happiest days of my life. I was taken completely by surprise when he proposed, as we hadn't been together that long, but I never felt a moment's hesitation in accepting. I stretch my hand out now and admire the engagement ring that Max bought me as an upgrade to my original ring and wonder where our future will take us. Our house back home is beautiful and has been thoughtfully furnished but I know Max has ambitions to own a larger house overlooking the park one day. I just hope that I can keep up with his plans for our life.

We finish our delicious meals and take the short walk to the busy bar street, laughing and chatting as we walk along. It's only ten o'clock but already the neon-lit bars are pulsating with music and holiday revellers out to have a good time. We pass a young couple, the woman obviously the worse for wear, having an argument with her boyfriend, who is shaking his head, which seems to ignite her fury even more. As we pass a bar, a group of English lads around our age jump behind us and take a selfie before inviting us into the busy bar for a drink. They come from the Northeast and we have a few good laughs with them. No one is drunk but we're all in high spirits. There's such a feeling of excitement in the air.

We all chat for a while longer then we say our goodbyes, declining the offer of shots and walking further along the road until the sound of 1980s music belting out, lures us into another bar.

'This is more like it. Rick Astley never gets old, does he?' I say, as we dance along to his biggest hit in a room full of people of a similar age to us. A hen party of women are wearing neon-coloured leg warmers, large hoop earrings and big hair, in homage to the eighties, and I feel relieved that Molly didn't suggest that we should wear a similar get-up.

'Literally. Have you seen him lately? He's turned fifty and looks fantastic. He's got a full head of hair and everything,' says Molly.

'It could be hair transplants. They all have them,' Ria says with a laugh.

'Rick Astley would never do that.' I shake my head at the thought. I was brought up on these songs and I remember Mum dancing around the kitchen to this particular tune. That was when she was happy.

'I once saw an actress from *Emmerdale* who was big in the nineteen seventies and she looked younger than me,' says Molly.

I'm thinking that's probably an exaggeration, although you never know.

Eventually, we head back to the hotel laughing and chatting, passing other party revellers along the way. We pass two women sitting on steps that

lead up to a church. I can see that one of them has a mascara-streaked face, while the other is swaying slightly as she speaks. It feels strange to think that the priest will quietly open the church tomorrow morning for Mass as the tourists in Malia are still sleeping. As we stroll along companionably, I feel so lucky to have such wonderful friends in my life. There's nothing like forever friends.

'Shall I book that party boat in the morning then?' asks Ria as we say our good nights. 'I'll be up early to take a morning run before breakfast. I can do it then.'

Yeah, right. I can't imagine Ria taking a run anywhere as she freely admits the only exercise she takes is up and down the stairs of the art gallery, which she insists is enough as there are dozens of them.

'If we were here a bit longer, I would have fancied a boat trip to Spinalonga,' I say. 'I read about it recently in a novel and thought it sounded interesting. A little different from a party boat excursion, which if I'm honest I'm not sure I really fancy.' The others agree, thinking it might indeed be full of teenage revellers.

When I read about the island of Spinalonga, which was used as a place of isolation for people who were suffering from leprosy, I had tears in my eyes. Among some heartbreaking scenes, sufferers identified with the disease were separated from their loved ones and sent to live on the island. Some families had tried to hide any family members with leprosy at home, but the authorities soon found out. Relatives could do no more than sail a boat close to the island and wave at their loved ones, who were not allowed any physical contact as the disease was so contagious. A whole community with doctors, shops and so on was set up on Spinalonga, and some of the islanders never saw their loved ones on the mainland again. The streets are still there and the old ruins of the houses, too, which I think would make for a really interesting excursion.

'We could always do that on the last day. We have a night flight, don't we? So we might as well make the most of the very last day.'

'Count me in,' says Kerry. 'I like a bit of history.'

Kerry always enjoyed the history of art when we were studying and if any one of us was going to end up working in an art gallery, I would have put my money on it being her rather than Ria.

Molly doesn't sound quite so enthralled about going to Spinalonga, but agrees to come along anyway.

We wind up the evening with a Greek brandy at the hotel bar and I also order a Greek coffee that, when it arrives, looks like a tiny bit of black treacle in the bottom of a cup. But I decide to try it anyway.

‘Wow, that could put hairs on your chest,’ I say, as a smiling barman hands me some water so I can dilute it.

‘Maybe not ask for Greek coffee next time,’ he advises me kindly. ‘Maybe an Americano or cappuccino.’ He gestures to a sleek coffee machine behind the bar. ‘Anyway, anything you need please ask. My name is Santos. I run the hotel with my sister.’

I phone Max for a chat before I go to sleep, and he tells me he’d been to the local pub to have a catch up with some friends.

‘And guess what? I had a late appointment with a potential investor before I joined the others at the pub,’ he tells me. ‘The guy runs a pyrotechnic company, organising events all over the Northwest.’

I’m so happy things are going well with the business, but I have a sneaking feeling I know what’s coming next.

‘So, I was thinking... What about a huge firework display at the wedding? It would be magical and would make a fantastic finale, wouldn’t it?’ His excitement is palpable even over the phone.

‘It’s a nice idea, Max, but isn’t there enough going on at the wedding already?’ I say with a sigh. I’m thinking of the band, the wedding singer – and the *Britain’s Got Talent* duo – the trip around the lake in a boat... Not to mention eighty-one guests. And now fireworks.

‘I know, but can you imagine it? The fireworks could be set off near the lake, completely lighting up the night sky. I think it would be really romantic. The photographer could video it all. Something to show our kids one day when they can watch us on the happiest day of our lives.’

Kids. It’s something that’s definitely not on my radar yet, but I know Max is keen to start a family. It’s yet another worry that perhaps we don’t have the same plans for our immediate future.

I’m mentally trying to figure out if there’s anything at this wedding that Max hasn’t thought of, but I think he has everything covered. Oh, apart from us arriving in a helicopter James Bond style. Which I don’t dare joke about, because I know if I mention it to Max, he would most certainly be happy to organise it. He did actually suggest us taking a hot-air balloon across the Lakes and arriving that way, but I gave that a firm no. A friend of Molly’s

had done something similar and ended up landing in a pigsty, when the balloon took on a mind of its own as it descended. I suppose the idea of fireworks is rather nice really and at least we're arriving at the venue in a beautiful vintage car.

'That's fine, Max,' I say eventually, imagining him punching the air and grinning. 'If you really want fireworks at our wedding, then why not?'

SEVEN

The following morning, we wake early and head down to breakfast, feasting on Greek yoghurt, honey and delicious pastries, before strolling down to the beach for a couple of hours in the sun. Today the sun's rays can already be felt from a strong sun beaming down from a clear blue sky. We take the sunbeds near the beach bar and our barman brings us cold drinks, before returning to his empty bar to chat to another man.

Suddenly my phone rings. It's Max.

'Good morning, gorgeous. What's the weather like today?'

My heart still melts at the sound of his voice. 'Glorious. Have you recovered from your night out?'

'It wasn't a late one because I had to be in work today. I don't drink much anyway,' he says, which I know to be true.

'Aren't you meant to be in work now though? Are you skiving?' I tease.

Max is usually up to his eyes in emails or organising Skype conferences.

'I *am* at work. I've just nipped outside to phone you. I can't be ringing you from the office, I'll set a bad example to the staff. I've had to tell a couple of them off for sneakily texting under their desks. That's how mistakes happen. Jay typed a letter yesterday to a Mr Munter instead of Mr Hunter. By the way, I saw your mother this morning at the petrol station,' says Max, I can't help sensing a little hesitantly.

'Oh, right. Is she okay?' I ask with bated breath, half expecting some sort of drama.

'Yeah, she's fine. She was telling me she'd bumped into your aunt Lily who's apparently moved back into the area again from Chester. She thinks that she should be invited to the wedding, now that they've made friends again.'

'Does she now?' I'm praying Max hasn't agreed to anything.

Mum and Lily had fallen out spectacularly over ten years ago just before Lily moved to Chester, with my aunt saying, 'If I never see that bitch again in my life it won't be a day too soon.' *About Mum*. I never did hear the full story surrounding their estrangement, although Dad once told me it had something to do with a brooch that had belonged to my late grandmother.

'They've made friends again? I never thought I'd see the day,' I say in surprise. 'I was texting Mum yesterday and she never said anything to me.'

'It only happened yesterday. Maybe she was trying to get her head around it all before mentioning it to you,' suggests Max.

'You haven't agreed to it have you? Without asking me?' My sense of dread is rising at not only the increase in numbers but also the thought that an invitation to Lily would certainly mean having to invite her daughter Ruth along too. All the memories of our younger years suddenly flood back into my mind.

I quite liked my aunt Lily when I was young. She always brought something for Lexie and me when she visited: a cake, a packet of sweets, maybe a magazine, that sort of thing. And I remember her always smiling.

The same couldn't be said of my cousin Ruth though. She was a troublemaker who always seemed to 'accidentally' break anything that belonged to me, including a mother-of-pearl hairbrush that was a gift from my godmother that I cherished. I pushed her over and called her a cow when she did that, and I remember the blood oozing from her grazed knee, which she laughed about at the time, but when my mum appeared she bawled her eyes out. There was a delighted smirk on her face as she stood behind my mother's back when I got into a load of trouble.

Things didn't improve as she grew older and we got into our teens. She seemed to take great delight in embarrassing me in front of whoever happened to be round at the time, criticising my fashion sense, hairstyle or whatever. As I grew older I realised that she was probably jealous of me, but at the time it hurt like hell. Lily was such a nice lady that I found it hard to believe that she and Mum would fall out over a brooch, but maybe they had never really been that close after all.

'I told your mum to speak to you first.'

'Oh well, thank goodness for that.'

It will probably cause an argument between Mum and me, but I am prepared for that rather than to have Ruth at my wedding. They say people change but I'm not so sure. And it's my bloody wedding.

‘But I did say that I don’t mind,’ he says quietly, as his voice trails off.

‘Oh great, Max! So now, if I say no she’ll say I’m the one who’s being churlish.’

Much as I love him to bits, I could strangle him at times for being far too accommodating.

‘You can’t leave family members out, not now that they’ve made up though, can you? That’s a celebration in itself. Besides, it’s only three more guests. Your aunt, uncle and your cousin. It seems she’s moved back home now after a marriage break-up.’

‘Three more guests *for now*, Max. I’m surprised you didn’t invite the bloody bloke at the petrol station.’ I’m angry with Max, although I try to calm down and finish the call on a cheerful note.

That’s eighty-four guests, I think to myself. At least it’s an even number now though. I could sit Reggie, who lived next door to Max’s old flat, on the same table as Ruth. If I didn’t like him, that is.

My mother hasn’t rung me to discuss the extra guests, but maybe she’s waiting until I get back from my hen party. Of course it’s nice that she’s made friends again with my aunt, but I can hardly invite Lily without her daughter, who, it appears, now lives with her parents. I think back to the last conversation I had with Max, when he called our wedding a celebration and told me how he wanted to show me off to everyone, which of course was a lovely thing to say. He’s excited about the happiest day of our lives and I know I’m lucky to have a future husband who thinks like this. But how on earth did we end up having a large wedding with the whole over-the-top party thing?

I wonder whether I should be feeling a little more excited as the day approaches. I’m just mulling things over, when Max sends me a picture message.

Oh, I forgot to tell you. These things will be roaming around the hotel grounds. How cool is that?

It’s a picture of peacocks. I don’t think I have any words.

I return to my sunbathing, trying not to be annoyed with Max and wondering why I have to remind myself so often that everything will be alright on the day and how lucky I am to have such an adoring fiancé.

We’re spending a couple of hours on the beach before the scorching

midday sun forces us indoors. There's not a cloud in the sky and, once again, the beach is almost deserted. There are one or two local families with young children, who are splashing about in the water, no doubt enjoying the quiet time before the party revellers surface. Children are running into the sea, squealing, as parents look on smiling affectionately. It's so beautiful here, watching the sun dancing on the water and listening to the gentle lap of the waves.

Last night at the hotel bar we had a look at some trips and, instead of the party boat, we decided to book a jeep safari today. It leaves at twelve thirty and promises a look at the 'real' Crete, with jaunts into local villages and a stop-off for lunch. I'm really excited to go off the beaten track a little and I have to confess that I'm slightly relieved that we're not going out on the party boat.

'I'd like to go on an animal safari to Africa one day, if anyone fancies it. I'd love to paint the wildlife,' says Kerry thoughtfully from the sun lounger next to me. I've no idea what suddenly put that thought into her head.

'Do you really think you would be hanging around a lion long enough to paint it?' I ask.

'Funny! I'd take some photographs, obviously, and paint in one of those canvas tents under the stars. I do love painting animals but dogs can get a bit boring sometimes. Don't tell my customers that I sometimes find painting their dogs boring, though, I might never get another commission.' Kerry laughs and then stands up to drag a beach umbrella over to her sun lounger, where she positions it to shade her body. Then she settles down to read a magazine beneath it.

As midday approaches, we pack up our things and stroll through the gardens and back to the hotel in good spirits. We go up to our rooms to get changed, before coming down again to meet the drivers outside the hotel.

There's a group of about a dozen people assembled near the hotel steps when we arrive, and four white jeeps are lined up on the road outside.

'*Kalimera*. Good afternoon. You are all ready to go?' a handsome Greek man around about my age, wearing shorts, T-shirt and a baseball cap, asks the assembled crowd. He flashes a smile, revealing dazzling white teeth that contrast with his tanned skin, and introduces himself as Vangelis.

Vangelis quickly ticks our names on a list, before informing us that one of the drivers is unavailable and asking if anyone would like to drive a jeep and follow the other vehicles. After a brief chat over insurance, Ria excitedly

offers to drive us in our jeep, which fills me with slight trepidation, as let's just say Ria could fill in for Lewis Hamilton if ever the need arose.

We get into our jeep and strap ourselves in, before Ria excitedly drives off. It isn't long before we are traversing some rough, mountainous terrain, holding on to our sun hats and emitting the occasional swear word as the jeep bounces along. Ria is whooping loudly and shouting: 'Isn't this fun?'

I hold my breath as she negotiates a particularly narrow stretch of road with the car tyres almost overlapping the edge of the mountain. Or at least that's how it feels. For a brief second I wonder whether we should have booked a day on the party boat after all.

It isn't long, though, before we find ourselves in the middle of beautiful mountains, surrounded by lush green pastures that take our breath away and make every bump in the jeep worthwhile. The jeeps come to a stop and everyone gets out to walk and look around. There's a silence up here that is so soothing, it's like nothing I've ever experienced before. A buzzard circles overhead and Molly asks me if it's a vulture, which I don't like the idea of quite so much. I find myself wanting to just stand here forever, soaking up the atmosphere and shrugging off the hectic and sometimes stressful lifestyle back home. A few houses are dotted around the mountainside and seeing them makes me wonder how it must feel not to have any neighbours close by. Would there be a sense of freedom? Or would the isolation create loneliness over time? I have an urge to unpack an easel and paint the striking scenery that stretches out in front of me, as this place fills me with such energy and inspiration.

Having taken some photos, we all jump back into the jeeps and, a while later, find ourselves pulling in to a traditional Greek village, where we stop beside a stone house to watch women wearing headscarves baking bread the traditional way. We are invited to have a go, overlooked by the clucking chickens and local donkeys who I swear are laughing at us, but maybe they're just braying. The locals make this bread-making lark look far easier than it really is, as my offering looks like an anaemic cow pat.

Next, we move on to a small workshop, where we watch some women making traditional Greek rugs and are once again invited to have a try.

'This is more like it,' I say, as, thankfully, I manage to thread a few colourful strands of wool across a loom and a toothless woman smiles at me and nods her head in approval.

'Makes up for the loaf,' I say, proudly showing off my small colourful

square, and feeling quietly confident that my effort looks far better than those of my friends.

‘Is that what it was?’ Ria says teasingly.

We each buy some colourful table mats and are given a shot of ouzo before we depart. The rugs are so striking – a rainbow of colours expertly threaded together by these lovely village women – I would have loved to have taken one home, if I’d had room in my case, but the ones on display are rather large so I go for the table mats instead.

After the village tour, we take the easy route to Roza Gorge, so named after the red-and-rose-coloured stone, and cross a rope bridge to a stunning dining area flanked by mountains and a shimmering green lake. Yet again my senses are soothed by the glorious surroundings. We are here to have lunch and experience a Greek floor show with dancers in traditional costume, which I’m really looking forward to.

‘I’m absolutely starving,’ Kerry says, glancing at her watch. ‘This really is a late lunch. I was beginning to size those goats up in the last village, imagining them in a curry, I kid you not.’

We all roar with laughter at the pun, which Kerry doesn’t even realise she’s made.

‘Don’t you just love this,’ Ria says, as we all sit down at a long wooden table ready for lunch. ‘This weather makes it all is so much more enjoyable, doesn’t it? Last year I went on a tour of Scotland and spent most of the time in pubs, sheltering from the rain.’

‘The Greeks know how to entertain tourists, that’s for sure,’ I say. ‘I mean, I know the dance thing is a bit cheesy and probably not something they do every day, but they have such a pride in their traditional way of life. It makes you think.’

‘About what?’ asks Ria as a waiter places a platter of stuffed vine leaves down on the table. This is quickly followed by a selection of mixed mezes.

‘Being content, I suppose,’ I explain. ‘Those women in the villages probably make just a little bit of money from the tour operators, but they have such a simple life that it’s enough for them. At least it seems to be. I think I envy that simplicity a little,’ I say, as I recall seeing chickens in the gardens and donkeys that are still used to transport things around the local villages.

‘I bet it’s a hard life at times, though, especially in the winter. Some of the young people probably can’t wait to get out of those villages, and to be

honest I can't really say I blame them. I would have been the same when I was young,' Ria points out. She has always preferred bright lights and big city places.

'A lot of young people in villages crave the excitement of the tourist towns, I suppose, or even a life overseas. It happens the world over. It's only human to think that the grass is greener,' Molly says.

'I'd say it's more to do with job opportunities,' suggests Kerry. 'Unless you want to be a goat herder or work on an olive farm, I imagine job opportunities are a bit limited.'

'That's true, but if only they could be made aware of the pressures and problems that come when you embrace that lifestyle,' I remind the others. 'No wonder so many young people feel a bit lost these days. It's sensory overload. There doesn't seem to be a day goes by without reading about young people suffering all sorts of mental health issues back home,' I say with a sigh.

'Alright, Socrates, that's enough of the deep thinking, although I know what you mean. Right. Shall we get some red wine?' Ria gestures to a waiter to take our order. 'Or should I say would you all like some? I'm driving so I'll save myself for a few cocktails tonight.'

Molly, Kerry and I agree on some red wine, while Ria opts for a mocktail of coconut and pineapple juice.

As we're finishing our delicious platters of mixed mezes, some dancers dressed in traditional costume appear with a loud '*Opa!*' As the music strikes up, they stroll around the audience showing off their costumes and tapping their feet to the rhythm of the song. The dancing starts off slowly as they link shoulders, before building to a dancing crescendo that has everyone in the audience whooping and clapping loudly.

A couple of the dancers make their way into the audience and take people by the hand to join in the dancing. I try to protest, laughingly, but find myself being escorted by the arm to the middle of the paved flooring that is the dance floor. I want the ground to swallow me up. I'm useless at putting myself in the spotlight and giving public displays of, well, anything really. I'm trying to make eye contact with Kerry to come and take my place, but she's chatting to someone.

We link shoulders and, as the music begins, I try my best to copy the steps, but my brain seems to be telling my feet to go in the opposite direction to everyone else. I look at Ria, who also got caught. She is a complete

natural, throwing her head back and laughing as she moves effortlessly from side to side. I do my best to join in and finally catch the eyes of Kerry and Molly, who are laughing at us and recording us on their phones, and I wonder how they got away without humiliating themselves up here.

After a few minutes I finally figure out the steps and, to my surprise, as the music gathers momentum, I find I'm actually beginning to enjoy myself. It feels so invigorating and somehow liberating, being here kicking my legs out and dancing in the sunshine with complete strangers. I'd feel far too shy and self-conscious to try anything like this back home, but over here I don't mind because I don't know anyone. Well, apart from the girls, of course.

By the end of it, I head back to the table exhilarated as the dancers receive thunderous applause from the audience. Ria walks towards the bar, chatting to a particularly handsome Greek dancer as she goes.

After lunch we all return to our jeeps, where our drivers tell us about the rest of the trip. We will drive to a nearby mountain village, where we will spend half an hour looking around before travelling to our final destination.

Our jeep climbs slowly up the twisty mountain road until, at one point, Ria misses a gear and we slide backwards for a second, which provokes screams from us all. But Ria just laughs and tells us to stop being drama queens.

When we finally park up and get out to view the mountainous scenery below us, it's hard to imagine anyone managing to live up here.

As we walk past the village houses, though, it becomes clear that the villagers are largely self-sufficient. There are chicken coops in most gardens and goats for milk and cheese. Grassy areas have trees overflowing with almonds, lemons and figs. Fat juicy tomatoes climb vines in terracotta pots on patios, alongside tubs of fragrant rosemary and oregano.

Strolling contentedly along the narrow roads in the scorching sunshine, we discover an artist's workshop down a cobbled side street next to a bakery and tiny general store. The owner of the workshop has some beautiful paintings and colourful ceramics displayed on a wooden stable door, overhung by bright pink flowers, outside his narrow shop.

We chat to the owner about his work and all purchase a souvenir of our visit, for which he is very grateful. I buy a canvas painting of a traditional Greek house, with a blue door and a cat sitting outside, which, for me, perfectly sums up the simplicity of village life here. Ria purchases a scarf and

Molly and Kerry each buy a wall plaque. The owner tells us that he teaches people to paint in a little garden, which overlooks the valley below, at the rear of the workshop.

‘How amazing. What a place to have an art lesson,’ I say wistfully. It’s a location many of us can only dream of.

He tells me that it is mainly the holidaymakers who take the lessons, mostly those with holiday homes who are staying for long periods of time throughout the year.

‘I do teach some of the locals but, as you can see, it is a very small village and people do not have a lot of money.’

I’d considered the idea of teaching art after my studies, but ended up starting the online business instead. Occasionally, I exhibit my work at Arts and Crafts fairs around the Northwest, but my sales are mainly Internet based. I’ve built up quite a collection of my paintings now, though, and one day maybe I will exhibit them in a small gallery in Formby. It’s the ideal location but the rents are just so expensive. I once thought the notion of opening a gallery nothing more than a dream, but being here makes me feel that just about anything is possible.

We stroll along, enjoying an ice cream from a kiosk, and stop to eye the stunning scenery below from a viewpoint. As I lift my eyes upwards, I see a hang-glider gently drifting across the mountain in front of us and imagine the sensation of feeling as free as a bird.

‘You know, speaking of art lessons, that reminds me,’ I say to Ria. ‘I met a lady in town last week who was talking about how her local library had closed down. They used to run watercolour painting classes there on Saturdays and she said she really missed them. It might be a good thing for the Walker Art Gallery if they were to consider running adult classes as well as kids’ classes,’ I suggest.

‘Hmm, I can’t see that happening at the moment, to be honest. There’s tons of stuff going on there already. Why don’t you think about running classes yourself?’ Ria wipes some chocolate ice cream from the side of her mouth and places the paper napkin in a nearby bin.

‘Me? I’m not sure I’d be able to stand in front of people and tutor them. My heart palpitates at the very thought of standing up in front of a class doing that.’ I envy Ria’s confidence when it comes to teaching people.

‘That’s because you’re thinking about large classes in a school or college. You could offer small classes with half a dozen people at a time or

something. There must be a slot at the local Community Centre.'

'I never thought about running small classes myself. Thanks, Ria, that might be something I should look into. The lady I spoke to said she was missing the library classes.'

We assemble at the foot of the mountain village and Vangelis informs us of our final destination of the day. We are heading off to some caves, reputed to be the birthplace of Zeus, located at the Lassithi Plateau a twenty-minute drive away, before returning to the hotel.

We're having such a good time that none of us wants the day to end. We're even becoming accustomed to Ria's Formula One style of driving. It's so different up here and around every corner is a visual feast that seems to assault the senses, from the gnarled and ancient olive trees overlooked by grazing mountain goats, to the isolated white churches that cling to the mountainside.

When we arrive at the foot of the caves, Vangelis shows us to an easy walking path, saying that the old path can be a little unsafe. It seems that the stones have been worn away over the years by thousands of tourists and are now quite slippery. There are some tired-looking donkeys at the foot of the caves – a little over 100ft high – that are there to transport people to the top, should they wish.

The sun is high in the sky and, although I'm sorely tempted, we spare the poor donkeys the trek and follow the guides up the path, slowly on foot. I ascend the hill breathing deeply and, with every step I take, begin to feel energised by the natural beauty of the wild, mountainous landscape all around me. I recall taking a hike up a mountain in Wales with Max, with me having to pause to catch my breath, and him teasing me and telling me I needed to get fit. Not long after that I bought the running shoes that are currently gathering dust in my wardrobe. Being here is a reminder of how good it feels to be at one with nature and I resolve to spend more time outdoors when I get home.

When I finally take a glimpse inside the Cave of Zeus, my breath is taken away by its stunning beauty, as a cavernous area glistening with stalagmites and stalactites reveals itself. In a small chamber the 'cradle' is pointed out to us, which is, according to legend, the birthplace of the Greek god Zeus. Large columns reflect the light and chasms of yellows and soft greens merge together inside the cave, giving it a serene, almost mystical charm.

We all enjoy the cooling respite from the sun inside the cave before carefully making our way back down the hill, having taken lots of photos. Vangelis regales us with interesting tales of mythical Greek gods and goddesses along the way.

We arrive back at the hotel a little after seven o'clock, tired but exhilarated, our clothes covered in a light film of dust from our mountain escapades.

'What an absolutely fabulous day that was. I feel as though I've been out for days exploring,' Ria says.

'I agree. It's amazing how much we've actually seen today,' I say.

'Right, I'm going for a shower. I can't wait to get ready and be out there hitting the town. Not before I've had a drink, though. Come on, girls.' Ria makes for the bar. I follow her and down a long, cold glass of fresh orange juice.

'I'm worn out,' Kerry says, yawning. 'How can sitting in a jeep all day be so exhausting?'

'It's all that fresh air. Plus, walking in the heat,' I tell her.

'Maybe. I've never really been one for walking. What's the point when you can get to places quicker in a car?' she asks me.

'Erm... exercise? Keeping fit? Saving the planet?' I suggest.

'There's less boring ways than walking. I haven't got the patience to just walk for miles knowing I could already be there,' Kerry informs us.

'It's about enjoying the experience and taking in your surroundings,' I say, but it falls on deaf ears.

'Yeah, whatever.' Kerry sighs. 'Although I really didn't mind it today because it's all so different.'

'Perhaps you should start coming on runs with me occasionally, or at least long walks. Maybe even get a dog,' I say hopefully.

'Stuff that, it's far too much of a commitment. Painting dogs is enough for me,' Kerry says, laughing. Clearly no one is going to change her mind.

'I'm feeling a bit tired, too, but I think it's because I'm actually beginning to relax,' I tell the girls.

'Bloody hell, it's like being on a pensioners' day out,' Ria says, chuckling. 'We could go to bed now, if you like, and order hot chocolate from room service.'

Walking through the hotel lobby, Kerry stops to look at herself in a

mirror and pulls strands of her hair down to her neck.

‘I was thinking of growing my hair again and maybe going red for a change, what do you think?’

‘Honestly? I think you suit blonde hair, but no harm in trying a change, I suppose. I do like it long, though,’ I tell her.

‘Anyway, come on,’ she says, threading her arm through mine as we head towards our rooms. ‘We’d better get ready for tonight or Ria might be wishing she’d brought her mother on holiday.’

‘Suppose so, but holidays are meant to be relaxing too, you know. We haven’t had a full day doing absolutely nothing yet. Which is something I adore occasionally.’

As I luxuriate in the shower, I find myself thinking about the life of the local people we met on the jeep safari. I think the man with the art gallery in the mountain village must pretty much have the perfect life. I imagine painting dreamy sunsets, or watching the sun go down with a glass of something in my hand, while overlooking the mountains from my own back garden. Would I miss my old life if I lived in a place like this? I think if I had the people I love around me then I guess the answer would be no. There’s just something about a simple life I feel I could really embrace, although Max is a city boy through and through. He does enjoy walks in the forest and picnics in the park, but he likes to return to the cut and thrust of his work and he enjoys the buzz of the city for leisure.

I’m just out of the shower and thinking about Max when he calls. He tells me he’s arranged a night at the races with some of the old gang from National Finance, where he used to work, this evening. ‘It will be nice to have a catch-up with my old colleagues,’ he tells me. ‘It might just take my mind off you not being here.’

National Finance is a high-street bank where Max worked before setting up for himself. It’s also where he met his ex-girlfriend, Rachel. They were together for two years before she left him and I know it hit him hard. I can’t help wondering if she will be at the races this evening.

‘Is it a couples thing, then?’ I ask casually.

‘I don’t think so. At least, one of the lads was saying it’s just blokes.’

For some strange reason, I breathe a sigh of relief that Max’s old flame won’t be hanging around, which surprises me slightly as I’ve never been the jealous type. Max told me that one of the things he loved about me was that I

never questioned him about his whereabouts, as it seems Rachel had been the suspicious type who would question his every move. He even caught her scrolling through his phone on more than one occasion. Little wonder that they split in the end, I suppose, although ironically it was her cheating on him that led to the break-up. I can't imagine Max and me ever being apart. I've waited a long time for someone like him to come into my life.

We're having a fabulous evening at a little taverna down a cobbled street, eating delicious fresh fish and mixed mezes and discussing our own personal highlights of the day.

'The village in the mountains for me, definitely.' I sigh as a picture of the valley below the mountain pops into my mind.

'Really? Not the Greek dancing, then?' Kerry teases as she peruses the dessert menu and moans that there's only baklava or ice cream on offer.

'Or the bread-making?' suggests Molly.

'It was harder than it looked,' I protest.

'We know, we tried a bite,' says Kerry, and the others laugh.

'I would have been alright if we'd been making pitta bread, it's easy. But that was actual crusty bread,' I say in my defence. 'Anyway, those women have been making bread all their lives. I was good at the rug-making, though.'

'Yes, I remember from uni that your cooking was terrible but you always had lovely curtains in your room,' Ria reminds me, her eyes twinkling. The others roar with laughter.

'That's not entirely fair. I'm a good baker. My chocolate brownies are the best.'

'Okay, yes, I'll give you that.' Ria nods. 'Anyway, I thought you'd be preparing to be a domestic goddess, as you're soon to be a married woman and all settled down.'

'Are you saying I should do all the cooking?'

'Not at all. But it's nice to occasionally cook a lovely romantic meal to enjoy together, isn't it?' replies Ria.

'Yep. And just so you know, Ria, that's exactly what intimate restaurants are for.'

Well, now and then, at least. I do actually like cooking, but I also like candlelight and waiter service. There's nothing sexy about dashing in and out of the kitchen, flushed and checking on the next course. It's probably why I

prefer preparing picnics. Ria's comment about being a domestic goddess makes me hope she doesn't think I'll be settling down and will stop having fun. Nobody changes like that just because they get married, do they?

We finish off our meal with baklava and ice cream for myself, Ria and Molly, while Kerry persuades the waiter to rustle up a strawberry sundae, even though it isn't on the menu.

A message pops through on my phone, which I notice is someone tagging me in a photo on Facebook. I flick to it. One of Max's friends has posted some pictures of the race night and I smile at how smartly dressed they are and how happy they all look. Max is wearing a grey suit with an open-necked white shirt. The grey suit brings out the colour of his blue-grey eyes and I think how handsome he looks. The other guys are dressed equally smartly in suits, one of them in a flamboyant mauve-checked three-piece affair.

I'm smiling at the group of friends, when one picture suddenly pulls me up short. Among the huddle of blokes is the picture I've been tagged in, mistakenly obviously, showing a pretty woman with shoulder-length dark hair standing next to Max and pulling a funny face. She's there in another picture, along with a different woman, this time with her arms draped around Max's shoulders and smiling broadly. Everyone in the group has their arms around each other as a bunch of friends would do on a fun night out, but I wonder why she has to be standing next to Max again in almost every photo? That is, until I look at the photo closely and realisation dawns.

It's his ex-girlfriend, Rachel.

'Is everything okay?' asks Kerry, probably noticing my worried expression as I top up my wine glass.

For some reason, I don't want to admit that the photo has bothered me. 'Fine. Just thinking about my mother. She's playing the martyr as usual, complaining about looking after Lexie, even though she actually invited her to stay.'

I sent Mum a text earlier to ask how she is and saying that I hope Lexie is getting to grips with her crutches. She replied telling me that she's fine, although exhausted looking after Lexie, and that it's a shame she's having to do it all by herself.

I resisted the urge to remind her that it was she who volunteered to look after Lexie, who is an adult, and who could probably look after herself a little more if Mum didn't fuss over her so much.

Max looks so happy in the photos at the races, where it seems it wasn't

just the blokes getting together after all. I find myself wondering how he felt about seeing Rachel again after all this time.

EIGHT

After our meal, the four of us wander along to a strip of bars near the beach front and I decide to put the photos out of my mind and concentrate on having a good time.

We head into a bar with karaoke and suddenly I feel like a large drink. After we have wound our way across a busy room with pink flashing lights across the dance floor, I spontaneously decide to order a porn star Martini and, after downing it, I peruse the book of karaoke songs at the bar.

‘Alice, what are you doing?’ Ria’s mouth is hanging open in surprise.

‘I thought I might get up and sing. Why not?’

The others glance at each other as if I have taken leave of my senses.

‘Alice... who hates to be the centre of attention? What on earth is in that cocktail?’ Ria says, laughing.

‘I like singing. In the shower usually, but... what the hell? I’m on holiday. No one knows me here.’ I carry on looking through the brochure until my eyes fall on a catchy dance number.

I must admit that I, too, am pretty surprised at my behaviour since I’ve been here. First it was the Greek dancing in front of an audience and now this. Yet somehow I am fired up. I need to rediscover the same sense of fun and adventure I used to have when I was at university, as for some reason that side of me has been buried of late. And after their comment about me not being fun, I resolve to show my friends a glimpse of the old Alice still lurking inside me.

I show the DJ the song I have selected and he tells me it will be around half an hour before my slot. Molly glances at her watch and says she thought we were moving on to another bar after this drink.

‘Are you kidding!’ Kerry shouts. ‘This I’ve got to see! Settle in, girls, I’ll see if I can find us a seat.’ We are scanning the rapidly filling bar, when Ria

notices a group of girls vacating a nearby booth and swiftly slides into it, earning us some snotty stares from a couple who weren't quick enough.

'Are you sure you're alright, Alice?' Molly asks.

'Why wouldn't I be?'

'It's just not like you to want to be in the spotlight, that's all.'

'Well, I'm fine. I think Ria was right about me letting my hair down once in a while and it's karaoke not skinny-dipping.' I drain my glass. 'Max told me I should try to relax.'

'And what a great place to do it,' Ria joins in. 'If you can't relax on holiday, where can you? Another cocktail, anyone?' she says, raising her glass.

The time passes quickly and soon enough the DJ is announcing my name to step up onto the stage and sing. For a fleeting moment I feel sick. I'm about to back out, but take a large swig of the blue cocktail now in front of me for Dutch courage. The sound of whooping from my friends is ringing in my ears as I step up onto the stage... and again consider turning round and making a run for it.

As the first note of the song strikes up, though, I grab the microphone and close my eyes. *It's now or never.* I have two choices, either rushing off the stage and out of the door, or I can sing my heart out to my favourite tune.

My palms are sweating as I clench the microphone tightly, yet somehow I manage to control myself and sing the opening bar. There's a silence in the room.

Oh dear God, no one likes it. This has gone ridiculously and embarrassingly tits up. What the hell was I even thinking?

But I can feel the delicious cocktail relaxing me and I carry on singing, when there's a whoop from the back of the room. Before I know it, I'm starting to get into my stride, even doing a bit of dancing. *This is fun!*

The crowd are on their feet now, going wild and singing along as I confidently belt out the familiar tune. Soon enough, the high-note finish is coming up and I take a deep breath, gathering every ounce of oxygen into my lungs for the ear-splitting top note, as the crowd go silent in anticipation.

I can do this... At least I think I can. I used to sing the Bee Gees' numbers when I was a kid, although that was twenty years ago.

My heart beats faster in my chest as the people in the room silently will me on, my friends probably cringing in the corner with their fingers crossed.

And then it's out – 'I believe in loooovvee!' – and it sounds higher than

Mariah Carey sucking on a helium balloon.

The audience is on its feet cheering and I feel about ten feet tall.

I did it!

The girls have rushed to the front of the stage and are hugging me tightly and Kerry is crying and talking about getting me an entry form for one of those talent shows.

I'm completely exhausted when I make my way back to the cubicle to have another drink.

'Oh, my goodness, where have you been hiding that voice? You were brilliant.' Ria's hands are on her cheeks. Kerry and Molly are shaking their heads in disbelief.

'I mean... you must know you can sing... right?'

I shrug, a little embarrassed now. 'I used to sing around the house and in the shower, that sort of thing, when I was young, but never really in front of anyone. Mum never remarked that I had a good voice or anything, so I never thought it was anything special.'

Ria and Kerry exchange a glance.

'Well, it is. It's bloody brilliant! Who are you and what have you done with Alice? I take back everything I said about you not being one for the spotlight!' Ria says and they all laugh.

We head to another bar called Reflex, which is pounding out dance tunes, but an hour later, just before midnight, I tell the girls I'm feeling tired out after the adrenaline rush of my impromptu performance on the stage and that I'm going to head back to the hotel, insisting they stay out and enjoy themselves. They see me safely into a taxi and tell me that they will see me later.

During the ten-minute journey, I'm smiling to myself all the way back to the hotel, and I'm still smiling as I enter reception. My grin must be infectious, as a bloke sitting alone at a table in the bar, nursing a drink, smiles back at me. He's a good-looking Greek man around my age and, at first, I don't recognise him as Vangelis from the jeep safari.

'Hello, again. Have you had a good evening?' He's wearing jeans and a white T-shirt that shows off his muscular, tanned arms. He offers me a seat beside him and I walk through to the bar and sit down.

'Hi. Sorry, I didn't recognise you for a minute.'

'Maybe without the cap.' He runs his fingers through his black, slightly

curly hair that almost reaches his neck.

‘Probably. And, yes, thanks, I had a lovely evening. I sang on the karaoke in a bar,’ I say with pride, hardly able to believe it myself.

Vangelis’s looking nonplussed, so I rattle on.

‘Which I realise doesn’t sound like something huge, but believe me it was for me. I hate being in the spotlight. I actually can’t believe I did it! Or how much I enjoyed it!’ I smile when I think of the expression on my friends’ faces as I made my way up onto the stage.

‘Then in that case I will say “Congratulations”. You conquered your fear.’ He gives me a sexy smile, which I am sure works on most of the women he meets. ‘Would you like a drink to celebrate?’ He stands up and seems taller to me than he did earlier. Or maybe I wasn’t paying much attention.

‘I think maybe I’ve had enough. A cappuccino might be nice though.’

Vangelis goes to the bar and returns with the coffee and a Greek coffee for himself. He asks if I like the hotel and I’m surprised when he tells me it was built by his grandfather.

‘My brother, Santos, and my sister run the place now. My father took over the hotel after my grandfather passed but he too died five years ago. My mother has her own career, so it was offered to the next generation to carry on the running of the hotel.’

He takes a sip of his coffee and I’m struck by how relaxed he seems. Maybe that’s what happens when you live on Crete.

‘It’s beautiful. Everything here is.’ I glance around the bar that is furnished with wooden tables and white walls covered in mirrors and pieces of art. ‘Your grandfather must have worked so hard to create such a lovely place.’

‘My brother and I helped with the refurbishment last year. It seems that many guests, although they love Greece, don’t like their accommodation too... I can’t think of the word.’ He frowns in thought for a second or two. ‘Oh, yes, rustic! Guests like their home comforts.’

‘It’s a changing world, I suppose. Do you work here too?’

‘No, I prefer the outdoor life, which is why I started the jeep tours. I tried working in the hotel for a while, and I do love talking to guests and learning their stories, but I felt restless, always yearning to be outdoors. I think I drove my brother and sister crazy.’ He smiles a broad smile and I find myself looking at his full mouth. ‘Have you been to Greece before?’

I tell him how Molly found the special deal online, and that I actually got engaged last time I came to Crete with Max.

‘Congratulations! This Max sounds like a clever person. No woman should ever say no to a proposal on this island.’ There is something slightly wistful in his voice now, which I wonder about for a second.

We chat for a while longer and Vangelis tells me he is staying at the hotel overnight. He says he has an apartment in Heraklion, but often stays over when he has had a long day on the jeep tours and doesn’t feel like driving home.

I feel completely at ease as I sit chatting to him. He tells me all about the island and its history and I, in turn, talk about my art and my life in the north of England. It’s clear from his conversation how much he loves the place where he lives, and how sure he is of his life here. I feel a pang of jealousy, wishing I was as secure and contented with my life back home.

As we finish our coffees, Vangelis hesitates before he asks me a question. ‘Do not think this inappropriate, but my hotel room has a huge balcony with the best sea view in the hotel. Would you like to come and have a Metaxa brandy as a nightcap? The view at night will not disappoint you.’

The question surprises me. I’ve just told Vangelis all about Max and that I am here on my hen party, and here he is inviting me to his room for a drink. Yet I feel strangely safe and comfortable here with him, because he’s so easy to talk to, and to my surprise I find myself accepting. Besides, the hotel is a family affair, so he’s hardly likely to try anything inappropriate.

Vangelis opens the door to his room on the second floor and I follow him inside. When he switches on the lights, I gasp. His ‘room’ is more of a suite really, with a separate lounge and kitchen area. He crosses the lounge and slides open the glass door to a huge balcony. Once outside, I can see that it really does have a breathtaking view. The sea is inky black, illuminated by the twinkling lights of the hotels, bars and restaurants that curve around the bay. The view from our rooms is pretty enough, but it’s only a side view of the sea and nothing compared to this.

Vangelis goes back inside and pours two glasses of brandy into chunky glasses, before returning to the balcony and handing one to me.

‘You weren’t kidding about this view. It’s absolutely sensational. I guess one of the perks of being family is that you get the best room, hey?’ I say, smiling at Vangelis.

‘It’s not quite the best room.’ He winks at me. ‘Are you hungry? I ate a little early this evening. I could order some room service.’

I realise that I am quite hungry, too, so I nod. ‘Thanks, that would be nice.’

A short while later, a mixed meze and flatbreads are delivered to the room. Vangelis puts the plates onto a low table in the lounge and we sit down to eat. We chat easily as we tuck into the delicious food, which includes creamy dips, sundried tomatoes and olives, and Vangelis asks me about my wedding plans. I find myself telling him all about Molly’s planning and Max and his spendthrift ways, and how the wedding arrangements are beginning to feel like a runaway train. It feels easier, somehow, to say this out loud to a stranger than to any of the girls.

Vangelis spears an olive with a cocktail stick, while frowning slightly at me. ‘Your future husband has money. He wants to spend it on a special day for you. Why do you not approve?’ He has a delicious Greek accent although his English is very good.

‘It’s not that I mind spending money, I just don’t like wasting it. You never know when it might be taken away and you’ll be left with nothing. Plus, as I said, I’m not very good at being in the spotlight. I can be a bit shy if I’m the centre of attention.’ I sigh. ‘I guess it just isn’t turning into the wedding I first envisaged.’

‘Is this the same woman who has just been singing on a karaoke in a room full of strangers?’ He raises an eyebrow, cocking his mouth in that sexy smile again.

‘I know what you mean, but they were exactly that. Strangers. I will probably never see the people I meet on holiday ever again.’

‘Some people come into your life and you hope they will stay forever. But life is full of disappointment.’

Vangelis has a faraway look as he speaks and I wonder what he is thinking. Then he smiles and focuses his soft brown eyes on me. They’re the kind of eyes you could fall right into. I give myself a mental shake. *That is, if you weren’t about to marry the love of your life.*

‘So why are you so worried about being without money? It sounds as though your fiancé is developing a very successful business.’

I’ve told Vangelis about Max’s ambitious nature and how he quickly built his new business and employed people.

‘I don’t see the need to be excessive for just one day, that’s all. *One day.* I

suppose I've always been a little cautious around money.'

'Well, they do say opposites attract.'

'We're definitely opposites. Maybe looking after my money stems from things I experienced in my childhood.'

'Most things do.' He swirls the drink around in his chunky glass before fixing his eyes on me again. 'Do you want to talk about it?'

'About the wedding or my childhood?'

'Both, if you like.'

I'm wondering why on earth I'm speaking about these things to a virtual stranger and question whether Vangelis is secretly a therapist. He seems to have this uncanny ability to look into your eyes and have you baring your soul in no time at all.

'I suppose I just remember one particular Christmas when I was a child and everything changed forever. I've never really enjoyed Christmas since. I was eight years old, sitting at home eating chocolates and watching *Home Alone* for the umpteenth time, when Mum got in, loaded down with shopping. To this day I can't watch the scene in the movie where one of the characters lets out a scream when a spider lands on him. It's freeze-framed in my mind, because it's the moment all the drama happened.'

I catch my breath for a minute and take a sip of my drink as the memory of that evening comes flooding back. The brandy has an almost immediate warming, relaxing effect.

'Anyway, I noticed a light dusting of snow on Mum's red coat and I remember racing to the window in excitement, to see thick snowflakes falling from a strange-looking orange sky. My younger sister, Lexie, was in the kitchen and almost fell flat on her face running through the hall when I called her to watch the snowflakes, which were getting bigger by the minute.

'I loved that house.' I pause as memories of a cosy winter tucked up in the warmth are mixed with bitter sadness. 'It was the second house move we'd made in five years, but this place felt special somehow. I remember Mum saying how she was going to make it our forever home, but it turned out to be the house where the arguments started. Or at least the first time I have any memories of them.'

I take another sip of the brandy, wondering what I'm doing raking up old memories from my past, yet I can't seem to stop myself. It feels like unravelling a ball of string and not being quite certain of where or when it will stop.

‘Dad would tell Mum she needed to “stop spending money like it was going out of fashion”. Mum, in turn, would tell him “not to be so tight-fisted” and “didn’t he want to make Christmas memories for his children?” He accused her of spending most of the money on clothes for herself, as she was always so beautifully turned out.’

‘Turned out?’

‘Dressed.’

Vangelis nods, his dark eyes staring at me intently. All this time he is listening to me without interrupting and I feel as if I’m talking to someone I have known all my life. It’s strangely comforting to be sitting here with this man who is almost a complete stranger.

‘Mum claimed a lot of her clothes were from charity shops and second-hand sales although, looking back, perhaps Dad would have known that Mum would never be one to accept someone else’s cast-offs. And I remember there was always an elaborate display of fresh flowers on a table in the hall near the front door. She would purchase them from the local florist, so they wouldn’t have come cheap.’

‘So, what happened on the day with the snow?’ he asks, pulling me back to the story.

‘The debt collectors suddenly arrived. I’ll never forget that snowy afternoon in December when they loaded all our belongings into a van, including the TV, which moments before I’d been watching. Mum was hysterical, screaming at the two men to have a heart as it was only a week before Christmas, but they shook their heads and went about their business. Lexie and I stood in the kitchen, hugging each other and sobbing, and not really knowing what on earth was going on.’

Vangelis says something softly in Greek. ‘That must have been so hard.’

‘Dad walked through the door to find the house stripped bare and asked my mother what on God’s earth had she done. They rowed and then he told us both to fetch our coats and any toys, which thankfully the debt collectors weren’t interested in. They’d taken our brand-new music system though, and most of Mum’s jewellery. It seems she’d racked up thousands of pounds’ worth of debt over the years, which Dad knew nothing about. I think I probably blanked that Christmas out of my mind as I grew older. We went to stay at my grandmother’s house with my father, who made our Christmas as special as he could, but our family was broken.’

‘What happened to your mother?’

‘She’d gone to stay with a friend and came to drop two presents off for Lexie and me on Christmas morning. Dad must have taken pity on her because he invited her to stay for lunch, although he could barely bring himself to look at her. He tried to make things as happy as possible for us, though, and we pulled crackers and told jokes as if it was a perfectly normal Christmas Day.

‘Dad and my grandmother did their best to be courteous to Mum, but I could sense their disgust over what she’d done. I suppose Lexie was too young to notice any sort of an atmosphere between the adults. Years later, I thought it was heartless that Dad hadn’t let us all stay in our own house that year, although there was hardly a stick of furniture in it so I suppose it would have been a pretty bleak Christmas. Plus, the betrayal was all a bit much for Dad. It turns out that Mum’s debt was huge as she’d been juggling credit cards each month until the payments had completely spiralled out of control.

‘Dad worked a seventy-hour week for months on end to pay off her debts, because he was too proud to file for bankruptcy, but their marriage didn’t survive. He told me years later that Mum had deceived him for so long that he couldn’t trust her any more. I think she broke his heart.’

‘Heartbreak is a terrible thing,’ Vangelis says quietly, nodding to me to continue.

‘Anyway, we moved into a rented flat with my mother after they split and a year or so later Mum met a man called Rex and we all moved in with him. He’d never been married and I think it was quite an adjustment for him having children around, but things were actually okay. He’s a nice enough man and he had a beautiful home in a good area so we settled in quickly. We never went without anything, as far as I can remember. But as long as I live I will never forget that Christmas when everything was taken away from us. So I guess maybe that’s why I don’t like the idea of lavishing so much money on a wedding. Or on anything, for that matter. I’d rather save than spend. Things in life can change in an instant.’

It feels so strange to have been thinking about that story, while sitting here with Vangelis and looking out at the sea. This warm night couldn’t be more different from the snowy December day I have been describing, but still, thinking about it gives me a chill.

Vangelis sits back in his chair and regards me closely. ‘But it was a different situation with your mother. She spent money that she did not have, living a false life. Your fiancé is successful in his work. Is there anything

wrong in enjoying the fruits of your labour?’

‘The voice of reason, and you’re right, of course. There’s nothing wrong with enjoying your hard-earned money, I just don’t see the need to be excessive.’

Max has put in long hours and worked hard for his money, but the thought of any sort of over-indulgence still leaves me feeling guilty and a little frightened.

‘If it is something that you feel so strongly about you should really tell your fiancé how you feel.’

‘I have tried, but he is just so generous that I don’t want to be a right old misery guts. I’m sure we’ll figure it out in the end.’ *Though right now, I don’t for the life of me know how.*

‘I’m sure you will too. Although if you like the idea of a small wedding, maybe you should go and see my mother.’

Vangelis stands up and walks out onto to the balcony.

I follow him outside. ‘Your mother?’ I ask in surprise.

‘Yes. Her name is Selena. She is a wedding registrar, although in her village she is simply known as “the wedding lady”. She conducts wedding ceremonies from her garden in the hills. It’s a beautiful place. Come over here.’

I walk over to where he is standing.

Vangelis points into the distance. ‘Her house is over there.’ He smiles, pointing west across the mountains. As he stands close to me, wrapped in the quiet of the night, I can smell his expensive musky aftershave. ‘Most of the weddings are for couples who have escaped.’

‘Escaped?’

‘Sorry, I mean...’ He taps his forehead.

‘Oh, eloped?’

‘Yes! Runaway weddings. There are no guests, only the happy couple and the witnesses. Guests are not strictly forbidden, of course, but usually it is just the bride and groom. My mother’s garden has an amazing view of the sea. Better than this one.’

A wedding garden. The idea of an intimate ceremony bathed in sunshine high in the hills of Crete sounds so romantic. It is exactly what I pictured when Max proposed in that secluded restaurant up in the hills.

‘Is it very far to your mother’s house?’

‘Not far at all. The bus outside the hotel goes almost directly there. It is

on the edge of Koutouloufari village.'

'Koutouloufari? Really? I got engaged in a restaurant up there. It's such a pretty village.'

The memory of that occasion pops back into my head once more. I can hardly believe there is a wedding venue in a garden just a stone's throw away from the place where Max and I got engaged.

'Well, you cannot miss the house. You turn right at the end of the main street and it's a short walk from there. It is painted in a soft pink. Everyone knows the wedding house.'

'That is exactly the kind of wedding I would dream of.' I sigh. 'Just Max and me. I'm not sure how that would go down with the rest of the family though. Or even with Max. Maybe everyone would think me a little selfish.'

I can imagine my mother's reaction if I told her that Max and I were eloping and nobody was invited to the wedding. She'd probably never speak to me again.

'And is your wedding about you or about everyone else?' Vangelis turns to face me.

There's that voice of reason again.

'I know what you mean, but I just think so many people would be genuinely disappointed if they didn't see us get married. Especially my close friends and family, although a family member eloped a few years ago and, as far as I know, nobody fell out with them.'

'And why would they? The important people in your life would surely respect any decisions you make about your own wedding.'

'Maybe. And it might be a bit of a daydream but, even so, I think I'd like to go and take a look at your mother's house tomorrow. I'd love to go back and visit Koutouloufari again anyway. Do you know how often the buses are?'

'Every hour. Although, as I am staying here at the hotel tonight, I could take you there myself after breakfast in the morning, if you like. My mother will be delighted to see me. She tells me I never visit her often enough.'

I'm thinking that most mothers probably say the same thing to their sons.

'In that case, yes, thank you. It won't do any harm to have a look, will it? And gosh, I'm sorry about all the unburdening this evening. I never imagined I would be talking about my miserable childhood Christmas. I hope I haven't depressed you.' I force a smile.

'Not at all. It's not the only thing we have spoken about this evening.'

Besides, I'm flattered that you felt able to tell me about such things.'

I haven't spoken to anyone, other than Max, of course, about the day of the eviction from our house, as I feel embarrassed about it all, even though I was only a child. I'd buried those memories deep in my subconscious, afraid of the emotions they would evoke if I spoke about them. Sure enough, suddenly I'm struggling to hold back tears that spill from my eyes.

'I'm sorry, I feel so stupid.' I brush away the tears.

Vangelis walks wordlessly to a bedside table and returns with some tissues. I'm so embarrassed I can barely look at him.

'Don't be sorry. Sometimes strangers are the best people to talk to. You can speak your mind, knowing that you are not going to be betrayed in some way in the future.'

'That's true. It's been really good to talk to you, but I think I should go now,' I say, stifling a yawn. 'If the girls are back they'll be wondering where on earth I've got to.'

I'm feeling so comfortable here, talking, that I think I would be happy to sit here until the sun comes up, but maybe it's not such a good idea.

'You're a grown-up. Surely it's up to you how you spend your time.' He locks eyes with me and I think how dangerous this situation could be if either of us wanted it to be.

We chat for a while longer and I tell him about my friends and how we all met at university where we studied for a fine arts degree. Vangelis tells me he thinks it must be wonderful to be blessed with a talent and doesn't think he has one... he is obviously not counting charm and good looks. When I eventually glance at my watch I'm shocked to see that it's almost four o'clock in the morning.

'It's nearly four o'clock! That can't be right, can it? And to think I came back to the hotel for an early night!'

The hours have flown by and I'm worried that the girls will be back in their rooms and wondering where I've got to.

I pick my bag up from the table and make my way towards the door feeling very tired, yet strangely calm and relaxed. This guy should do Reiki or some sort of emotional healing. He could make a fortune.

He walks me to the door and I can feel his strong presence next to me. Something very strange seems to be happening to me here this evening. It's as if I've been hypnotised in some way, because I feel as though this man could ask me to do absolutely anything and I'd agree to it. Which is exactly

why I need to get out of his room.

‘I had intended to have an early night too.’ Vangelis covers his mouth as he lets out a yawn. ‘It shows you what good company can do. I imagined a night alone watching a movie, and instead I had the enchanting company of a beautiful woman.’ He holds my gaze and again I feel the heat rising in my cheeks.

As Vangelis opens the door, a giggling group of people can be heard making their way upstairs. I tell him I will see him in the morning and he steps forward and gives me a friendly good-night hug... just as Molly appears at the top of the stairs, closely followed by Ria and Kerry. She’s swaying slightly as she squints her eyes, before finally focusing them in on me.

‘Alice? What are you doing here? I thought you’d be fast asleep by now,’ Molly slurs, her eyes narrowing slightly.

‘Alice? Is that really you?’ asks Ria, sounding surprisingly sober.

Kerry is giggling as she almost loses her footing on the top stair before stumbling onto the landing with a thump.

‘I think it’s perfectly clear what she’s been doing.’ Molly wags her finger at me. ‘What else would you have been doing, leaving a man’s bedroom at this hour?’ She’s swaying slightly from side to side.

‘What! Are you serious?’

Vangelis has closed the door to his room and I walk towards the girls, stunned that Molly could suspect me of cheating on Max. I’m about to protest my innocence, but she gives me a dirty look and staggers off in the direction of her bedroom.

‘Alice,’ squeals Kerry, who is on her feet again and moving towards me. She throws her arms around me and wraps me in a hug. Over her shoulder, I see Ria standing silently behind her.

‘Oh God, Ria, Molly thinks I’ve been up to something,’ I whisper, at the same time as extracting myself from Kerry’s hug. ‘I’ve just been chatting to a bloke I met in the bar downstairs and the time just ran away. His name’s Vangelis and he was one of the drivers on the jeep safari.’

My heart is hammering in my chest, imagining how it must have looked to Molly. I came home hours earlier than everyone else, saying I was tired, yet I’ve been sitting up half the night chatting to a perfect stranger, who she sees hugging me outside his bedroom door.

‘Ria, I need to speak to her. There was nothing going on.’ I make an attempt to follow Molly down the corridor, but Ria lays a hand on my arm.

‘It’s best not to tonight. Molly’s completely out of it. She’s been hammering the shots all night. She probably won’t remember a thing in the morning. And you don’t need to explain anything to me. I believe you.’ She smiles at me warmly as we link arms and head to our room along the corridor.

I suddenly feel so foolish and wonder what on earth I was thinking. All of the calm of the night has vanished.

Kerry distracts me, though, by linking up with my free arm and singing all the way to the bedroom. ‘What time is it? Why did we have to come home so early? I’m ready to *paaarrtty!*’ she cries, throwing her arms in the air.

A woman opens a bedroom door and tells her the time and to be quiet before slamming it in annoyance.

‘Ssh, Kerry, it’s four in the morning. You’ll get us all thrown out.’

Ria steers Kerry towards the door of the bedroom that she is sharing with Molly, to find the door is open and Molly is sprawled on the bed, fully clothed and already out for the count. We say our good nights to Kerry and go next door to the room Ria and I are sharing.

I’m overcome with exhaustion and climb into bed, although Molly’s accusations weigh heavily on my mind. I wonder what *I* would think if I saw Max walking out of a woman’s room at that hour of the morning? And can I deny that I find Vangelis attractive? Should I be noticing other men’s physical attributes when I’m about to get married? Not that anything would have happened, even if he’d wanted it to, which he obviously didn’t, as he behaved like a perfect gentleman.

‘There was nothing going on there, you know,’ I find myself saying out loud.

‘I’ve told you, there’s nothing to explain. Although, if you were thinking of having one last fling I wouldn’t have blamed you. That guy was hot.’ Ria is removing her make-up with a wet wipe.

‘Was he? I honestly never even noticed. He was just good to talk to.’ My fingers are crossed under the sheet, but I can’t help the guilt I’m feeling.

‘I’m teasing. Now get some sleep.’

As I close my eyes, I have an overwhelming urge to ring Max just to hear his voice. But it’s the middle of the night and he’d probably think it was strange of me anyway. A tiny part of me feels disloyal that I’ve told a perfect

stranger some things about my childhood. But perhaps Vangelis was right. Maybe it is easier to vent to complete strangers. I think about tomorrow morning and decide to take the bus to the wedding house, rather than accept a lift with Vangelis. This is something I need to do alone.

NINE

‘You’re quiet today,’ Kerry comments, as we sit in a local taverna eating cheese-and-ham toasties and drinking frappés. We missed the hotel breakfast this morning, because none of us surfaced until after eleven o’clock. Four blokes, whom I recognise from bar street as the lads from Newcastle, are on the next table, each having a full English breakfast and a pint of lager. They wave at us when they recognise us and inform us that a party boat is leaving at two o’clock from the beach, if we fancy it.

I’m not the only one who is quiet this morning, but I think Kerry is just trying to make conversation and lighten the mood. Molly has barely looked at me. Her face is hidden behind huge sunglasses, possibly to avoid eye contact with me, but maybe I’m being paranoid because she’s probably just hung-over.

I’m also tired, but that’s because I tossed and turned for what was left of the night, wondering why I felt like I’d betrayed Max somehow in chatting to Vangelis, even though it was all perfectly innocent. Is it really so wrong to talk to someone through the night just because they happen to be male? Would eyebrows be raised if I had been chatting to a woman I’d met that evening?

Or maybe I feel guilty because of how Vangelis made me feel. He was such a good listener and I remember feeling lighter afterwards, as if a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. That was until I saw the girls in the corridor returning to their rooms. I’m not sure what Molly is thinking now, and if or how she will relay what she saw to Max.

Then of course those photos of the race night were playing on my mind, also preventing me from sleeping. Obviously, they’re out there for all to see on social media so Max has nothing to hide, yet I still feel slightly uncomfortable. Did Rachel decide to go on the night out at the last minute or

was she going all along? The friends looked so happy together and Max did tell me honestly that he was pretty cut up about it when Rachel called things off....

But that was three years ago. And isn't Max now in the middle of arranging a wedding to rival Meghan and Harry's? I give myself a stern talking to and tell myself to stop being so silly.

Then a thought occurs to me. Surely Max wouldn't have invited these colleagues, including Rachel, to the wedding, would he? I have an urgent need to speak to him, so I leave the table and stroll outside to call him.

Max answers on the third ring.

'Hi, beautiful. I was just about to phone you. How's the holiday going?'

'It's going well, thanks. Missing you, though.'

We chat for a few minutes and I have an overwhelming urge to tell him about my evening chatting to Vangelis, but then think better of it, as it might seem like I'm making an issue of something that was completely innocent.

I hate how much I'm overthinking this.

'I saw some pictures on Facebook of your race night. Did more people turn up in the end than expected?' I ask, of course referring to the two women in the picture.

My fingers are crossed that he will tell me about Rachel straight away.

'Oh yeah, Rachel and Kaz turned up in the end. We had a good laugh.'

'Rachel... as in your ex, Rachel?' I'm trying hard to keep my tone neutral and suppress a feeling of jealousy, which is so alien to me, but I can't seem to help myself.

'Yeah. She was just part of the work gang. She works in Leeds now but was in Liverpool that weekend, to see her mum, so thought she'd catch up with the old gang...'

Including her old flame, who's done very well for himself since the days at National Finance, I can't help thinking. And she's hardly just part of 'the work gang'; she's the ex who broke his heart...

'What's up? You're not jealous, are you?' asks Max, tapping into my thoughts.

'Should I be?'

'No, of course not! Hey, what's this all about? I'm missing you like crazy and counting the days down to our wedding, remember? This is not like you, Alice. Is everything alright?'

I take a deep breath and ask myself why on earth I am behaving like this.

‘Yes, sorry. Maybe I was a teeny bit jealous seeing a photo of your ex with her arms draped around you. It just took me by surprise, that’s all.’

‘Well, it’s not like you to question me like this,’ he says coldly.

‘Like what?’

‘All possessive. I don’t know what’s got into you.’

‘Got into me? So you don’t think I should have anything to say about photos being splashed over social media of my fiancé cuddling up to his ex while I’m out of the country?’

‘Cuddling up to...? What the hell are you talking about?’

I hate feeling this way and don’t know what’s made me feel so suddenly insecure. I know that Max loves me. I also recall how he hated the jealous streak in his ex.

‘Alice,’ Max says seriously. ‘It was just a fun kind of night. Surely you know how much I love you?’

‘Of course I do. I’m sorry,’ I say, wishing I could take back every suspicious word.

Max tells me the gang were all asking about the wedding plans in an attempt, I feel, to steer the conversation away from Rachel and my uncharacteristic feelings of insecurity. Talk of the wedding plans prompts me to ask him a question.

‘Max, I have to ask, you haven’t invited anyone else from race night to the wedding, have you?’

‘What? No, of course not. Well... apart from Jay and Kim, but they’ve been on the guest list from the word go.’

‘Oh, yes, of course, I’d forgotten. That’s okay. Oh, I can’t wait to see you, Max.’

‘Me too,’ he says softly. ‘Now, go and enjoy your time with the girls. I’ll see you in a couple of days.’

‘It’s a late flight, remember? I probably won’t arrive home until around midnight.’

‘I’ll wait up. I can go in to work a little later in the morning. I’m the boss, remember!’

‘If you say so. I’ll see you soon then. I love you.’

‘You will. And I love you too, Alice.’

Back at the table, there’s an uncomfortable atmosphere between Molly and me and I’m now certain her coolness has nothing to do with being hung-

over. I resolve to find a moment to talk to her about last night before the holiday ends.

Vangelis had probably gone about his day when he realised I wasn't around this morning to take him up on his offer of a lift to his mother's house. I never noticed him in the hotel reception as we headed out to the taverna for a late breakfast, so maybe he had a lie-in himself. Maybe he has shrugged off our chat last night and simply got on with his day, not giving our evening together another thought. Somehow I don't think so, though. I felt like we had a genuine connection yesterday.

I tell the girls where I'm going and, as they walk off to the beach, I leave the hotel and cross the road to the bus stop. Once there, I get chatting to a young couple from London who are going to a secluded cove they discovered a few days ago. They look so happy together, smiling constantly with their hands interlocked, and I think of Max. As the bus comes into view, I'm wondering if we look this happy together.

The three of us climb on board and the bus rattles along the coast road, passing hotels where people can be seen floating on brightly coloured lilos and lounging around hotel pools, heading towards Hersonissos. As the bus crawls out of the strip of restaurants overlooking the sea, it stops at the foot of a slight hill that leads up to the village of Koutouloufari.

I climb down from the bus and grab a bottle of water from a street kiosk, then take the short walk up the hill as the sun climbs higher into the sky. Throngs of people are heading downhill in the opposite direction, en route to the beach, many carrying inflatable swimming aids.

As I approach the village, pretty restaurants with blue-painted window frames, and flower-covered shops, loom into view. A pretty ginger cat greets me as I reach the main street and I soon find myself walking past the hotel where Max and I stayed on our holiday. I recall how thrilled I felt being engaged, constantly stretching my hand out to admire the ring on my finger. We spent long, lazy mornings in bed displaying a 'do not disturb' sign for the cleaner, who we could hear clanking her bucket along the hotel corridor and probably cursing us because she'd have to return later to clean our room. We ate breakfast (when we finally made it out of bed) on our balcony and had dinner at intimate candlelit tavernas, and I thought I would burst with happiness.

I continue my walk along the road, passing gift shops displaying postcards outside on stands, and it isn't long before I'm at the end of the

cobbled street. The Acropolis taverna on the right-hand side is the restaurant where Max proposed to me, and I glance at the vine-covered outdoor space that is already quite full with customers. A waiter is serving food to a table and I recognise him as the man who serenaded us on the day of our engagement. It feels so strange to be standing here, reminiscing about our engagement, without Max by my side.

As I leave the main street, I turn right, as Vangelis instructed, and walk on for five minutes, glancing around for the pink house, which can't be very far away. The grassy roadside is covered with smatterings of pungent rosemary and wild purple flowers and, in the distance, olive groves stretch as far as the eye can see.

As I round a slight bend in the road, I suddenly stumble across a house painted in the softest pink, and catch my breath. The front garden is overflowing with violet and red poppies and wild irises. I make my way towards the house before coming to a shuddering stop. What on earth will I say when I get there? Is it really acceptable to turn up unannounced at a stranger's house like this?

I'm so unsure about what to do next that I'm considering walking back down to one of the restaurants for a drink, when I hear a voice behind me. It's Vangelis. He's pushing a wheelbarrow and is wearing shorts and a vest and looks a bit like a Greek god.

'So, you made it, then?' He has a broad smile on his face. 'I thought you might still be sleeping.'

'Vangelis, hi! What are you doing here?' I'm shocked to realise that my heart seemed to miss a beat when I laid eyes on him. *Thank God I never blush.*

'I never saw you at breakfast but I decided to visit my mother anyway. Perhaps she is right in saying I do not visit her often enough.' He shrugs.

'I can see she keeps you busy when you get here.' I gesture to the wheelbarrow full of scorched yellow grass and weeds.

'Always. There are so many jobs to do around the house and in the gardens, of course. She has a gardener who comes in, but I think she tells him to leave some of the work for her sons.'

I fall in step beside him as he pushes the wheelbarrow to a compost heap, before setting it down.

'As luck would have it you have arrived on a good day. There will be a wedding here shortly. Come, I will introduce you to my mother.'

He leads me to the dark, wooden front door of the house, which contrasts beautifully with the pink walls. As we step inside, a small, pretty, dark-haired woman, dressed in a blue floral dress, greets us in the hallway and introduces herself as Selena.

‘*Kalimera.*’ She takes my hand and shakes it warmly. ‘You must be Alice. My son has told me all about you.’

I don’t quite know how to interpret her words, but she has a warm smile and soft brown eyes just like her son.

‘Would you like some fresh lemonade? I know the bus stops at the very bottom of the hill. It’s quite a walk on a day like this.’ She is so welcoming that I find myself envying Vangelis for having such a warm, caring mother.

I gratefully accept her offer of a drink and she leads me into a vast kitchen. The walls are lined with pale wooden cupboards and there’s a huge table at the centre of the room. A cream jug full of wild flowers sits on a windowsill that overlooks part of the garden.

Selena tells me that today there will be two weddings at the villa: one in about twenty minutes, and the other in the late afternoon. While I finish the cool, zesty lemonade, she glances at her watch and invites me to take a look around outside.

Opening the patio doors from the kitchen, we turn left along a short gravel path until I suddenly find myself in a vast, rambling garden. I clasp my hand over my mouth as the view in front of me is absolutely stunning. Bright red, yellow and mauve flowers are blooming all around the garden, interspersed with long reeds. At the centre of the garden is an old tree with gnarled branches, yet sprouting pretty, pink-coloured flowers.

‘That is the chaste tree,’ Selena tells me, when she catches me staring at the tree.

‘The chaste tree? What an intriguing name.’

‘The flowers were said to be crushed into a tea to help decrease the sexual urges in monks. Or at least taken as an aid to lower their libido to help them to remain celibate.’ She has a cheeky grin on her face as she almost whispers the words.

‘Really? How... fascinating.’

‘Although, interestingly, it is said to have the opposite effect on women, acting as an aphrodisiac.’ She raises an eyebrow and grins.

At the end of the slightly sloping garden is a pretty, white, flower-covered archway and, as we approach it, I notice that a table has been set beneath it,

covered with a white cotton cloth and set with a vase of mauve-coloured flowers. Two glass flutes are sitting on a silver tray and Selena tells me some champagne is chilling in the fridge for later. As we walk along the garden, with me taking in every inch of it in wonder, the scent of heady blooms fills the air.

‘This is just incredible.’ Standing under the flower-covered archway my breath is taken away, once again, as my gaze falls beyond the garden and I spot the shimmering sea below. It’s the most exquisite place for a wedding and at this moment I just wish that this simple, beautiful garden could be the wedding venue for Max and me.

‘It’s quite something, isn’t it?’ Selena says, noting my obvious admiration. She proudly surveys her garden and the glorious scene beyond, where tiny fishing boats can be seen bobbing on the water.

‘It’s unbelievable. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a more beautiful wedding venue.’ My senses are stirred and I have an urge to sketch my surroundings, when a thought pops into my head.

Cavendish House back in the Lake District, despite its grandeur and carefully trimmed topiary hedges, cannot compare to the natural beauty of Selena’s garden. The thought of two people exchanging their vows in the serene beauty of this place completely fills my heart with love. I can’t help thinking of the scale of the celebration that Max has planned for us and once again feel completely torn. Our families would probably think I was selfish coming to a place like this to exchange my vows with Max, yet somehow it just feels so right here. I wonder whether everything happens for a reason, including my coming to Crete and meeting Vangelis. What were the chances of running into someone whose mother conducts weddings from her garden in the hills? It’s the stuff of dreams to me.

‘Maybe you could be a witness at the wedding today,’ Selena suggests. ‘Usually it is me and one of the villagers. But earlier today I asked Vangelis. If the couple don’t mind, I’m sure you could do it. Weddings aren’t really your thing, are they, darling?’

She smiles affectionately at her son as we stroll back up the garden towards the house and I find myself wondering why Vangelis doesn’t like weddings.

TEN

I am seated near a window in the kitchen, enjoying a cold drink, when I hear the sound of a car. Glancing out of the window, I see a young Greek couple getting out of a taxi. The bride is wearing a long, simple cream dress edged with lace and the groom is wearing a blue suit over a white open-necked shirt. As they walk closer, I notice the bridal bouquet is made up of an assortment of pretty wild flowers rather than an expensively put-together bouquet from a florist. The couple are smiling at each other and, as they approach the house, I see that the bride has a slightly rounded belly.

Selena has changed into a white blouse beneath a formal two-piece navy suit with a silver brooch on the lapel. She walks outside to welcome the couple warmly into her home. They glance in my direction, then nod, and I presume Selena has just told them that I will witness their marriage today.

‘Actually,’ I whisper to Vangelis. ‘Would you mind being the witness after all? There’s something I would quite like to do.’

Vangelis shrugs his shoulders and agrees to my request and I go to tell Selena about the change of plan and to ask her if she has any paper. She goes to a writing bureau in the lounge and removes a piece of good quality plain paper from a drawer, which she presents to me with a curious frown.

‘I’d like to sketch the couple as they make their vows,’ I explain. ‘Vangelis will witness their marriage, as you’d originally planned. That is, if it’s okay with you and them.’

Selena speaks to the couple and then confirms that they agree to my idea, and I follow the small procession outside. I take a seat beneath an olive tree, just out of sight of the couple, and take out my trusty small tin, containing pieces of charcoal, from my shoulder bag. I sketch the couple beneath the beautiful flowered archway as they say their vows, all the time thinking how simply stunning and happy they both look. My eyes are almost filling up as

they hold each other's hands and the groom slides the ring onto his beautiful bride's finger. I sketch the chaste tree in the background and hope that they will live happily ever after.

I scribble the date onto the finished sketch, alongside a little heart, and, as we all share a glass of champagne, which Selena had provided for a toast, I pass the drawing to the bride.

'A little memento of your day here. Congratulations to you both,' I say, letting Selena translate my words for them.

The bride takes the drawing in her hand and a single tear falls down her cheek.

'*Efharisto*. It's beautiful.' She squeezes me in a hug and I can smell her fresh, rose-scented perfume.

'That really is very good.' Vangelis is looking at the drawing. 'I see you are talented as well as beautiful.'

Selena looks at her son and jokingly wags her finger at him. 'Please excuse my son. He can be very charming. Although maybe he should not be to a woman who is looking for her own wedding venue.'

The couple sign the wedding certificate and the bride asks Selena if she would take a few photos of them from her mobile phone. Selena snaps away, guiding the couple to various parts of the garden, and they seem thrilled when they scroll through the shots and smile happily as they view the photos taken among the flowers, by the chaste tree, and with the sea in the background. Before they leave, Selena pops into the lounge and returns with an empty picture frame.

'Here, let me.' She takes the drawing from me and places it carefully into the wooden frame before handing it back to them.

'*Teleios*,' says the bride, which Selena tells me means 'perfect'.

The couple tell Selena they are going for a meal at a little taverna just out of town. They are about to order another taxi when Vangelis offers them a lift to the restaurant. Apparently it's not on the high street, but a little off the beaten track, a mile or two away. It's as though the couple are seeking complete privacy for their nuptials, and I reflect on how everyone's idea of a perfect wedding is completely different.

Now I find myself beginning to wonder whether Max is right. Maybe a wedding *should* be a huge celebration of two individuals' love for each other, watched over by their loved ones. Would I regret it for the rest of my life if I were to exclude those closest to me?

As the couple thank Selena once more and leave with Vangelis, I walk back into the garden with Selena.

‘So, you have seen the wedding ceremony here. Even though it is a beautiful location the ceremony takes no time at all. Some people even feel it is a little rushed. You must think carefully. Would you like your wedding vows to be over so quickly?’

The honest answer is, I’m not so sure.

‘Did the bride and groom have any family?’ I ask, hoping my curiosity isn’t inappropriate.

‘You may have noticed that the bride is pregnant. It’s barely noticeable, but definitely there. Her parents didn’t want to attend her wedding. They said she has brought shame on the family.’

‘*What?* Oh no, the poor girl. I’m surprised that people would be shocked by that in this day and age.’

‘Truthfully, maybe many people would not be. But she comes from a strict Greek Orthodox family who live in the largest house in a small village. The bride’s family have quite a bit of money. Her father owns an olive oil factory, whereas the groom is a simple goat herder. The bride’s parents were opposed to the romance from the beginning.’

It’s hard not to feel sorry for the couple. Having seen them together, it is so obvious that they are in love. It must have broken their hearts not to have their families present on their happy day. I hope the bride’s parents come round in time, as surely they will not want to miss out on the chance to see their grandchild grow.

Chatting to Selena, I discover that she has been a widow for five years and I can’t help wondering whether all these weddings ever make her think about finding love again. Or maybe she found her one true love in life in Vangelis’s father and would never consider being with another man.

I ask Selena some questions about the legal aspect of the wedding and she tells me that most of the correspondence can be done via email and hands me a card with her business details.

‘Thank you for this and thank you so much for showing me around today. I feel so lucky to have been able to watch a wedding. It was beautiful, it all just felt so special,’ I tell her.

‘You are most welcome. Now, would you like to stay for a spot of lunch? I have some homemade spanakopita in the fridge. My son will be back shortly.’

I think I can think of nothing nicer than having lunch here with Selena and Vangelis, and feta-and-spinach pie is one of my favourite Greek foods, yet all the same I decline Selena's kind offer.

I want to be alone with my thoughts for a little while. Watching the couple marry today has made me look forward to marrying Max even more, so why do I feel something I can't explain when Vangelis is around? He has something about him that is so captivating. I was surprised by how happy I felt when I saw him today and realise I need to put some distance between us and concentrate on my forthcoming wedding to Max.

'Please say goodbye to Vangelis for me. I'm so happy I ran into him or I never would have known that the wedding house exists.' I hope he won't think me rude for disappearing before he returns but, then again, I never made any promises to stay.

Selena shakes my hand warmly and I thread my bag over my shoulder and head out into the warm sunshine.

ELEVEN

Walking back towards the village, my thoughts turn to the happy couple once more and I hope they are enjoying their wedding meal alone. Along the way, I absorb the serenity of my surroundings, strolling once again past the wild, overgrown grasses on the roadside with bursts of colour from wild flowers. As the scent of wild thyme fills my senses, I breathe deeply, enjoying the tranquillity of the area. I've just been popping into a few of the shops I remember from last time I was here when my mobile phone begins to ring in my bag.

It's Max.

'Hi, gorgeous. How are you?'

It's so lovely to hear his voice, I feel an immediate sense of calm wash over my troubled mind, and I'm relieved that the tension in our last conversation is behind us.

'Max, hi! I'm just out doing a little shopping. Would you believe I'm in Koutouloufari? I walked past the restaurant where you proposed earlier. I wish you were here with me.'

I know in this moment that I would like nothing more than to be having lunch here with Max and sharing a cool, crisp bottle of wine with him.

'Aw, so do I. What are you doing up there? Are you showing the girls the place where I proposed?' I can picture Max smiling.

'I came alone, actually. The girls have gone to the beach, but I didn't fancy it today. I wanted to do a little shopping and I remembered there were some cute little gift shops here.'

I decide not to tell Max about the wedding house, with its beautiful garden, until I get home. And who knows? Once I'm back in England all thoughts of getting married here in Crete may fade into the distance. It's easy to be seduced by things on such a beautiful island. As things stand, so many

people are expecting to share in our special day, and we've already sent out the invitations so it would be a real upheaval to change our plans now.

Max's voice interrupts my thoughts. 'Well, don't forget to bring me a jar of good olives like those ones we ate non-stop at that little taverna near the beach. Anyway, would you believe your mum has invited me to dinner at her house tonight? She rang me this morning and said that she's making her cheesy-topped shepherd's pie.'

It's rare that Mum even invites us over for dinner together, so I'm surprised to hear she's invited Max on his own. I suppose it's rather nice that she's looking out for him.

'You don't have any late appointments, do you? Don't want Rex ending up in A & E again from eating too late,' I remind him.

'I've actually got an early finish, which makes a change, doesn't it? My last appointment's just after four o'clock, although I've got a couple of early ones the next morning. And you know I can't resist your mum's homemade food. There isn't a problem with me going, is there?'

'Yes, I know you can't resist her food! Sometimes I wonder if you're only with me to get access to Mum's macaroni cheese. Go and enjoy yourself, Max. I'm sure Rex will be glad of some male company.'

'I will do. And I might go and have a drink in the village after that with a couple of the blokes from the bank.' He pauses. 'And I should tell you that Rachel stayed an extra night before heading back to Leeds, so she might join us. I know you were upset that she was with us at race night, but I got over her years ago, Alice. And you know I'd much rather be sitting in a taverna, sharing a bottle of wine with you.'

My heart sinks, but I try to remain upbeat. 'I'd love to be doing that, too. Thanks for telling me, Max. You enjoy your night out and I'll be home before you know it. We can go to the Greek restaurant in town. Not quite the same, I know, but the moussaka there is fantastic.'

'Oh, yes, that chicken dish in tomato sauce and ouzo for me, every time. And a bottle of Mythos.'

'It's a date. But, don't worry, I won't call it a date night.'

The term 'date night' irritates Max, as he says surely it's natural for couples to go on nights out together, and why does everything have to be given a name these days?

When we finish the call, I tell myself to get a grip. Maybe wedding nerves are getting to me after all, because I'm starting to feel paranoid about

just about everything. Why can't I just relax and be happy?

As I'm coming out of a little deli with Max's olives, lost in thought, I hear the *toot toot* of a car horn.

Vangelis pulls up beside me in a black coupé. 'Are you alright, Alice? You did not wait.' His hair has tousled slightly in the breeze from the car and he's wearing a look of concern beneath his sunglasses.

'Wait for what?' I reply a little tersely, which I regret instantly.

Vangelis removes his sunglasses and regards me closely. 'I thought you would have waited until I returned. Has something upset you?'

'No, sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. I just feel a little stressed, which should be impossible in a place like this.' I breathe deeply as I take in my surroundings and try to centre my thoughts.

The main street of the village is round the next bend, so I decline a lift and carry on walking, while Vangelis crawls his car beside me. Once parked up, he offers to take me for a drink in one of the tavernas, which have begun to get busy, and despite having resolved to keep my distance, I find myself accepting. What harm can a cooling afternoon drink do?

We take a table near some railings, which overlook the gently sloping road that heads down into Hersonissos. A middle-aged man, wearing checked shorts and a pink T-shirt, has stopped halfway down the road and is taking a long glug of water from a bottle.

A pretty waitress approaches our table and addresses Vangelis personally, before disappearing with the drinks order. She reappears a short while later, with two large bottles of Mythos beer accompanied by ice-cold glasses and a small dish of pistachios.

'Are you hungry?' Vangelis lifts a menu from the middle of the table.

I shake my head.

'Well, I am. I was looking forward to some lunch at my mother's house; she makes the best spanakopita. We could have taken it into the garden with a salad and a nice cold glass of wine.'

Honestly, it's not like I stopped you from having lunch.

'Sorry, you go back if you want to.'

Once again, I can hear myself sounding ever so slightly rude and it doesn't go unnoticed.

'Okay. What has happened?' Vangelis takes a long drink of his beer before putting his elbows on the table and resting his chin in his hands. His

warm brown eyes are staring at me across the table, giving me the kind of look that threatens to have my innermost thoughts spilling right out of my mouth. *Again.*

‘Something is wrong,’ he persists. ‘You were smiling at the wedding; a mood cannot change so quickly, unless something has happened.’ He takes a pistachio from the bowl and tosses it in the air before catching it in his mouth.

‘It’s nothing really. I’ve just found out that Max is going out for drinks with his ex this evening.’

Vangelis looks confused.

‘With his ex?’

‘Well, not just the two of them, obviously. There’s a group of people going out. Oh, never mind, just forget it.’

I resolve to put any negative thoughts away and enjoy having a drink with this lovely man sitting in front of me, who seems very rapidly to have become some sort of confidante.

‘Do you have a girlfriend?’ I suddenly find myself blurting out. I feel like I’ve poured my own romantic history out, but he hasn’t mentioned a wife or girlfriend so far.

His face becomes shuttered and he takes a minute before he answers, first downing more of his beer.

‘No.’

I wait. There is no way I’m speaking now if the best he can give me is one syllable replies. I’m wondering whether he is someone who prefers to play the field, taking his pick from the hordes of tourists in the summer months, when finally he speaks.

‘There was someone. I would have married her in a heartbeat.’ His gaze is somewhere far into the distance.

‘Would have?’

‘Yes. Not so long ago, I met a woman who came on holiday here from England. Her name was Louise. She came before the season started properly, when it was very quiet, and stayed here for five months. From the day we met we spent every moment we could together. But then she left suddenly, moving on to another island. It seems she had just been looking for a holiday romance and must have decided I fitted the bill. I never imagined I would fall head over heels in love.’

Here I was, just a few seconds ago, imagining Vangelis being a

heartbreaker and yet it would seem that he is the one who has been hurt. He tells me all about Louise from London, who stole his heart, and how he was certain she felt the same way about him. He talks of the long, hazy summer last year, spent out in the mountains in the jeep, exploring, and enjoying intimate candlelit dinners in their favourite tavernas.

‘For the first time in my life, I thought I was finally ready to settle down. I loved her so much and I thought she felt the same way about me. I asked her to stay, and to marry me, but she said no, she was ready to move on to Rhodes. A day or two later she did just that. Maybe I was a fool to think that she might consider staying here with me. After all, when we first met, she did tell me she wanted to go travelling. I should never have allowed myself to fall in love with her.’ He gives me a rueful smile.

So Vangelis has felt the pain of losing someone. I feel so terrible for him.

‘When we went our separate ways, I promised myself that I would never get involved with a tourist again, who, it seems, just wants a Greek man for a holiday romance she can tell all her friends about.’

‘Not all women are like that,’ I say softly, but Vangelis is deep in his own thoughts.

‘The strange thing is, I never usually get involved with people who are here on holiday, but it was different with Louise. She was unlike anyone I had ever met. And then you come to visit the island, and I spend the night talking with you like someone I have known all of my life. Just my luck that you are here on your hen party, or I might have been going back on my promise to myself,’ he says, as his dark eyes lock with mine.

Vangelis is clearly a natural charmer, and I’m sure he’s seduced many women with his silken words, but I’m still thrown into slight confusion. I wonder for a second whether he really likes me, although either way it shouldn’t matter to me.

After our drink, Vangelis walks me down the hill and we talk all the way to the bus stop, where we say our final goodbyes.

‘Well, it’s been a real pleasure meeting you and thank you so much for introducing me to your mother,’ I say. ‘I think her garden is the most beautiful place for a wedding that I have ever seen. Who knows, perhaps I’ll be back with Max one day. And, Vangelis, I know you’re still hurting, but I hope you’ll find your everlasting love,’ I tell him, forcing myself to look up into his dark eyes.

‘You too. Although it seems you have already found yours. Good luck, Alice. It has been a pleasure to know you.’

We stand for a few seconds, just looking at each other, and then Vangelis moves closer. He brushes my cheek softly with his lips and instinctively I move my face round so that he kisses me full on the lips and a thousand bolts of lightning shoot through my body. I kiss him back before reality sets in and I quickly pull away from him, wondering what the hell I have just done. But Vangelis looks unfazed as he holds me close to him. It’s almost as if I am under some sort of spell when he is around, and I realise I have to get as far away from here as possible. Thankfully, the bus has just appeared from around a corner and is heading towards the stop.

‘Vangelis, I’m so sorry. What was I thinking?’

‘Do not ruin a happy moment with being sorry.’ He threads his hand through mine and whispers into my ear, ‘Another time, another place, Alice, and who knows what might have been?’ Then he hails the bus and hands me up into it, telling the driver my destination. Even the way he says my name sends me into a flutter and I wonder what on earth is happening to me.

As the bus pulls away, I realise that I am shaking. I think about the brush of his lips on my cheek and how it made me feel. It was probably just a Greek way of saying goodbye and it would have meant nothing to him, until I stupidly turned my face to receive a kiss on the lips. *Why did I do that?* I love Max with all my heart, I know I do, but in that split second I thought of nothing and no one else except Vangelis. And he seemed perfectly happy to kiss me.

I feel ashamed at my own weakness and hope I never set eyes on him again. Vangelis’s comments about women looking for holiday romances made me realise how easy it is to become involved, especially in such a beautiful, romantic setting. I always imagined people would have realistic expectations of a holiday romance, but I don’t suppose you can help yourself falling in love if you meet someone special. I thought that Max was the right person for me but right now I feel so conflicted and I wonder for the umpteenth time how I could possibly feel so attracted to another man. And is it right to marry Max, if I am capable of such a thing? Do I have to tell him what I’ve done?

As the bus heads back towards Malia, I stretch out my hand and look at my engagement ring. It’s such a huge rock compared to the smaller, single solitaire Max presented me with when we first got engaged. I feel so guilty

wearing it right now though, as if I have betrayed Max. A tear escapes my eye as I slide the ring from my finger and place it in a side pocket of my shoulder bag, as I gather my thoughts. I can't lie, I wanted to kiss Vangelis, yet I can't understand why. Until I do understand, I don't deserve to wear Max's ring.

When the bus stops outside the hotel, I gather my shopping bag of gifts, including the olives for Max, as well as a colourful scarf for Lexie and a jar of honey for Mum. I thank the driver as I alight from the bus. But once I am out in the street, I realise I am missing something. With a feeling of horror and rising panic, I realise I have left my handbag on the bus. With my ring still tucked inside.

TWELVE

I wave my hands furiously over my head and shout, but it makes no difference and the bus disappears round the next corner and into the distance. My mind is racing and I feel sick. Heart thumping, I head across the road to the hotel and see the manager taking a break outside.

‘Santos!’ I wave to him as I frantically run towards him.

‘*Despoinida*, is something wrong?’ He walks to meet me, a concerned look on his face.

‘The bus... my bag. Oh my God, it’s gone... what am I going to do?’ I can barely string a sentence together.

‘Slow down, please. Tell me what has happened.’ His voice is calm and I try to gather my thoughts, but I have an overwhelming urge to cry.

I take a deep breath and finally manage to tell Santos that I have left my bag on the bus and that it has my engagement ring inside it.

‘Okay, no problem. I will phone the bus company. Please come into reception with me,’ he says, taking control of the situation, though I am not certain he understands how awful it actually is and that I’m struggling to keep my hysteria under control.

We head into the hotel and Santo dials a number and begins a conversation in Greek.

I give him the details of my bag and he translates to the person at the other end of the phone.

‘I am told the driver will back at the bus terminus in twenty minutes,’ he informs me. ‘We will know more then.’

‘Don’t they have mobile phones they can communicate with?’ I ask in exasperation.

‘*Despoinida*, this is Greece. A lot of the drivers do not communicate that way. All we can do is wait. Would you like a brandy? You look as if you

need one.'

I gratefully accept and we head to the bar, where Santos pours me a brandy and I knock it back. I'm in a panic, thinking about what Max will say if I don't get the ring back. How can I possibly tell him, and explain why I had taken it off?

If it has gone, is it a sign?

What feels like an hour later, and resisting drinking any more brandy, despite my nerves, I'm still waiting anxiously at the bar, when Santos comes over to me with a smile on his face.

'The driver has your bag. He will be back at the bus stop again in forty minutes. If you wait at the bus stop he will give it to you.'

The feeling of relief is overwhelming. 'Oh, thank you, Santos. I don't know what I would have done without your help.' I have an urge to throw my arms around him but that kind of behaviour has got me into enough trouble already.

When the green and white bus arrives at the stop, I've never been more happy to see anything in all my life. I don't understand the driver's words as he hands me my shoulder bag, but his kind smile makes me think he isn't lecturing me on my foolishness. The first thing I do is check the side pocket and I'm thrilled to find my ring is still there, along with my purse. I peel a twenty euro note from my wallet and hand it to the driver, who protests strongly, but I insist. He thanks me many times before driving off with a huge smile on his face.

When the bus has gone, I put the ring back onto my finger and vow to never take it off again. What a fool I have been. Tomorrow is the last full day of the holiday and the day after I will be back home in my own bed with Max. I can hardly wait. I need to see him and put all thoughts of Vangelis out of my mind. I really want to get home and back to my normal life. Holiday romances aren't real and even if I am attracted to someone like Vangelis, reality is always around the corner. Yet, despite myself, I can't help thinking that whoever ends up with him will be one lucky lady.

THIRTEEN

That evening, having all showered and changed, we decided to have a meal on the upper floor at the Apollo taverna, with its view over the sea and the boats bobbing in the harbour below us. It has quickly become our favourite place to eat. Now we're dipping chunks of bread into a plate of dips as a starter and enjoying some cold white wine, while a warm evening breeze wafts over us. Our smiling waitress told us of a special dish on tonight's menu, pork and black olives simmered in a tomato and oregano sauce, which sounded delicious. We all ordered it, apart from Kerry, who opted for some roasted stuffed peppers, her burger on the beach seemingly a moment of weakness. I don't tell my friends that I almost lost my engagement ring and I do my best to put all thoughts of Vangelis out of my mind and enjoy the remaining time here with them.

'Ah, I'm going to miss this view.' Ria is glancing at the twinkling lights in the harbour below. 'Back to the kids in the gallery on Monday, and their interesting interpretations of the great masters. Maybe I'll get them to paint van Gogh's starry night.' She gazes at the star-filled sky above.

'Sounds good. I'll miss it here too. Although I can't wait to see Max. I've really missed him,' I say.

Maybe it's my imagination, but Molly seems to raise an eyebrow slightly after I say I've really missed Max.

'They do say absence makes the heart grow fonder,' Kerry says. 'Although if I was given the chance to stay here another week, I'd be quite prepared to take it. I'm not missing Hal *that* much. I've been missing *The Great British Bake Off* more.'

We all laugh at her remark, although I wonder whether there's a half-truth in her jokey statement. She's hardly mentioned Hal since we've been here, but the conversation moves on while I'm deciding whether I should ask her if

everything is alright.

We discuss our plans for tomorrow and I impulsively make a suggestion. 'Well, if you can all get up early in the morning, and I do mean early, we could go for a day trip to Santorini.'

'I thought you wanted to go to Spinalonga?' Kerry reminds me.

'I did, but I'll do that another time. I wouldn't mind spending a few days in Agios Nikolaos so I'll probably visit Spinalonga then instead.'

We could probably have fitted that trip in the day before we go home, if we'd been desperate, but we're all determined to have a beach day to top up our tans. Well, all of us apart from Kerry. I'm sure there will be a next time for me, as there's so much more to explore. I'd like to come here again with Max and hire a car so that we can explore this side of the island, finding secret coves to have the picnics that we both so enjoy.

'Santorini! Are you kidding! Of course we'll go! I'll set three alarms if I have to. Ooh, yes, I fancy a day mingling with the beautiful people and eating at some fabulous restaurant overlooking the harbour. It looks really pretty with those gorgeous, blue-domed buildings, doesn't it? Count me in,' Ria squeals, and Molly quietly nods her head in agreement.

'I've always wanted to go there. Do you know it is the most photographed place in Greece? My photographer friend told me that particular little nugget of information,' Kerry informs us.

'I can imagine. It looks absolutely amazing. I can't wait,' Ria agrees.

'I might not go home at all. Think of all those world-famous sunsets I could paint. I might set up a little studio like the guy in the mountain village.' Kerry sighs.

'You'd be bored of the scenery after a few weeks. Don't you redecorate your lounge every few months?' Ria reminds her with a laugh.

'It's true. I tire of things easily, darling,' she says theatrically. 'It must be the artist in me.'

Again, I'm not sure if Kerry's joking or not and hope to get the chance to talk to her properly to make sure she's okay.

'Also, do you really think you could live here in the height of summer with your pale skin? You'd be housebound!' I remind her.

'Yes, thank you! I could have a beautiful house on the cliffs with a large covered terrace. I'd waft around in kaftans and huge sunglasses drinking Pimm's and taking dips in the pool. And painting. Glorious mountain views. Plus, as I'm good at painting animals, I could paint the Greek cats and sell

my pictures to the tourists. And my bread-making wasn't half as bad as yours, Alice, so I wouldn't starve.'

'Bloomin' cheek! You do make it sound idyllic, though,' I say wistfully.

'I'm not convinced,' says Ria. 'It's a great place for a holiday and I'm having a wonderful time, but I like the buzz of a city. I can't imagine living here permanently; it would be a little too quiet for me out of season.'

'Me too, there's no way I could live here permanently. I'd miss all the shops in town,' Molly adds. 'And Bongo's Bingo.'

Bongo's Bingo in Liverpool is a unique and crazy nightclub and prize bingo experience, where prizes range from bottles of wine to weekend breaks, as well as a plethora of useful household items up for grabs.

We decide to head back to the hotel bar so that we can have a few drinks there and still manage an early start tomorrow. I'm pleased to see that Santos is working in the bar when I go to order our cocktails.

'I spoke to my brother today, you know him, I think,' Santos says. 'He seemed a little down so I am going to see him tomorrow and take him sea fishing. He has a day off from the jeep tours and a day out on the water is good for everyone.'

'Vangelis? Oh yes, I saw him earlier today. I'm sorry to hear that though. I hope you have a good day on the water. We're going to Santorini tomorrow, so I hope the weather is fine for the crossing, too.'

I am sorry to hear that Vangelis is feeling a little down and hope that talking about Louise hasn't opened up old wounds. Maybe a day spent outdoors with his brother is just what he needs. I wonder, though, why Santos mentioned it to me. I hope Vangelis hasn't said things to him about me. Looking at Santos now I realise that he has a look of his brother, but is smaller in stature and has shorter hair.

The girls and I enjoy our drinks before heading off to bed. Things between Molly and me seem to be okay, on the surface at least, as we've had a perfectly enjoyable evening. But I think I should probably try to clear the air with her tomorrow.

As I climb between the sheets, I find myself wondering about Vangelis and his change of mood. Maybe being present at a wedding yesterday, or talking about the woman who stole his heart, has left him feeling a little flat. It would seem that nothing is ever perfect in life, no matter how beautiful a place you live in. If I close my eyes, I can picture his tall, muscular body and that thick head of hair, that full mouth with a ready smile, and I can't help

thinking that Louise from London must have been crazy to let him get away.

FOURTEEN

Max has messaged me early this the morning, telling me that my mum's shepherd's pie was excellent as usual and saying he hopes my evening dinner was just as good. I tell him all about the tomatoey, oregano flavours of the pork dish I ate and he replies with lots of food emojis and smiley faces. Then my phone rings.

'Okay, I think you win. That pork sounds amazing, but the shepherd's pie was really good too. Oh, and she made apple crumble for dessert. It was a surprisingly good evening actually. I thrashed your mum and Lexie at Scrabble too.'

'Scrabble? I didn't think that was your thing,' I say in surprise.

In all the time I've known Max, he has never once suggested playing any board games.

'No, neither did I. Lexie introduced me to it and it ended up being quite a laugh. We should buy it.'

'Maybe we should. Or I could bring a packet of those playing cards home.'

'The rude ones?' he asks suggestively, making me giggle.

'You'll have to wait and see... Anyway, it was nice of Mum to invite you over, although you're hardly hopeless in the kitchen, are you?'

'I'm better in the bedroom. I can't wait for you to get home.' His husky voice sends a thrill coursing through me, as I imagine his strong body pressed against mine in our huge bed.

We finish the call and I feel so happy to have spoken to him. I need to forget what happened with Vangelis and move on. Max and I have complete trust in each other, and I realise that there's nothing in a relationship if you don't have trust... and then feel another pang of guilt over that stupid kiss.

We all dress quickly and grab a light breakfast washed down with coffee.

It's a short drive to Heraklion and our taxi driver chats to us easily, pointing out places of interest on the way and telling us a little history with obvious pride. Soon enough, the ancient harbour walls appear before us and we are being dropped off near the port, where we'll take the catamaran to Santorini.

The boat seems to shoot us through the water in next to no time at all, skimming the waves and making Molly regret the second Danish pastry she ate at breakfast. She seems perfectly friendly with me today, though, so maybe I was overthinking things yesterday. Perhaps she was just suffering from a hangover in the morning after all.

When we finally arrive and step off into the glorious sunshine on the dockside at Athinios, we all gasp in unison. In front of us, a jumble of white buildings and hundreds of steps climb up the rocks, which are interspersed with the occasional blue-domed roof. Balconies from apartments are vibrant with pink-and-blue flowers spilling from pots. Turquoise pools can be seen outside cool, glass-fronted apartments, which seem to be carved right into the rock face.

'Wow. This looks even better than it does in the brochures, if that's possible,' Kerry says, staring at her surroundings with her mouth open.

'So how do we get up there then?' asks Ria. She points to the throngs of people walking along a promenade above the harbour, with shops and restaurants in the background. 'That looks like where all the action is.'

There are a few bars and cafés around us in the dockside area and I notice one restaurant with blue-and-white checked tablecloths on the tables, which seems to be very popular already. A waiter deposits some coffee and omelettes onto a nearby table and my stomach gives a little growl. I only ate a little Greek yoghurt for my breakfast.

'We go up in those.' I point to our left, where a queue of people are waiting in line for the cable cars. The cars take people up to the paved promenade, where I imagine the view to be spectacular. 'Or on those.' I point to a bloke with some tired-looking donkeys, which will take you up to the top of the island.

'Or even on those.' Kerry points to some steps that wind their way to the top of Thira. Hundreds of them.

'Not unless there's a first-aid station at the top. I'd need oxygen,' says Ria, taking a fan from her bag and wafting her face.

'I thought you were always up and down the stairs at the gallery?' I tease

her. 'Well, anyway, my vote is for the cable cars.'

'Definitely. We couldn't do that to those poor donkeys. Not in this heat,' says Molly. One of the donkeys turns towards us with a forlorn look on its face, so the decision is made.

Today has turned out to be a scorching hot day with not a cloud in sight. The bright sunshine fills my senses with joy and I can't wait to explore and soak up everything this place has to offer.

Kerry has on a huge, wide-brimmed hat and a long floaty dress, and has covered herself in factor 50. It makes me smile that she thinks she could actually live here in Greece.

We join the queue, which is moving very quickly, and just minutes later a cable car swings in to the station and we take our seats. Its rocking motion makes me a little nervous, but a moment later we are literally shot up to the top of Thira in a matter of seconds. As we disembark, we glance down the sheer drop of the rock face that we have just escalated and Molly's face turns pale.

'Oh my goodness, I don't think I'm going to be able to get back down again.'

'If I can do it, you can, Molly.' I breathe deeply, hoping my heart rate will soon return to somewhere near normal. 'It's no worse than that ride at Alton Towers that shoots you up in the air.'

'You mean the one I haven't been on since I was about eighteen years old?' she says, grimacing.

We stroll along a pedestrianised promenade, flanked by gently swaying trees, before passing a church with a group of people and a tour guide outside. I hear the voice of an American tourist asking the guide questions about the church and see people nodding with interest at the answers.

The sun is bouncing off the walls of the white buildings, making them seem almost surreal, like part of a magical kingdom high up in the clouds. Before long, we stop to buy ice creams and then head to a viewpoint that's crowded with tourists, all with cameras around their necks and all jostling for best position. It seems everyone wants a photo of The Three Bells of Fira, the iconic blue-domed church overlooking the sea, which is featured on every postcard from Santorini. As the visitors snap away, I gaze at the jumble of white buildings that seem to slide into the sea below. Beyond the church lies the most picturesque view of the water, glistening in the sunlight. It all looks

stunningly beautiful and, for a while, we all just stand and stare in silence, mesmerised by the sights.

‘Now that’s some view,’ Kerry says, sighing.

We all agree that this spot would be a perfect place to paint, although highly impractical with the hordes of tourists.

Moving on, we take a walk along the narrow, ancient streets, passing cafés and upmarket gift shops displaying souvenirs and clothes that are twice the price of anything we have seen in the tourist shops of Crete. Two glamorous women with the most immaculate hair walk past, dripping in expensive clothes and carrying outsize designer bags. Our gaze follows them as they take some steps down into one of the white-washed apartments that are embedded in the rock. All these places have patio doors overlooking private pools that, in turn, overlook the sea.

‘Can you imagine those sunsets... Sitting by your private pool or on your balcony, with a cocktail in your hand, watching the orange sun descend into the sea?’ I say, sighing.

‘Now that would be a scene worth painting,’ Ria says.

We’re glancing down at the water, taking in the stunning surroundings, when we notice a cruise ship slowly drifting into the port. Taking in the view and feeling this island working its magic, I can hardly wait to get home and create something wonderful on a canvas, as this place is pouring inspiration into me.

It’s just after one thirty when we find a pretty taverna off the main street. We all sit down in the outdoor area, which is dotted with colourful pot plants, and take a look at the menu, and I think once again that I could get used to this life. Kerry and I are chatting about our artwork and which aspects of the island we would like to paint, when I notice that a man on the next table appears to be half listening in to our conversation.

Presently he turns to face us. ‘Forgive me, but am I right in thinking that you are artists?’

I guess our conversation about morning light, refraction and shade kind of gave it away.

The man introduces himself as Frederik, on holiday here from Denmark, and he recommends a little gallery several streets away.

‘Some of the pieces there are really rather special. Unique, in fact.’

After a delicious lunch of fragrant fish and Greek salad with slabs of feta

and huge juicy tomatoes, washed down with ice-cold beers, we stroll along and pass another group of tourists, huddled together, listening to a tour guide as he points to the dormant volcano in the sea. We hover in the background, listening to him describing how the island was the site of one of the largest volcanic eruptions in recorded history.

‘Some people believe that the eruption is the source of the legend of Atlantis,’ the guide states theatrically, as the crowd listens with interest.

We move on, feeling slightly voyeuristic, since we hadn’t paid for the privilege of listening to the commentary.

Cutting down a narrow side street, we are thrilled to stumble upon the art gallery that the man in the restaurant told us about. A metal sculpture of a shark pokes theatrically out of the rough, white stone wall of the gallery and makes us all smile. Once inside, the ocean theme continues, with sculptures of various sea creatures. Magical sea horses fashioned from driftwood and colourful glass artwork are displayed on shelves, using every available space. There is some exquisite jewellery on sale, too; semi-precious stones twisted around silver and pewter are made into stunning bracelets. We chat to the owner of the gallery for a while, who tells us he began by selling a variety of things at a stall on a beach before his business really took off.

‘This is absolutely gorgeous,’ says Ria, turning over a twisted silver bracelet set with a single topaz in her hand, before sneakily taking a photo of it on her phone.

‘I could copy something like this,’ she whispers to me.

When we’ve finished looking around, I buy myself some earrings and a metal fish skeleton painted in a metallic dark blue that has an almost haunting feel. I could spend forever browsing in the gallery, appreciating the skill of the artist, who has created so many unique pieces, and envying him being able to work in such a beautiful space. Standing here makes me think about how I might one day display things in my own gallery, impressed with how the owner has made use of the small space.

Continuing our walk, presently we come across a tiny chapel on a headland and I catch my breath. The view of Santorini below is striking from such a high point, and I literally feel on top of the world standing here. What an absolute dream it would be to marry in a place like this.

‘How about this for a wedding venue, Alice?’ Ria says, as if reading my mind.

‘It’s spectacular. I bet there are all kinds of legalities attached to marrying

in a place like this though.'

'Plus, there's that small matter of you having booked and paid for a wedding in England,' Ria reminds me. 'Although,' she adds, 'it really is romantic here. Maybe you should forget about the Lake District and elope here. That would shut your mum up and stop her inviting any more horrible cousins.' She gives me a wry smile.

Standing outside this gorgeous, whitewashed chapel, the pink wedding house and garden in Crete, as pretty as it all was, seems to pale into insignificance compared to this place. We step inside and it's so tiny that the four of us can only just manoeuvre our way around. There's a welcome coolness inside the stone building and we all take a minute to absorb our breathtaking surroundings. Despite the chapel being tiny, it's stunningly beautiful. There is a richly decorated gold altar and paintings of the Virgin Mary are dotted about the chapel walls. I fall into step with Molly, who is admiring the ornately decorated altar, and we start chatting about the wedding.

'Molly, can I talk to you, please?' We've stepped outside the chapel into the searing heat once more and I turn to face her. 'I need you to know that nothing happened between me and Vangelis the other night. I hope you believe that, despite what you think you might have seen.'

'*Think* I might have seen? I saw you coming out of another man's bedroom in the middle of the night and you were hugging each other. I know exactly what I saw.' She bites her bottom lip, which is something I know she does when she is irritated.

'But it wasn't how it looked. We just had a really good conversation. He knew I was on my hen party; it was all perfectly innocent.' I don't tell her that I spent the evening telling a complete stranger all about my childhood and the Christmas that was ruined.

'If you say so. Although if it was that innocent, how come you never just stayed downstairs in the public area? Come to think of it, you told us all that you were really tired so why didn't you just go to bed?' She's biting her bottom lip again and staring at me.

I've asked myself that question so many times too.

'I've wondered that myself, to be honest, and maybe I should have. But it was a little stuffy in the bar so we went to chat on the balcony where it was a little cooler, that's all. Vangelis told me had a wonderful view of the bay from the balcony and I found I couldn't resist.'

‘Was that all you couldn’t resist?’ Molly sneers.

‘Of course it was! Molly, I need you to believe that I’m telling the truth.’ My heart is beating inside my chest and I have to ask her the question. ‘Are you going to tell Max?’ I ask, dreading her reply.

‘No, Alice, it’s not my place to tell him, it’s yours. And I’m sorry, but I find it hard to believe that you spent almost the whole night just talking. Didn’t you admit yourself that this holiday was all about having a little fun?’ She has a serious tone in her voice that matches the look on her face.

‘Yes, but...’

‘Or maybe one last fling,’ she mutters under her breath before walking ahead to join the others. My heart sinks. She really thinks I’ve cheated on Max.

The rest of the afternoon passes quickly and, despite the glorious surroundings, my conversation with Molly has soured things for me. I can’t help thinking about what she said. Ria and Kerry don’t seem to notice anything is wrong, though, as Molly is being perfectly friendly and I am trying to stay upbeat. The last thing I want is to ruin the last full day of our holiday with a strained atmosphere.

We continue exploring Thira, climbing dozens of white steps, zigzagging through back streets and stumbling across yet more shops, galleries and cafés, with rough stone walls, sharing the narrow streets. I take a deep breath, inhaling the warm air and wishing I could stay here alone with my thoughts for a while longer.

Around an hour before our catamaran is due to leave the port, we find a seat at a restaurant with an incredible sea view and order a bottle of wine and some water, and Ria proposes a toast. ‘To friendship and long may it last. Here’s hoping you won’t forget about us when you get married and fill your house with kids.’ Ria chinks her glass against mine.

Perhaps it’s the wine, but her words really touch me. I hope I will never lose touch with my friends, although I wonder whether I might have lost sight of myself recently... I try to laugh it off. ‘Not a chance, Ria. It’s said that if you have a friend for more than seven years then they are officially family, so I guess I’m stuck with you all now. Besides, I have no plans to fill the house with children, at least not for the time being anyway.’

Max has talked of one day building a tree house at the end of a long garden, in a bigger house that would become our forever home. I know that

Max would make a wonderful father; his sense of fun would build happy memories for any child. Becoming a mother feels like a huge responsibility to me, and although I would like to start a family one day, I just can't see it being in the foreseeable future.

Despite having a lovely day, the evening with Vangelis is still on my mind so I realise there's only one thing I can do. However innocent it was, I'm going to have to tell Max. I know I'd be devastated if he kissed another woman and I want to start our marriage without any secrets. I just pray he'll be able to forgive me.

On the return journey to Heraklion, I sit next to Ria and, because of our conversation in Santorini, I tell her all about my visit to the wedding house in Koutouloufari village.

'Surely you're not really thinking of changing things now?' she asks in surprise. 'Isn't everything booked?' She looks at me with a puzzled expression on her face.

'I know, you're right. I don't suppose there was much point in looking really, but it was just idyllic. If I'd have known the place existed when we got engaged, I might have persuaded Max to look into having our wedding there and then. But after seeing the chapel in Santorini, I realise there are probably hundreds of beautiful wedding venues in Greece. It's a pity we didn't look into it all.'

'I didn't realise you wanted to get married abroad. How come you never said anything?'

'Oh, I guess I felt selfish. What you said earlier about eloping, well, I'd like nothing more, but I know Max would never hear of it.' I'm surprised to hear emotion in my voice as I tell Ria this.

'Alice,' she says, gently taking hold of my hand. 'It's yours and Max's day, no one else's. Do what makes you both happy. The people that matter to you would understand.'

'Really?' I ask, as a single tear rolls down my cheek.

'Of course!' She squeezes my hand. 'You need to talk to Max about everything. I'm sure he'll understand. He loves you to pieces, anyone can see that.'

'Thanks, Ria,' I reply, feeling relieved and grateful. 'And I have tried to talk to Max, but he's just so excited by everything that maybe I haven't been completely honest with him.' I shrug.

‘He’d be mortified if he knew how you really feel, I’m sure.’ She squeezes my hand again. ‘This wedding isn’t all about Max. It’s your day too.’

‘I know. And I’m sorry I didn’t speak to you sooner. You’re my closest friend but, truth be told, I don’t think I even knew what I wanted myself. Max made a big wedding sound like such a joyous occasion that I was swept along with the idea. Then, after a while, I began to think about it and to wish that we’d kept to the small, intimate gathering we had planned at the beginning. I’ve been worried that we have such different ideas of how a wedding should be.’

‘Well, as I say, it’s what the two of you want that matters. Nothing else matters really, does it? You two are made for each other and, personally, I wouldn’t care if just the two of you decided to get married on the moon.’

‘You can do that?’ I attempt a small laugh.

‘Well, if not, I’m sure Richard Branson’s onto it! So... Vangelis told you about his mother’s place, huh? He seems to have made quite an impression on you,’ Ria says, nudging me gently and raising an eyebrow.

‘Don’t start, I’ve told you nothing—’

‘I know, nothing happened between you, I’m teasing,’ she interrupts. ‘But you did fancy him, didn’t you? And I wouldn’t blame you if you did.’

‘Wouldn’t you?’

‘Wouldn’t I what?’

‘Blame me if I found him attractive. I mean... should I be finding men attractive if I’m getting married soon?’

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake, Alice, being engaged doesn’t mean you stop noticing other people. You don’t turn into a nun when you get a ring on your finger. You’re only human. It’s when you stop finding people attractive that you should worry.’ The sound of her laughter rings out across the boat. ‘It’s normal to appreciate other people, of course it is. As long as you don’t act on any feelings of attraction towards someone else, then it’s all fine. I’m always fancying blokes, but when I’m in a relationship I’m strictly a one-man woman.’

I’m suddenly riddled with guilt as I recall how we kissed.

‘Anyway,’ she says. ‘We’ll be back home soon and away from temptation.’ She’s grinning broadly.

‘Ria, will you stop it!’ I find myself laughing and push her a little too forcefully, just as the catamaran hits a wave, and she slides off the end of the

bench and lands at the feet of an astonished-looking elderly male passenger.

She picks herself up and tells me I owe her a drink, just as Molly and Kerry – having seen what happened – are howling with laughter.

In no time at all we are stepping off the boat onto the quay at Heraklion, which is bustling with tourists embarking and disembarking from boats. It's really bustling down at the harbour and the restaurants are all busy, so we head back to the hotel and decide to have a totally relaxing poolside day tomorrow.

FIFTEEN

The next morning I stretch my arms out over my head and realise it's our last day, just as Ria emerges from the bathroom humming a tune.

'Come on, sleepy head, time for breakfast. We can't waste a second of our last day. Let's hit the pool!'

'Give me two minutes.' I grab my towel and head to the bathroom, where I take the quickest morning shower ever.

Seated at a breakfast table on an outdoor terrace, we feast on yoghurts, figs, honey and an assortment of breads and cheeses, all washed down with apple juice, in my case, as I still haven't changed my opinion of the local coffee.

'I can't wait to see Max, although I'll really miss this place,' I say with a sigh, as I cast my eye over the pretty gardens and paved path that leads down to the swimming pool.

'There's something about it that really gets under your skin, isn't there?' Molly looks at me, smirking, and I can't help wondering if she's implying something.

'I hope there are some sunbeds left. It's nine thirty,' says Kerry, glancing at her watch.

When we approach the large, blue kidney-shaped pool, we are relieved to find plenty of available beds and all begin to settle down. I pull a book from my beach bag and make myself comfortable.

'Anyone fancy a drink?' Ria is on her feet again and heading for the pool bar.

'We've only just had breakfast! Maybe some water,' I suggest.

'You lot are no fun,' she huffs, but goes on to admit that maybe it is too early for alcohol. 'Will eleven be okay for cocktail o'clock?' she asks hopefully, nodding her head and smiling.

We all agree that, since it's our last day, it seems reasonable.

Ria returns with our water and sits down on the sunbed next to mine. It's still quite early, but after a few minutes I can feel the sun burning my skin, so I apply some sun lotion and wish Max was here to massage it into my back.

It's such a soothing, relaxing sensation lying here, that I find myself hoping we'll have a good summer back home. I read a few chapters of my book, then close my eyes. I must have dozed off, as I'm woken by the sound of glasses clinking and see Ria standing in front of me with a tray of cocktails. I glance at my watch. It's five minutes past eleven.

'You didn't waste any time,' I say with a laugh, eyeing the tray of colourful drinks with fruit and umbrellas poking out of them.

'I got us all a Slow Comfortable Screw. I hope that's okay,' Ria says, winking.

'Give it here, I haven't had one of those for a while,' says Kerry.

'Me neither. I've been a good girl on this holiday. That barman's very cute, though, and he was really flirty.' Ria takes a sip of her drink and glances towards the poolside bar, where said hunk is wiping the bar and staring back at her, smiling.

After two hours of sunbathing and taking dips in the pool, an idea suddenly springs to mind and I'm shocked that I'm even considering it. When I ask the girls if they fancy walking down to the beach and having a go at parasailing, they think I have finally taken leave of my senses.

'Not a chance! Those cable cars in Santorini were enough for me,' Kerry says.

'But they're tandem seats. Sit next to me. You'll be alright. I'll hold your hand.' I smile at her winningly.

'No way, never. I'll take some photos from the beach.'

Ria and Molly, though, decide it's a great idea.

'Fabulous! I'm game for that. Give you a cocktail, Alice, and it seems you're up for anything.' Ria roars with laughter. 'Remember the karaoke evening?'

I close my eyes for a moment, recalling how good it felt to be standing up there on the stage, singing, once I'd conquered my initial nerves. It was so much fun and I felt free and adventurous, believing that I could do just about anything. But it's not just the cocktails that do it for me. Being here with my friends has given me time to rediscover a little of the old me. I love being a part of a couple with all my heart, but sometimes... well, sometimes you

need to make your own choices and be your own person. These are things I've forgotten of late.

It's twelve thirty and the beach is still half-empty, as last night's partygoers are slowly filtering onto the beautiful, long stretch of sand. We aim for a speedboat halfway down the beach, where two guys in shades and shorts are sitting on chairs, scrolling through their phones, which they immediately put away as we approach.

'Ladies,' says the taller guy, who dazzles us with an impossibly white-toothed smile. 'You want to try parasailing today?'

Molly and Ria need no encouragement and happily clamber into one of the tandem seats. I get into the other, but Kerry insists she is not interested. Though when hunk and hunkier show us the safety briefing, I can see her resolve weakening.

'You don't want your friend to be alone up there, do you?' says the better-looking and slightly more muscular guy, piercing her with his chocolate-brown eyes.

And that's it. Loyalty to her friends (along with some sweet talk from the sexy Greek man) has persuaded Kerry to go up.

'Well, you'd better not go too high,' she says to the two guys, still not entirely convinced. I can't help noticing they exchange a smile with one another.

Safely strapped in, we move along the water, chatting excitedly, when there's a sudden pull on the straps and we begin to ascend. Slowly, we reach higher and higher and all the time Kerry has her eyes closed. Soon enough, the sea below looks the size of a huge swimming pool and the people on the beach look like ants.

'Oh wow!' My hair is fluttering in the breeze and I think my heart is going to burst with excitement. I'm flying like a bird in the mountains and I wish I could stay up here forever. I'm savouring every second of the experience, when I hear a voice beside me.

'Alice, I don't like this. I want to get off.' I glance at Kerry and her eyes are still firmly closed.

'Kerry, open your eyes,' I coax gently. 'You'll enjoy it more then.'

'I can't.'

'Honestly, just do it. Trust me.'

Kerry does as I ask and I immediately regret telling her to.

‘Holy shit! Oh my god, I don’t like it. *Get me down!*’

‘We’ll be landing shortly,’ I lie. We’re only about three minutes into a fifteen-minute flight.

‘*We’re going to die!*’ she screams.

‘Kerry, it’s alright, I promise.’ I take hold of her hand and realise she’s shaking. ‘Really, it’s perfectly safe. I’m with you.’

‘And what the bloody hell can you do when we both hurtle to our deaths? I should have stayed below and took the photos. *Aagh!*’

She closes her eyes again and for a few minutes she’s quiet. I glance down at the villas and hotels behind the beach, and the mountains in the background, and marvel at the sight, hardly believing that I’m really up here.

‘*I’m going to pee myself!*’ Kerry’s voice suddenly breaks into my thoughts.

I know Kerry is having a bit of a meltdown and I’m happy to support her, yet I’m trying so hard not to crack up with laughter.

‘Honestly, I hate this. I wish I’d taken some Imodium. My insides are doing a Highland fling,’ she moans.

Oh, no. This is something entirely different.

‘Take deep breaths, Kerry. I promise you’ll be fine. I think we’re already on the way down,’ I lie.

‘Good, because I think I’m going to vomit.’

‘So which is it, then? Are we going to have wee, poo or vomit flying through the air?’

To my surprise, Kerry bursts out laughing at that.

‘Oh, Alice. Thanks for being so calm. Molly would have probably opened my straps and pushed me out by now.’

‘There’s still time yet.’

We laugh together and, thankfully, Kerry calms a little and is able to half enjoy the remainder of the trip. By the time we are on the descent, she is even controlled enough to do an elegant landing in the boat, as opposed to my sort of belly flop.

Molly and Ria have already disembarked and are smiling hugely, having enjoyed every minute of their experience, and Ria is even saying she wouldn’t mind going up and having another go. But now that she’s back on land, Kerry has forgotten that she enjoyed the last five minutes and has turned an even paler shade than usual, so we agree to head back to the pool instead.

Later on that afternoon, sitting in the Apollo taverna and sporting a nice golden glow, we enjoy our final hours together. Even Kerry has a healthy, sun-blushed tinge to her skin. One thing's for sure, this holiday seems to have done us all a power of good. I think about my flirtation with Vangelis and realise how easily these beautiful islands and the attention of a handsome man can seduce you. But he was a nice man. A gentleman, really. He could have tried to take advantage of me in his room, but he didn't. We're all human, I suppose, and I've come to realise that despite a momentary attraction to another man, it has no bearing on my relationship with Max. I love him with all my heart.

'Let's propose a toast,' says Ria, as we share a bottle of Prosecco. 'To friendship. And to having fun, even when you're married.' She nods in my direction.

'You betcha,' I say, as we all clink glasses.

SIXTEEN

‘You’re home!’ Max opens the front door just before one thirty in the morning and I’ve barely had time to drop my bag on the floor before he squeezes me in an embrace, tilts my face towards his and kisses me on the lips.

‘I’ve missed you,’ he breathes.

‘Oh, Max, I’ve missed you too.’

I inhale the scent of his aftershave and feel the familiar butterflies in my stomach when he’s close. Standing here, wrapped in his arms, I know there’s nowhere I’d rather be. For a second, I can’t believe I nearly had my head turned by a handsome stranger, almost jeopardising everything I have here.

Max runs his hands over my body and I gasp as he tugs my cotton dress from my body and I hear a small rip.

‘That was my favourite,’ I mutter weakly as he guides me towards the couch.

‘I’ll buy you another,’ he breathes, before laying me down and showing me exactly how much he missed me.

It’s so good to be home, wrapped here in Max’s arms, and I just want this feeling to last forever. I know I have to talk to him about what happened on holiday, but just for tonight I’m going to try to forget about it and enjoy being back here with my fiancé.

‘Fancy a nightcap before we head up to bed?’ Max pulls me to my feet from the couch.

‘Bed? You know, I’m not due back at the shop for another day so you can keep me up as long as you like tonight, Mr Jenkins.’

He grins as he takes me by the hand and guides me upstairs.

Despite using up plenty of energy with Max, I don't sleep well and find myself wide awake in the early hours of the morning. I get quietly out of bed and head downstairs for a drink of water. Sitting at the kitchen island, I find myself thinking about Molly and wondering if and when she will speak to Max about seeing me with Vangelis. She was fairly friendly with me on our last day in Malia, but even so I know that I must talk to Max myself. I know he'll understand; he trusts me completely. We are getting married soon after all!

When I eventually go back upstairs, just before the break of dawn, I find myself opening the door to the spare bedroom. Daylight is beginning to filter through the window, casting shadows on one of my paintings of a sea scene with waves crashing over rocks beneath a stormy blue-and-lilac sky. Suddenly I'm transported to the balcony of the hotel, listening to the gentle waves of the sea. I find I have a fierce urge to paint and I take a clean brush from a roll and a medium-sized canvas from a cupboard. The room continues to lighten and gives just the right amount of shade, so I drag some oil paints across the canvas with a palette knife, before using a brush to soften the edges. I have no idea what I am painting, I'm just spreading and covering the canvas in long, sweeping brush strokes. Hours later, I hear Max's alarm clock, which is soon followed by the sound of the shower running in our ensuite bathroom.

I gaze at the picture and realise I have painted a rough scene of Santorini and the blue-domed church overlooking the sea. The sunset is a deep orange against an indigo sky; the white steps leading down to the sea are like some mythical sea snake. It's incomplete, yet I feel very satisfied with the painting, thinking it's one of the best things I've started in a long time. Maybe I ought to go on holiday more often for inspiration.

I'm staring at the picture, lost in my thoughts, when Max opens the bedroom door.

'There you are,' he says, handing me a mug of coffee. 'What time did you wake up this morning? I thought you were looking forward to a lie-in.'

'I was but I didn't sleep very well and woke in the early hours. Maybe I was overtired. I'm going to grab a shower now.'

Max sniffs the air then glances at the canvas that is leaning against the wall.

'Wow! Have you been painting through the night? That looks incredible.'

'Thanks and yes, I have. It's a bit rough, but I just had a compulsion to

paint a view of Thira, maybe while it was fresh in my mind.'

'Well, it's brilliant. I bet that gets snapped up as soon as you put it online.' Max cocks his head to one side and eyes the painting in admiration. 'You are so talented. You should definitely have your own gallery. There are enough paintings here to fill one.' His eyes scan the assortment of paintings that are crammed into the fairly small bedroom.

'I know. The city rents are so expensive, though. Maybe a shop in the village will come up for rent one day.'

I think about it seriously as Max kisses me goodbye. As he goes downstairs, he's checking that the Indian restaurant in the village will be okay for tonight. There are quite a few independent shops on the small high street, nestled between one or two cafés, but there's no art gallery in Formby. And the Alice I felt myself becoming on holiday would be brave enough to change that.

When I've had my shower, I lie down on the bed for a few minutes and find myself scrolling through some holiday pictures on my phone. I was snapping away at almost every turn and a whole load of memories come flooding back as I look through them. There are pictures of the four of us sitting in restaurants, sipping cocktails, and lounging around on the beach watching the *Love Island* lot. I smile at the snaps in Santorini sightseeing – one of them in particular, which shows us jokingly poking our heads around corners, sticking out our tongues, taken for us by another tourist.

Presently I come across the photos of the wonderful day out on the jeep safari. There's a photo of the group in a huddle before we set off, and Vangelis is on the edge of the photo, grinning. He looks so relaxed and I remember him telling me he is the outdoor type who can't bear to be cooped up, working inside. I think of the artist in the mountain village, painting sunsets and selling beautiful art pieces in the small gallery, and reflect that it's all a world away from my working life in the shop and selling my paintings over the Internet. I don't dislike my job in the shop, but it isn't what I'd hoped to be doing when I was in my thirties, and I'm not looking forward to returning to work tomorrow. I feel in the mood to spend the rest of the week painting. But for now, at least, it seems I have little choice.

More pictures show the extraordinary colours of the cave and the cradle of Zeus, and I'm immediately transported to the magic of the place. I view the steps of Santorini and the meal in the restaurant where I got up and did

some Greek dancing. It's hard to believe we packed so many things into five wonderful days.

I decide to have a bit of a tidy of my painting room and spend the morning tossing away rags and empty paint pots and small, crumpled sketches, which I discard into a bin liner before checking my online shop, where I'm delighted to find an order for a canvas of a bird in a forest. The background is painted in shades of teal and orange, which I think would look striking against a plain white wall.

Stopping to make a pot of coffee and give my mum a call to tell her about the holiday around midday, I'm just thinking about what to wear for my evening out with Max when the doorbell rings. I'm not expecting visitors, so when I open the door I'm surprised to find Molly standing there.

'Molly, hi. I thought you were back in work today?'

'I am, I just nipped out for an early lunch.' Molly works from home, which is about a five-minute drive away, so she occasionally calls in to have a catch-up with Max and me. They've grown closer to each other since their parents retired to Spain a few years ago.

Molly follows me into the kitchen and I offer her a coffee, anxiously wondering what it is she wants to talk about.

'No, thanks. I'm not stopping. I'm afraid I've just called in to tell you some bad news about the wedding.' She bites her lip nervously.

'The wedding. Oh my goodness, what's wrong?'

I'm standing with my mouth open and the coffee pot hovering over my cup.

'It's the caterers. They've had to pull out.'

I can't believe what I'm hearing. The wedding is only a matter of weeks away.

'The company has gone into liquidation,' she continues. 'Apparently they poisoned half of their guests at a wedding and they've just settled the lawsuit. I'm so sorry, I wasn't aware of any of this when we booked them. We're going to be hard pushed to get another caterer at this late stage, but don't worry, I'm onto it. Although, to be honest, it would probably be easier if there weren't so many guests,' she says with a grimace.

'Oh no! This is a complete disaster,' I say, my stress levels going through the roof. 'We're up to eighty-four guests, at least that was the number at the last count. Caterers have to be booked months, sometimes years in advance, don't they? What the hell are we going to do?' I can't help thinking it

wouldn't be such a mess if we'd kept with the original small gathering.

As I process what Molly has just told me, I wish again that I'd been stronger and insisted on a local registry-office wedding, with a party back here in our garden. But Max wouldn't hear of it, complaining that the garden would be far too small. Yet, if we'd chosen the small, intimate affair that I wanted, we wouldn't be in this predicament now. However, in fairness to Max, I know that I haven't exactly been vocal in telling him how I feel.

'Don't panic. I've told you I'm sure I can sort it,' Molly reassures me. 'This is exactly the sort of thing new businesses are looking for to make a name for themselves. They'd put their all into the food. Which is exactly the call I'm waiting for. I have a friend at the gym whose brother and sister-in-law have recently set up an outside catering service. They have a café during the day, with brilliant customer reviews so far. Although, admittedly, they haven't done a wedding as large as this... They're meant to be fantastic, though. Both of them have worked in five-star hotel kitchens. I'm sure they can deliver.'

I'm wondering if it's a sign. Maybe we should have carried on as we were, perfectly happy, as I recall. Perhaps Kerry's boyfriend Hal is right. What's so important about a piece of paper if two people are happy together? My brain is spiralling with panic, but I am so thankful that Molly is here and has a plan.

'I haven't told Max, so maybe don't say anything just yet. And don't worry, Alice, I'm waiting on that call from the couple, plus another couple of return calls this afternoon, so I'll speak to you tomorrow.' She stands up to leave.

'Okay, I'll wait to hear from you. And thanks, Molly.'

That evening, sitting in the cosy ambience of the Indian lounge in the village, where the red and gold décor has remained the same since the late 1990s, I can't stop thinking about Molly's visit today. When I saw her standing at the front door, I was certain she had called round to discuss the evening I spent in Vangelis's hotel room and, though her news wasn't brilliant, now that I've had time to process it and calm down a little, I breathe a huge sigh of relief.

'I haven't had an Indian meal for ages. I'd forgotten how good this place is,' Max says, tucking into a lamb pasanda, the aroma from the fragrant spices filling the air as I enjoy a tasty chicken biryani.

‘So, go on then, tell me what you got up to on holiday? Did the girls all enjoy it?’ Max asks as he takes a sip of his cold beer.

‘Yes.’ I pause a little as I consider getting it over with and telling him about Vangelis, but I lose the courage. ‘We all did. It was really lovely us all being on holiday together. We did all the usual beach stuff and nights out, and the trip to Santorini was just amazing. I’ll show you all the photographs later.’ I can just imagine his face when he sees the one of me kicking my legs in the air alongside the Greek dancers, which Ria snapped without my knowledge.

‘It might be nice to get some canvases printed, although I bet your paintings could beat any photos. Anyway, as you enjoyed it so much, maybe you should make getting together with the girls more of a regular thing. It’s good to see friends – I realised that on the race night. It’s healthy to see other people outside your relationship.’

‘And here’s me thinking we were exclusive?’ I say in mock astonishment.

‘Sorry, that came out wrong but you know what I mean. It’s good to have separate friends and interests sometimes. It gives us something to chat about outside our own relationship.’

I’m wondering whether Max is suggesting our relationship has become a little insular. Maybe even boring? Which is a little worrying, as we’re not even married yet.

‘Are you going to arrange another night out, then?’ I find myself wondering if Rachel will be at the next reunion as I fork some chicken and rice into my mouth.

‘Yeah, we were talking about it. I’d forgotten how well we all got along when we worked together. And, don’t worry, I’m not excluding you. I’ve suggested doing a couples thing next time, as most of us are hooked up.’ Max smiles warmly before he rips a piece of naan bread and dips it into his curry.

And here was I, for a brief, silly second, wondering if some of the appeal for Max in meeting up with his old colleagues was Rachel.

We enjoy our tasty food and finish off sharing a sweet coconut dessert before we stroll home on what turns out to be a beautiful, warm summer evening. I’m feeling guilty about still not having spoken to Max about the evening in Crete with Vangelis, but the truth is I’m terrified of what will happen after I’ve told him.

‘You’re quiet tonight,’ Max notices, as I spend the rest of the walk home lost in my thoughts. We pass the individually designed houses in the elegant

streets, most of them with wrought-iron gates, before we finally turn into Somerville Road, where a grey tabby has taken up its usual night-time position on the red brick wall of the end house.

‘Sorry, I’m just not looking forward to going to work tomorrow, that’s all. I feel in the mood to get on with some painting. With the weather being good, I fancied maybe painting outside in some natural daylight. Maybe creating some more pieces to display for real one day.’

That’s the trouble with a break away in the sun. You never feel like returning to work, especially as the weather forecast here is for a sunny spell over the next few days and I can think of nothing better than creating some new pieces in our garden, which has tall hedges, meaning we are not overlooked. I shouldn’t be hiding behind a computer screen despatching my paintings to people without meeting them. I should be chatting to them in my own gallery, seeing their reaction to my work and discussing the finer points of art.

I realise that working at the gift store in town has helped me to overcome my shyness, but it’s the holiday in Crete with the girls that has pushed my confidence up even further. Joining in the Greek dancing in front of a crowd, and singing on the karaoke, are two things I would not have dreamed I could do. And I was surprised by how much I actually enjoyed it all.

That evening in bed, as I sink into Max’s embrace amongst the tangled sheets, I have no doubts in my heart about how much I love him. As I melt into his kisses I pull him close to me and silently pray that everything is going to be alright. I just need to stop feeling guilty about the other kiss in Crete, and to find the courage to tell Max what happened with Vangelis.

My life is here with Max and I must make it the very best life for both of us. Perhaps if I did have my own gallery, I wouldn’t have envied the Greek artist with the studio high up in the mountains. As I drift off to sleep in Max’s arms I count my blessings, yet resolve to make some changes in the future. I have a lot to be thankful for in many ways, but I need to be responsible for my own happiness too.

SEVENTEEN

I'm serving a customer with a pair of white ceramic turtle doves, when I spot my mum outside the shop; she's waving at me through the window. I wave back, wondering why she hasn't come inside and is gesturing for me to step outside.

'Hi, Mum. What's up?' I say, as I step through the doorway. 'Why didn't you come into the shop?'

'Sorry, Alice. I always end up buying something if I go inside. You know how hard it is for me to keep my spending under control and you have such lovely things in there. I mean look at that.' She moves her face close to the window and points to a pretty floral footstool. 'That would look really good in the lounge, which Rex has recently painted and wallpapered, but he's given me a budget and that is way over it.'

Mum seems to be in charge of soft furnishings, but it's Rex who does any painting and wallpapering, as Mum, by her own admission, lacks the patience for it.

I feel a surge of admiration for Mum for trying to curb her spendthrift ways. Maybe she has learnt her lessons in life the hard way.

'Anyway, I just wondered if you and Max would like to come for dinner tomorrow night? Max had such a good time with us that evening when you were away. It's made me think I should invite you both over more often.'

I'm wondering whether I'm seeing a softer side to Mum as she gets older. Her looking after Lexie with her broken leg was a bit of a revelation, as Mum'd only recently reminded me that she was no good with sick people. Something I recall well from my childhood. Lexie has let me know that she's gone back to her flat now, as she is managing to navigate her way around more easily with her crutches.

As if reading my thoughts, Mum says, 'I've invited Lexie along too.'

Maybe Max has a friend he could bring along to meet her? It would be nice if she could meet someone like Max. They got along so well that evening he came here for dinner.'

'Are you trying to set Lexie up with a date?' I find myself laughing at Mum's attempts to find someone for Lexie. 'I think Max's friends are either married or in relationships. There is a single guy at his office, but I don't think he's Lexie's type somehow.'

Dave is in his early forties and apparently spends his weekends up to his armpits in oily rags and tinkering about with motorbikes.

'Oh, well, it was just a thought. Thursday around seven o'clock?'

'I'll have to ask Max to check his diary first, Mum, but that works for me.' Max can't just drop everything to accommodate Mum, but I have to admit it sounds nice, and I did miss seeing Lexie while I was away.

'Already asked. He said that's fine with him but he would check with you. As I was in town today, I thought I would pop in and check before I do any shopping. It will be boeuf bourguignon for dinner. And I might make my apple crumble again. It went down a treat with Max. You really ought to try some classics, you know. All this brown rice and quinoa is fine for lunch, but men need real, hearty food when they come home from a day's work.'

'He works in finance, Mum, not down the pits.' I laugh and shake my head in disbelief. Once again, Mum has asked Max something before she has run it by me and I'm doing my best not to be annoyed or get angry with her. 'Well, if Max has agreed then I shall look forward to it.' I smile as brightly as I can.

I return to the shop just as a small queue has formed at the counter, and the rest of the morning passes fairly quickly. I probably need to lighten up, but I wonder why Mum has suddenly started asking Max and me round for dinner. Maybe she's ill. Or maybe she's realised she wasn't the warmest of mothers when we were younger, so is trying to make up for it now. Who knows? But whatever the reason, I'm sorry to say that I feel hesitant about diving straight into this happy-families routine with her. I'm never entirely trusting of my mother's motives, although I do suppose people can change.

After work that evening, I head home on the train and arrive at the house a little after six. There's no parking near the shop and city parking costs a fortune so I prefer to get the train, especially as you can chill out at the end of the day without having to worry about being stuck in traffic. I'm just putting

my key in the front door when I receive a text. It's from Molly and it simply says *Sorted* and a thumbs-up sign. As soon as I'm inside and have shrugged off my jacket I call her.

'Have you managed to sort the catering?' I breathe, fingers crossed behind my back.

'Yes, I was going to ring you later. The couple who own the café are happy to help. As I told you, it's a fledgling company and they're keen to make a name for themselves.'

'Thank you so much, Molly. Can we keep the same menu?' I remember it took hours to select the menu, such were Max's particular specifications with the food. He wants everything to be just perfect.

'Yes. I've arranged a meeting with them at their café on Hardman Street tomorrow night, if that's okay, around seven o'clock.' Hearing this news, I feel relief flood through me.

'Yes, that's fine. I'm sure Max will be relieved.'

Molly reminds me that Max doesn't know there's a problem. 'But I'm sure he'll be happy that we've found a solution.'

'That *you've* found a solution. I can't thank you enough.'

When I finish the conversation, I immediately realise that Max and I have agreed to go to dinner tomorrow evening at Mum's at the same time as the appointment with the caterers, so give her a quick call to say we won't be able to make it after all.

'What's so important that you have to cancel?' Mum asks, obviously annoyed with me.

I decide not to tell her about the catering problem and tell her that Max has had to rearrange an appointment. It's only a white lie and I remind myself of all the dates Mum has cancelled in the past, so I don't feel too bad.

'Well, it's a good job I didn't buy the beef today then,' she huffs.

'Sorry, Mum, there will be other times.' I wonder how many times I've heard Mum say the very same thing to me as I finish the call.

Max texts me to say he'll be home at seven thirty and, after a shower, I prepare us a nice pasta dish and open a bottle of red wine.

Later, as we are sitting at the kitchen table, Max devours the pasta, saying the addition of some anchovies has taken the dish to a whole new level, and I can't help smiling at his passion for food.

'Mum thinks I should be feeding you stew and dumplings every evening after you've spent a day at work.'

‘Please don’t,’ Max says, laughing. ‘As much as I enjoy your mum’s cooking, if I ate that stuff every day I’d end up in A & E like Rex.’

We both laugh.

Talking about food, I think it’s time to come clean about the caterers, especially as we have to go and meet the new ones tomorrow evening. I take a deep breath and tell him all about Molly’s visit. The catering problem should be the last thing I’m worried about confessing, but I feel so anxious every time I think about telling Max about what happened in Greece.

‘Cancelled on us? Gone into liquidation? I don’t believe I’m hearing this. Are you joking?’ Max is silent for a few seconds as he processes the news. ‘We’ll probably lose our deposit then if the company has gone bust.’

The smile that was on Max’s face a few seconds ago has completely disappeared. Thousands of pounds may have just disappeared down the drain. This is more of a disaster than I’d realised.

‘Maybe, oh gosh, I never even considered that. But try not to worry. Molly has found replacement caterers. We just have to go and meet them tomorrow evening.’

‘Why didn’t Molly tell me about this? And what if they’re not up to the job? Not many catering companies would be available to help out at short notice.’ Max drums his fingers on the kitchen table.

I tell him all about the couple who run the café, and that they have already received some great customer reviews, and his shoulders seem to relax a little.

‘Molly’s the wedding planner, isn’t she? It’s her job to smooth things over, remember. Maybe she thought she was doing you a favour by trying to come up with a solution first.’

Max is silent for a few moments before finally leaving the table and going to phone Molly in the other room. I can hear him asking her numerous questions before he hangs up and returns to the kitchen.

‘Well, they sound alright, I suppose.’ He runs his fingers through his hair before he picks up his glass and takes a long swig of red wine. Max is not used to things being outside his control and, for the first time in a long while, he looks stressed. He wastes no time in checking out customer reviews about the café on the Internet, before eventually conceding that they might be up to the job.

‘Better than being struck down with food poisoning, hey? Silver linings and all that,’ I say, trying to lighten the mood, but Max isn’t smiling.

‘They do sound good, I suppose, but you should still have told me straight away,’ Max replies tersely.

‘You paid the original caterers upfront, didn’t you? Will we lose the money?’ I ask hesitantly.

‘No, just a large deposit. It’s probably going to be hard to get anything back if the company has gone into liquidation though. Or at least it will take a long time to recover any money.’ Suddenly Max softens a little and pulls me to him in a hug. ‘Don’t worry about it. It’s only the food after all. Everything else is going to plan, fingers crossed anyway. If we lose a few grand it’s just bad luck. I’m not going to let it ruin our special day.’

‘It’s still a lot of money, though. You don’t have to go far in this city to find people sleeping on the streets... if we’d kept our wedding smaller, it wouldn’t have been such a big loss.’ I hadn’t intended to add to the stress of the situation, but I couldn’t help myself.

‘I know what you’re saying, but I’m not careless with money, Alice. I just enjoy nice things in life. Is there anything wrong in wanting the best catering for our wedding? But what’s happened has happened and I don’t see the point in crying over spilt milk, that’s all. Everything will be alright.’

Which is absolutely true of Max. He’s the type of person who sucks things up, moves on and makes the best of a bad situation.

‘I know. I’m sorry, Max. No one could have predicted that this was going to happen.’

‘Don’t be sorry.’ Max plants a kiss on my cheek. ‘And, anyway, everything happens for a reason. Maybe these new caterers will blow the other ones out of the water. Actually... hasn’t your mum invited us round for dinner tomorrow evening?’

‘I know, I’ve already cancelled. I said something about you having a late appointment. Sorry. I just didn’t want her going on about the catering, you know what she’s like.’

‘No, it’s fine. Let’s clear these things away, then you can show me your holiday pictures. I’m surprised you haven’t uploaded them to Facebook already.’

‘I haven’t really had time. Okay, I’ll make some coffee to take through to the lounge.’

I think about Max’s comment ‘everything happens for a reason’ and even though I agree, I decide that maybe now is not the time to discuss the beautiful wedding garden I stumbled across on holiday. I’ve resolved that I’m

going to become more active in looking for a venue to start up a gallery, but the time has passed for speaking up about my reservations on the direction of our wedding.

As I flick through the pictures of Crete, Max begins to relax a little as he reminisces about the proposal at the restaurant with the wonderful view. We laugh together as he reminds me of the waitress hiding behind a tree with a bottle of champagne until she heard me say 'yes'. We're snuggled up on the couch together and Max is gently stroking my hair. He can hardly believe it when he sees the photo of me dancing with the waiters at the Greek restaurant and laughs heartily, asking me how many ouzos I'd had.

'We should go back to Greece.' Max is smiling fondly as we look through the pictures together. 'We could hire a car and explore the island. In fact, when we're millionaires, I wouldn't mind buying a little holiday home in Greece.'

I think of summers spent in the sunshine and waves lapping at my feet as I set up an easel and paint.

'Would you really buy a place in Greece?'

'No, I'm only joking. It's not warm enough in the winter, so we couldn't escape for some sunshine when it's freezing cold here. Plus, there are hardly any direct flights over the winter.'

'So you've already checked this out?'

Max shrugs. 'When we came back from holiday, I looked up the winter temperatures and the flights. Maybe I just wanted to go back, still feeling high from the holiday. There are some real bargains to be had on houses over there, though, especially the ones in the villages.'

I think Max would probably be arranging to view properties this very minute, had I appeared enthusiastic about the idea of buying a holiday home. I decide to shelve the idea of telling Max all about the wedding garden in Crete, as we're having such a lovely evening.

As I sit here snuggled up next to Max, I recall him telling me not to be nervous about the ceremony and maybe he's right. He will be right there beside me, after all. And maybe that's all that really matters.

EIGHTEEN

Joe and Sarah look to be a similar age to us, when they greet us warmly the following evening as we walk into their cosy café on Hardman Street. Entering through the open glass doorway, I'm wrapped in a comforting hug by Sarah, a pretty, petite blonde who is clearly a toucher. The faint smell of cinnamon reaches my nostrils and I mention this to Sarah, who tells me they have been baking cinnamon-dusted doughnuts and offers me one to try.

Having seated us at a wooden table, with a coffee and one of the delicious doughnuts each, Sarah explains that the café is open for breakfast and lunch but, until they can find some larger premises, they aren't offering evening meals yet. I'm so impressed by their ambition. If this delicious doughnut is anything to go by, then I think Max and I will definitely be booking a table for dinner in the future.

'You've made this place really welcoming,' I say, glancing around the café and admiring how they have made use of every available space, with chunky wooden tables, ladder bookshelves and small vintage cupboards tucked in the corners, creating a very homely feel.

'So, I've had a look at the menu and that's all absolutely fine,' Sarah says, pushing her blonde, shoulder-length hair behind her ears. 'We've both worked in busy hotel kitchens so there's not much that we haven't cooked. We've done chicken ballotine many times, and meringues happen to be my speciality, so a berry pavlova is a great choice.'

'Although Sarah's sticky toffee pudding is to die for,' Joe states proudly. He is tall and dark-haired with a small beard. He's wearing round glasses and a Fair Isle patterned jumper, and reminds me more of a librarian than a chef.

'Mmm, my favourite. But maybe a little heavy for a summer wedding,' I suggest.

Sarah agrees and says she thinks a pavlova will be perfect. We also ask

for sharing cheeseboards on the tables, and even with the addition of these, the price still comes in very reasonably.

Max has a spring in his step as we head to the train station for the journey home.

‘They were a really nice couple, weren’t they?’ he says happily. ‘And it felt a bit more bespoke than that big catering firm. It’s nice to have a personal touch.’

‘I know.’ I link my arm through his, feeling relieved that the catering ‘crisis’ has been sorted.

Later the same evening, I go upstairs and decide to put some finishing touches to the painting of the blue-domed building in Santorini. As my brush sweeps across the canvas, my thoughts return yet again to the evening in the room with Vangelis, and of course to the kiss at the bus stop and the feelings it evoked in me.

What was I thinking?

I’d like to say it was all down to a cocktail of sunshine and holiday spirits, but it was more than that. My talk with Ria made me feel slightly better about it, but I know that, when Vangelis whispered in my ear ‘another time, another place’, for a brief second I wished it was the right time and the right place, and confusion pulled at my heart.

If I close my eyes, I can still feel Vangelis’s lips on mine as we shared that lingering kiss and I feel sick inside. Surely another person shouldn’t have that effect on you when you are about to get married? If he had made a move on me that night at the hotel, would I definitely have been able to resist him? Am I really ready to marry when I can experience feelings like that towards another man?

Deep inside, I know I have to tell Max. I don’t think we should have any secrets between us before we marry. Plus, there’s Molly. She could mention that evening to Max somewhere in the future, if she chose to, which could well cause trouble between us and I’m not sure I could risk that.

Just after ten o’clock, when Max calls up the stairs to ask if I would like a coffee, I say yes, then put my painting things away and go downstairs to join him.

I follow him into the kitchen, then we take our mugs into the lounge.

As we finish our coffees, Max turns to face me. ‘Alice, is everything

alright?’ He has a slight look of concern on his face.

‘What? Yes, of course. Why wouldn’t it be?’ I hope Max can’t see the guilt written all over my face.

‘I’m not sure. It’s just that ever since you’ve been back home, you’ve been... well, a bit distracted somehow. I just wondered if there was anything on your mind?’ He looks at me with an expression of concern on his face.

I guess when you know someone so well you can tell when something isn’t right. I can sense what kind of mood Max will be in as soon as he puts his key in the door. It’s almost like a sixth sense. I’m not sure why I thought I could hide things from him, as I appear to have spent half my time in a daydream since I arrived home. Although I haven’t just been thinking about that evening at the hotel, I’ve also been thinking about the wedding.

We’re settled in bed but I can’t stop thinking about what Max has asked me so decide it’s time to get things off my chest.

‘Max, I need to tell you something,’ I say, sitting up and switching on my cream bedside lamp. My heart is beating fast but there’s no going back now.

‘I knew there was something on your mind. What’s going on?’ His handsome face is smiling and I am filled with feelings of guilt but I press on.

I tell Max the whole story of me spending the night at the hotel with Vangelis and he listens wordlessly. I try to keep it as light-hearted as possible, although looking at Max I can see the hurt mixed with anger in his eyes, and this prevents me from telling him about the kiss as well.

‘You spent the evening with another man?’ He takes a swig of water from a bottle on his bedside table.

‘No... well, yes, I did... half the night, I suppose, but we were just talking. Max, you need to know that nothing happened, yet I still feel like you should know.’ As Max looks at me with confusion in his eyes, I wish I’d never said a thing.

‘If you were just talking, then why bother telling me? Are you trying to ease your conscience in some way? Is there something you’re not telling me?’

I can feel heat rising in my chest as I realise Max might not believe me, that he can tell I’m holding something back.

‘I’m just trying to get my head around the fact that you weren’t with your friends,’ he continues. ‘Why would you go home early from your own hen party?’ He’s staring at me with a frown on his face and a wounded look in his

eyes that I don't think I've ever seen before.

'I know it sounds a bit lame, but I was really tired. We'd been out for the day and I fancied a bit of an early night, and it was almost midnight.'

'So you go back to the hotel and go to another man's room, even though you're feeling exhausted?' Max pauses, then shakes his head.

I realise how bad it must sound. Was it selfish of me to tell Max just to assuage my guilt, although the real guilt is over the kiss, which I don't think I can bring myself to tell him about, though I know I should.

Max is sitting upright in bed now and biting the edge of his thumbnail, which is something he does when he is mulling something over. 'So, are you sure nothing happened between the two of you?' he asks doubtfully.

I hesitate before I answer. 'No, Max. I've told you we were just talking.'

'What were you talking about for four hours?'

'Just stuff, families and so on. I told him about our wedding. It was stuffy in the bar, so he just asked if I would like to see the view from his balcony.'

'That's an original line.'

The more I talk, the worse it sounds, and I'm so sorry to have hurt Max. I go to grasp his hand but he pulls it away from me sharply.

'So, you're telling me that absolutely nothing happened between you?'

I think of the soft, yet exciting kiss at the bus stop, and for a moment I am rendered speechless and unable to answer Max's question. He is staring at me as my cheeks flush red and I don't know what to do next. 'There was a brief kiss,' I whisper now, unable to look him in the eyes.

Max suddenly swings his legs over the side of the bed and pulls on a pair of joggers, before dragging a T-shirt over his head.

'Max, where are you going?'

'Downstairs. I need to clear my head. I'm just wondering why you're telling me all this. Are you having doubts about the wedding or something? Or just feeling guilty that you had one last fling? Jesus, how would you feel if I told you I had spent the night in Rachel's room after the race night?'

I feel sick at the very thought. 'Rachel? As in your ex? Well, that would be a bit different, wouldn't it? And why does that example jump to your mind?' Blood is pumping through my veins as I try to keep my tone even. 'And you could have done for all I know; I was thousands of miles away when you went on that race night.'

Max is heading for the bedroom door when he swings round to face me. 'Do you seriously think that? And why are you making this about *me* all of a

sudden? *I'm* not the one who's just confessed to spending the night with someone else "thousands of miles away" and kissing them. If it was just a kiss.'

'It wasn't like that, Max. The kiss was just a friendly one.' I feel awful lying, but I've hurt Max enough already.

I realise that with every word I seem to be making things worse and I bitterly regret having been so selfish as to say anything to Max in the first place. I had a physical attraction towards another man, but that was all. It happens in life. As Ria says, you can't go through life not finding other people attractive; it just becomes a problem if you act upon your feelings. I love Max with all my heart and regret having hurt him like this.

Max heads downstairs and I jump out of bed, grab a robe from the back of the bedroom door and follow him down to the lounge. He sits down on the sofa and, looking at his face, I see that it's etched with concern and not at all like the smiling, loving Max I normally see.

I sit on the floor by his feet. 'Max, you have to trust me. I don't want any secrets between us, which is why it was eating away at me and I had to tell you. But it's nothing worth us falling out over.'

'I want to trust you, Alice, but it's hard for me. I need to know about that friendly kiss. When you say "friendly", did he kiss you on the lips? Did you kiss him back?'

I'm not sure I can bear the hurt in his eyes, yet despite myself I tell Max that yes, I kissed him back. I explain it as a moment of sheer madness, yet deep inside I remember the feelings of confusion it stirred in me.

Max exhales deeply. 'Wow. Considering you were the one that didn't want a hen party in the first place, you certainly seem to have enjoyed yourself. Can I ask you, were you drunk when you accepted the invitation to the guy's room?'

'No, I'd had a few cocktails in town but I wasn't drunk.'

'Somehow that makes it even worse. We've all done daft things under the influence of alcohol, but you're telling me you weren't even drunk.' Max pushes up from the sofa and begins to pace the room.

'Is that right?'

I take a seat at the corner of the long sofa. Part of me feels like running away and finding a secluded beach, sinking down into the sand and forgetting about the whole world. But I guess everyone has times when they feel like that. I do know how lucky I am, there's no doubt about that. And I love Max

and I'm sorry I've hurt him like this. Not for the first time, I wish I'd insisted on a hotel spa break, then I wouldn't have run into any hunky Greek men. Although, is that saying that I am unable to resist temptation?

'So what now then?' I ask Max, feeling drained.

'I'm not sure, but I need to get some sleep. I've got an early appointment in the morning.' Max drains his drink then heads off to bed without saying good night, and the tears that I have been holding back fall freely down my face as I ask myself, *What on earth have I just done?*

NINETEEN

After a fitful sleep, I wake in the morning to find Max has already left for work without saying goodbye. I glance at the empty bedside table beside me, which usually has a morning coffee there, brought up by Max. I head to the en suite to shower and, as the water cascades over my body, I'm filled with a sudden feeling of dread. *Surely the conversation we had last night won't affect our wedding plans?* I'm terrified at the thought, yet at the same time feel strangely in control of my emotions. Perhaps it's now time to step back and review all the wedding day plans.

Halfway downstairs, I hear the ping of a text message and head upstairs again to the bathroom to retrieve my mobile phone. Glancing around the tiled room in muted shades of brown and beige, with fluffy white towels on the rack, I recall the pink plastic suite that was here when we first moved in. Max and I took forever deliberating on how it should be replaced. His first choice was a completely white, tiled room with black and silver fixtures and fittings, which somehow reminded me of a bathroom in a horror movie, as I imagined the white tiles smeared in blood. He laughed at me and said he would never understand what went on inside my mind, but he realised it must be helpful to have such a vivid imagination when it came to my painting. When I think about it, we do tend to disagree on quite a lot of things when it comes to décor, but these kinds of issues are easily resolved with some sort of compromise. I relented over Max's ideas for the lounge, which, actually, is very warm and my favourite room in the house.

The message on my phone is from Max, telling me that he will be late home this evening and not to make him any dinner. I feel a sickness in my stomach as I wonder what's going through his head and reply saying I hope he isn't too late as I think we need to talk. He doesn't reply.

This morning at work, I make a couple of mistakes and almost forget to scan a £50 vase that a customer is about to place in their bag, along with a few other items. My boss Gail notices and takes over the transaction with a smile, scanning the said item and telling me to take a break.

‘Okay, what’s going on?’ She hands me a coffee in the small canteen at the back of the shop. ‘You never make mistakes and it’s not the first one this morning. At least the first customer was honest enough to tell you that you had given him twenty quid too much in his change. Not like the old crone who would have been out of the shop in a flash with that vase, if I hadn’t noticed.’

‘I know, I’m so sorry, Gail. I didn’t have a very good sleep last night.’

‘Want to talk about it?’ She takes a seat opposite me at the small table.

‘The shop’s busy.’ I take a long slurp of coffee and stand up to leave.

‘The till is covered.’ She gently pushes me back down onto my chair. ‘So, what’s up?’

I tell her about me confessing to Max that I kissed someone on holiday and that I spent all evening chatting to the same man in a hotel room. As the words come out of my mouth it sounds really bad. No wonder Max reacted the way he did.

‘Wow.’ Gail takes a deep breath. ‘So now you’re beating yourself up about it? Believe me, we all do daft things on holiday. You do love Max, and still want to marry him, don’t you?’

‘Of course I do. That’s why it’s all such a mess. I can’t forget the hurt look on his face.’ I run my hands through my hair, which I didn’t take as much care blow-drying this morning and seems to be slowly morphing into Coco the Clown’s wig.

‘Listen,’ she says firmly, looking me in the eyes. ‘Holidays have a tendency to make people behave differently, but it’s not real life. It’s especially easy to lose your head on a Greek island, for goodness’ sake. That mix of gorgeous weather and food, the hunky laid-back men, it’s enough to weaken the resolve of a nun. I dumped a perfectly nice boyfriend in the early nineteen nineties for a holiday romance I had in Kefalonia. Spiros seduced me with flowery words and romantic walks along the beach. All very innocent at first, but we knew exactly where it was going as he reeled me in.’

There’s a sudden faraway look in Gail’s eyes as she presses on with the story.

‘Anyway. It was a wonderful two weeks, and a few nights before the end

of the holiday he invited us to a party and we danced and kissed and' – she pauses for a minute – 'we spent the entire night together. I was in a complete dream on the flight home and my poor boyfriend Darren, a carpet-fitter from Wigan, didn't really stand a chance after that. I was utterly smitten. A few weeks later, I flew over to Kefalonia for a long weekend to surprise Spiros and, in true cliché style, he was already schmoozing his next conquest. A two-year relationship with Darren was over, although to be fair he wasn't really the love of my life. He said my lifelong addiction to George Michael was unhealthy so it would never have lasted in the long run. But it's different with you. You and Max are made for each other, anybody can see that. Don't let a silly holiday infatuation ruin things.'

Gail has got to know Max over the years and we've even been on a couple of nights out together, so I allow myself to be reassured by her words.

'Tell that to Max. I wish I'd never opened my mouth in the first place. So much for honesty.'

'You don't need to tell Max every little thing, you know. Sometimes, when we omit to tell someone something, it's to spare their feelings. You know the saying "what you don't know can't hurt you"... I mean it's not as if you were considering anything serious with this Greek bloke, is it?'

'No, of course not.'

Well... at least that's what I tell myself. I'm certain I would have halted things had they gone any further. I have to be. And when I think about what it could have cost me and how much I would have hurt Max if I really had let myself get carried away with Vangelis, I feel so relieved that he behaved like a complete gentleman.

'Then you need to toughen up a bit. Stop being so sensitive. And so blinking honest!'

I attempt to return to the shop after the chat with Gail, but she pushes me gently down onto the chair again.

'And you need to stand up for yourself more and stop being so accommodating. You should have told Max exactly what kind of wedding you wanted from the off instead of leaving it to other people.'

'But I—'

'I haven't finished. Leaving it to Molly and Max left you with little say in how things were organised. Don't let people, however much you love them, take over your life. And don't even get me started on how you run around after your mother.'

'I'm getting better at that.' I hang my head, absorbing the harsh truths Gail has just unleashed on me.

'If you say so, but you seem to fly into a panic every time she texts or phones. Just because she's your mum doesn't mean you have to indulge her every whim. Especially when she seems to let you down at the drop of a hat.'

Gail has been witness to many such occasions over the two years we have worked together in the shop.

'You're a truly nice person, Alice, but you need to learn how to say no. Maybe I should get you assertiveness classes for your wedding gift!'

'Maybe you're right. Although I do feel more confident than I've felt in a long time. That holiday did me the world of good, although I don't suppose I can hop on a plane every time I'm feeling a bit stressed.'

When I finish my coffee and head back into the front of the shop, I realise with a heavy heart that everything Gail has said is true. And of course she's right about the thing with Vangelis. How could it have been anything more than a holiday infatuation? I never really got to know the man after all. I forgot about my life back home for a brief few days, indulging in a selfish fantasy that was never meant to be. The problem is, now that I am back to my real life, I'm worried I may have ruined it forever.

TWENTY

It's late when I hear the closing of a car door and, as I look out of the window, I'm surprised to see Max getting out of a taxi. As he walks into the lounge, he appears to be a little drunk. Max has never been a big drinker, as he can't really hold his alcohol too well. He's still in his work suit and takes his tie off before tossing it on the sofa and flopping down next to it.

'Would you like a coffee?' I ask.

'I'm not drunk. I've just had a few beers at the pub. I invited the staff for a drink. I should do it more often.' Normally Max has a silly smile on his face after a beer or two, but not tonight.

'Have you left the car at the office?'

'Yep.'

It's clear Max isn't in the mood to talk, at least not in a way that will lead to us resolving anything, so I tell him I'm going to go upstairs to bed and he shrugs his shoulders at me. I'm halfway up the stairs when suddenly anger overtakes me. I know I've hurt him but we need to discuss things like grown adults, but he's retreated into his shell and decided to give me the silent treatment.

I find Max in the kitchen making a coffee that he seemingly did want after all.

'Are we going to sort this out? I thought you might have come home earlier this evening to talk. We're getting married soon, in case you've forgotten.'

'In case *I've* forgotten. That's a laugh,' he sneers.

'Max, please. I know I've hurt you and I'm truly sorry.' I try to remain calm, because a huge argument is the last thing I want right now. 'The evening at the hotel was spent chatting, nothing more, and the goodbye kiss... well, it was a moment of madness, that's all. My life is here with you

and I wouldn't want it to be any other way. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything, but I never want there to be any secrets between us. That's the reason I told you. Now, please, tell me what you need so that we can move past this.'

I think of all the people who go on holiday and have indiscretions, just like Gail at the shop did all those years ago, and they shrug and say, 'What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas', but I'm not like that. I could never keep something like that to myself, I would be racked with guilt. Although maybe Gail is right in saying some things are better left unsaid to avoid hurting people. Maybe I was a little overwhelmed by the wedding numbers and just wanted to let loose for a while rather than having it out with Max and scaling the wedding back to something we could both agree on.

Max is silent as the coffee machine pours a drink into the cup I bought him when he first started up his business. It has the saying 'Fortune Favours the Brave' written on one side. I found it in a little gift shop on our first weekend away together, when we stayed in a pretty cottage in the Lake District. Suddenly I find myself choking back tears, remembering all the wonderful times we've shared together and, not for the first time, cursing myself for putting our future in jeopardy.

'Max, please say something.'

He walks back to the lounge, sits back down on the sofa and takes a long slurp of his coffee. 'What do you want me to say?'

'We have to talk about this,' I plead. I've never known Max behave this way. 'I need you to tell me that everything is going to be okay. I love you, Max, you know that. You must trust me. I've been honest with you. How can we fix it now?'

'You were only honest because you felt guilty. And why is it that I can't get it out of my head that something happened in that hotel room,' he says in a low voice.

'I had nothing to feel guilty about. I've told you for the umpteenth time we were just talking in that room. Believe what you like, I'm not going through it all again.'

Thoughts are swirling around my head as I wonder if I deserve Max's forgiveness. It's true we were simply talking that night, but Vangelis was the best listener I have ever known. He was calm and thoughtful, in contrast to Max, who usually makes light of any concerns I may have, turning everything into a joke. I've discussed some of my childhood with him,

obviously, and, although he was sympathetic, I know Max is the type of person who feels that you shouldn't be defined by your past. He's such a positive, inspiring person, who believes in always looking to the future, and maybe I ought to feel that way too.

'Only you can decide if you trust me or not.'

'That's the trouble, isn't it?' he says, looking at me searchingly. 'I'm not sure that I do.'

TWENTY-ONE

‘Alice!’ Ria gasps in surprise as I announce my arrival at her flat through the intercom outside. She presses the buzzer to let me up.

When I left the house this evening I didn’t have a clear idea of where to go. I thought about heading to Mum’s, but I know she goes to bed religiously at ten thirty each night after watching the news. Plus, I couldn’t have faced a lecture. I knew Ria would welcome me with open arms, no questions asked.

When I arrive at the door of her flat, she is standing there, dressed in a grey satin dressing gown, with her copper hair slightly tousled and a faint stain of red lipstick on her lips, making her look like a 1950s film star.

‘What’s happened?’ she asks, as she crushes me in a hug before leading me into her kitchen, where she pours us each a small gin from a bottle she has retrieved from a glossy white kitchen cupboard. Ria had the whole flat redecorated last year, after she had an unexpected payout from some mis-sold insurance. It’s decorated stylishly, in contrasting shades of white and teal, with touches of mustard soft furnishings and vases of fresh flowers. There’s a large canvas of the Palm House at Sefton Park – one of Ria’s favourite places – on the kitchen wall, painted by yours truly. I gave it to her as a flat-warming present, when she bought the place five years ago. She’d been renting up until then and had saved steadily until she had the deposit for her own place.

‘Medicinal. I wouldn’t normally offer you a drink at this hour.’ Ria hands me the glass and I glance at my watch and realise it’s almost midnight.

‘I’m so sorry to disturb you. I know you have work in the morning, I didn’t know where—’

Ria presses her finger against my lips to silence me and I cry into my gin as I tell her all about Max and his harshness in our fight.

‘I just needed to get out of that house. He doesn’t trust me and I don’t

know how we can go into a marriage where there's no trust. I should never have gone to bloody Crete. Gail was probably right; I am a wimp who needs to stand up for myself more.'

'She called you that?' Despite the situation, Ria can't help smiling.

'She did. And she suggested I go to assertiveness classes.'

Ria has told me many times that I'm a bit soft and should assert myself more, but I don't suppose I've ever really listened as I dislike confrontation, such is the irony.

'Listen here, stop beating yourself up. Everything will be alright between you two, I'm sure of it. You're probably both a bit stressed about the wedding. Of course Max trusts you, he's clearly just processing what happened. I know he insists on taking on a lot of the plans, but he has a high-pressure job too, remember? I'm surprised he hasn't burnt out but I guess that's what happens when you're a control freak. Well, in the nicest possible way,' she adds, obviously not wanting to appear too rude.

It's true Max likes to oversee a lot of things himself, especially when it comes to matters of the business, as, I guess, many self-employed people do. I like to think his decisiveness complements my 'go-with-the-flow' and, at times, indecisive nature, but perhaps I've become too much of a doormat, and I worry what that could mean for us in the long term.

Half an hour later, having had a good cry on Ria's shoulder, I'm ensconced in her cosy guest bedroom, inhaling the smell of freshly laundered cotton sheets, but, despite feeling utterly exhausted, I find I'm unable to drift off to sleep. Ten minutes later I can hear Ria gently snoring through the wall from the next room and the sound, far from being annoying, is strangely soothing. I feel blessed to have such a wonderful friend as Ria in my life and don't know what I'd do without her. I've struggled a little with knowing what to do with my art degree, but I wouldn't change a thing about it as it gave me my friendships with Ria and Kerry, and that is worth more to me than anything.

As I lie awake, I relive the moment Max quietly told me he didn't know if he trusted me and I'm filled with despair. Can I blame him? Would I believe Max if he told me he had spent the night in a woman's hotel room on a stag do, claiming it was all perfectly innocent? I think so. But would I believe him if he said it had been with Rachel? I don't know. Shouldn't there be an unshakeable trust between two people in any situation?

I take my phone from my bag to see if Max has texted me, but there's

nothing. I pull the covers over me and cry gently into my pillow, as I consider the possibility that I may have ruined things between us and wonder what on earth tomorrow will bring.

TWENTY-TWO

The next morning, as I head into work on the train, my mum phones and asks me what is going on between Max and me. It seems bad news travels fast. My head is thumping, because I hardly got a wink of sleep last night, so a conversation with Mum is the last thing I need right now.

‘Nothing, I just stayed at Ria’s last night,’ I tell her, wondering what on earth Max has said. She must have heard it from him, but why has she contacted him yet again? As Mum continues the conversation, she informs me that she bumped into Max outside the newsagent’s this morning in the village. She asked him if we wanted to go for dinner at her house one evening, as we’d had to cancel the last one, and he shrugged and said he’d ask me when he saw me. I can’t help but see this as a good sign: Max didn’t say outright that we would never be going to Mum’s for dinner together again.

‘Well, something’s going on, I can tell. Max looked as though he’d hardly slept a wink.’

That makes two of us then.

Her silence usually elicits a long explanation from me, but not today. There’s no way I’m going into all the details of what happened the previous evening, so I tell her I needed to call on Ria about something and ended up staying the night. I’m not sure I’ll ever tell her what’s happened between Max and me as I’m certain she would sit in judgement and I’d never hear the end of it.

‘If you say so,’ she says eventually. ‘Anyway, I was trying to rearrange our dinner date.’ I can’t believe Mum is so keen to have us over, but decide to take it as a positive thing. ‘I hardly see anyone these days and you’re always both so busy. Having Lexie to stay with me for a while reminded me of how nice it is to have family round, because most of the time it’s just me

and Rex.'

Mum doesn't have any grandchildren yet, or many friends, so I guess she gets a little bored sometimes, especially as Rex spends hours mooching around in his garden shed.

'Okay, Mum, I'll get back to you,' I say, thinking that my mum really does seem to be becoming a little gentler as she gets older and maybe I ought to try to understand her a bit more. I know she found life difficult following the split with Dad, but I strongly resented the fact that she clouded our opinion of him.

'Well, don't leave it too long, and whatever is going on between you and Max, sort it out. There was definitely something not right with him.'

Mum's right, of course, and I can hardly wait to get home after work and talk things over with Max. Last night I went over and over our conversation, unable to forget his comment about not being able to trust me, and I wonder where we go from here. I don't see how there can be a relationship without trust and the thought fills me with dread. With a heavy heart I pray that we can sort things out between us. And if we manage to, I vow never to give up trying to communicate with Max.

Halfway through a busy morning at work, Max texts me to tell me that he's meeting up with his friends from National Finance again this evening and not to wait up for him. I'm wondering if he's trying to hurt me. At the very least he seems to want to avoid me. And part of me is annoyed that he is so unwilling to confront our fight head on. I know that I avoid confrontation, but I don't run away when there is a problem right in front of me.

I press on with work, careful not to make any mistakes at the till. I don't want to bring my personal problems into the workplace ever again. A customer purchases a picnic basket and I think of the one Max bought for me not long after we met. I recall the wonderful summer days we spent in the park, barely able to keep our hands off one other – as we kissed publicly like the kind of couple I find embarrassing to witness – and find myself suppressing tears. I wonder what it says about me that I couldn't trust myself around a handsome stranger on holiday.

I wonder if Max was the one to instigate this meet-up with his old colleagues and if Rachel will be there again. I feel a knot in the pit of my stomach, worrying that things could be unravelling between us, but I throw myself into my work in an effort to forget thinking such things.

I'm exhausted when I push the key into the front door of our house a little after six o'clock, but I'm thankful that it was a busy afternoon at the shop, giving me little time to think about what is going on between Max and me.

A short while later, Max arrives home and gives me a curt nod, before going upstairs for a shower.

'Are you eating out?' I ask, as he walks into the kitchen a while later, reeking of the aftershave I bought for him on his birthday. He's wearing a new shirt with fashionable jeans and his designer shoes that usually only come out on special occasions. 'I was going to make a risotto.' Risotto is one of Max's favourites and the first thing I ever cooked for him.

Max eyes the ingredients set out on the kitchen counter and hesitates for a moment, before declining. 'No, thanks, we're going to grab something in town.'

'Max,' I say, as softly as I can, 'how long are you going to keep this up? I feel as though you're punishing me.' The weekend is upon us and I can't remember the last time Max spent a Friday night out with his friends.

'I'm not punishing you.' He turns and looks me in the eyes. 'I just can't get over the fact that you spent the night with another man. Even though you claim nothing happened, I feel so betrayed. You haven't told me what you were talking about, which makes it all sound pretty secretive. But perhaps I could have forgiven that if you hadn't then told me that you kissed him. There was obviously a spark between you both and it makes me wonder what might have gone on that evening. It just keeps going around and round in my head.'

'Oh, Max.' I attempt to embrace him, but he shrugs me away. The rejection kills me, and a feeling of panic seeps through my bones as I think how naive I was to expect Max to just shrug my confession off.

'Max, please, I know I've hurt you. I don't know how many times I have to say I'm sorry, but I need to know things will be okay between us.' There's that twisting knot in the pit of my stomach again.

Max fills a glass with water and glances at his watch. He won't meet my eyes. 'I should be setting off soon. I said I'd meet the guys at seven o'clock in town. It will probably be a late one.'

There is a tiny hope in my heart that he will kiss me, as he does every time he heads off somewhere, but tonight there's nothing. He can barely look at me and my heart sinks.

‘Look, Alice, I know it might seem to you like I’m overreacting about all this and maybe I am. But I’m trying to sort things out in my head.’ He picks his keys up from a hook and turns to face me. ‘But I still love you. You can’t just switch those feelings off overnight. Don’t wait up.’

As the front door closes behind him, I burst into tears. *Maybe there’s hope for us after all.* Just maybe.

I watch a film on TV and after a few glasses of wine I doze off on the sofa. When I wake and stretch my arms out and glance at the clock, it’s a little after two o’clock in the morning and Max isn’t home. Or perhaps I didn’t hear him come in. I go upstairs on the off chance that Max has returned home and I didn’t hear him, but the bedroom is empty.

I sigh as I change into my pyjamas and climb into bed, remembering Max telling me not to wait up. It’s strange to think that not so long ago he suggested his old pals bring their partners to their next reunion. It seems that idea has been shelved though, unless I was the only one excluded from the invitation. For a second I worry about him, hoping that nothing has happened, then tell myself to stop it and remind myself that he’s a grown man.

I find I’m wide awake after the sleep on the sofa and I’m about to flick on the television in the bedroom, when I see an earlier text message from Kerry, asking me what I’m up to tomorrow and do I fancy brunch at her place? It’s her birthday tomorrow so I can hardly say no, even though I really don’t feel like socialising, or eating Hal’s vegan cooking. Also, although it’s a Saturday I don’t have work tomorrow.

I’m still wide awake at four o’clock and, as another movie ends, I try to settle down to sleep again, but find myself tossing and turning. As the dawn breaks and Max still isn’t home, a slight panic engulfs me. Max has never stayed out overnight before and, despite his hurt over the things I have told him, didn’t he tell me he loved me before he left? Something doesn’t feel right and I ring his phone, which goes straight to voicemail.

I don’t have the numbers of any of Max’s old colleagues, apart from Jay’s and his partner Kim’s, who are coming to the wedding. It’s a little early to be ringing on a Saturday morning so I tap out a message to Kim, asking if Jay has arrived home after their evening out. She replies a while later, telling me that Jay is snoring soundly, having returned home just after one thirty in the morning, and asks if everything is okay. I tell her Max hasn’t arrived home and apologise for bothering her, and she promises to get in touch if Jay

knows of Max's whereabouts.

I pad downstairs to make coffee. Glancing around our beautiful kitchen, I wish with all my heart that Max was here, standing next to me, retrieving eggs from the fridge to make my favourite eggs Benedict, while I pour us some freshly brewed coffee.

It's almost seven now and I switch the radio on, vaguely anxious about whether there will be anything on the upcoming news about an incident in town, before realising that my imagination is probably running away with me.

As I sip my coffee, I watch the seconds tick by on the kitchen clock and my heart sinks even further as I ask, *Where on earth are you, Max?*

TWENTY-THREE

The queue for the ferry to Seacombe is quite long this morning, probably due to the weather forecast promising a day of sunshine. A little blonde boy of about five is holding his parents' hands and jumping up and down excitedly, asking when he will be able to go on the 'big boat'. A few minutes later the little boy gets his wish, when a guard removes a barrier and we step onto the wooden boards of the ferry that will take me over to where Kerry lives.

As it chugs along gently, I think of Max and wonder if he's arrived home yet. I've sent him a couple of messages, telling him at the very least to let me know he is safe, then, since the police hadn't turned up at our door, I decided not to message him again. He clearly wants some space, never mind how inconsiderate he is being about it. Yet, despite myself, I keep checking my phone for any messages. *Nothing*. I wonder whether Max has stayed out with someone as an act of revenge if he really believes I slept with Vangelis, then quickly dismiss the thought because Max is not that kind of man. But perhaps if Rachel was there last night and the drinks were flowing and...

'You dropped these.' I'm pulled out of my thoughts by a woman, standing with the young boy I was watching earlier, who is holding out a pair of grey woollen gloves that are rolled up into a ball.

'Oh right, thank you.'

'No worries.'

I don't think I'll be needing the gloves today. Or the long coat, for that matter, which is a little heavy for the weather, although I'm grateful for it on the slightly blustery ferry crossing.

The blonde woman, who looks a similar age to me, heads back to the rail of the boat, where a dark-haired man places his arms around her shoulders and she takes hold of the little boy's hand again. The sight of them enjoying a

family day out together brings a lump to my throat and suddenly I'm fighting back tears. Just over a week ago, I had the most perfect relationship and was looking forward to being married, if not exactly to my wedding, and now I've gone and screwed it all up. As the boat continues its short journey across the water, my phone rings and I fumble in my pocket, praying that it's Max and that he's alright.

'Alice, hi, where are you?' It's Kerry.

'Hi, Kerry, I'm on the ferry.' I laugh at the rhyming sentence despite being disappointed that it isn't Max on the other end of the phone. 'I'll let you know when I'm close.'

'Okay, see you in a bit then. I'll have the kettle on.'

I'm hoping she has something a little stronger when I get there, as I could use a drink right now, before remembering that it's only a little after eleven o'clock in the morning and I'm not going down that road.

Arriving at Kerry's house, a pleasant ten-minute walk from the ferry terminal, the unmistakeable waft of bacon hits my nostrils as I approach the front door. When Kerry opens the door she's wearing a tiny denim mini skirt, a white T-shirt and a floral hairband.

'I knew it!' I enter the kitchen to find a plate of juicy bacon and a thick crusty farmhouse loaf on the kitchen counter. 'Or are you telling me this is meat-free bacon?'

'Nope. Best quality Danish bacon from the butcher's up the road. I've done some cauliflower hash browns in the oven. One of our five-a-day so I don't feel so guilty. Oh, and some beans if you like.'

What is going on?

'Were you ever really a vegetarian?' I ask suspiciously. My stomach gives a little growl as I realise I'm feeling ravenous.

'Kind of. I wanted to cut down on meat anyway so I did that when Hal was around. The rest of the time, well, I ate whatever I felt like.'

I sit at the reclaimed wooden table and we tuck in to the most delicious doorstep bacon sandwiches, with a side of cauliflower hash browns, which are home-made and really tasty, plus a ramekin of baked beans, all washed down with some delicious Colombian coffee.

'Mmm. Is there really anything nicer than a bacon sandwich on a Saturday morning?'

I'm glad I couldn't stomach anything earlier as it would have spoilt my enjoyment of this simple, comforting brunch. I'm wondering where Hal is

and if he'll walk into the house soon and rumble Kerry and her dark secret, when she tells me he's in London for a few days.

'He's gone on a march to support the WASPI cause.' Kerry sighs loudly and rolls her eyes.

'WASPI?' I say in surprise 'Erm, isn't that inequality in women's pension age or something?'

I remember it being all over the news and Mum telling me she had been lucky to get her pension at sixty as she had avoided the new age entitlements by a couple of years.

'Yep. I mean they have my sympathy, obviously, but I'm not sure why he goes on every march he can find, even things he hasn't appeared to show any interest in before. Although I suppose he does have a meeting in London tomorrow anyway, I think. I might have buggered off by the time he gets back.'

To my surprise she sounds serious.

Kerry takes a huge bite of her bacon sandwich and glances outside to the slightly messy patio area, where a broken chiminea, an assortment of recycling bins and some soggy canvas bunting from a previous party are strewn across the flagstones, all of which have moss poking through the cracks.

'Really? What do you mean?' I ask her softly.

Kerry tells me that she hasn't been happy for a while and that Hal seems to be pleased to be doing anything other than spending time with her.

'And it's not as if I'm demanding. I'm happy to stay at home when Hal doesn't feel like going out, but he never wants to do anything. That is, other than talk about his work and sustainable housing... and climate change... the plight of the badgers... and now the injustice of the women's pension age. I never get dressed up any more, as I never get to go to fancy restaurants, apart from with you and Ria. The last straw was this weekend.' She places her coffee cup down and lets out a deep sigh. 'He forgot my birthday.'

'He never!' Kerry had a huge party for Hal's birthday in the spring, with a home-made cake and everything. To think that she went to so much effort for him and he forgot about her makes me annoyed on behalf of my friend.

'When he told me he was going to London, I asked him if it was really essential that he stayed over and couldn't he get the train home. I thought that he might have booked a restaurant for us to go somewhere nice over the weekend. He didn't bat an eyelid and clearly had no clue that it was my

birthday weekend and I wasn't going to bloody well tell him. Anyway, that's it, I've had enough. Not just because of my birthday; things just aren't working between us. We're two totally different people. I'll miss the light in that conservatory when I paint though.' She gives a short laugh.

If I'm honest, I never thought Kerry was really suited to Hal. She changed a lot since they got together, trying to fit in with him, but I wondered whether she was really being true to herself. She's talked of growing her hair again and today she's back to wearing her old style of clothes. I would never have told her this, of course. I guess we all have to figure things out for ourselves...

'I know. The things we do for love, hey? And no one could have said anything to me, because I wouldn't have listened. At least not when I was all loved up.' She lets out a sigh.

'Are you really going to move out?'

'Yes, I'm moving back across the water. This place is in Hal's name anyway. I'll rent somewhere until my next painting is snapped up by the National Gallery, then I might consider buying a place.' Kerry plasters a smile across her face and I lean over and wrap her in a lingering hug.

'Sounds like we're both having man trouble.'

I tell her all about Max and how, as far as I know, he hasn't returned home yet because he hasn't been in touch with me. All my concerns about the wedding come tumbling out and I sob all over her kitchen table.

'Stay here tonight, if you like,' she says gently. 'That is, unless you feel you should go back home to try to sort things out. Although I have to say, staying out all night without contacting you and making you sick with worry is completely out of order.'

Kerry and I spend the afternoon chatting, against a background of songs on the radio, and drinking coffee until just after three o'clock, when Kerry opens the fridge and offers me a glass of white wine. I still haven't heard anything from Max and almost weaken and tell Kerry I should really be heading home. I think of every scenario, including the possibility that Max may have lost his phone, so I make a decision to give Molly a call.

Molly answers on the third ring and tells me that she'll try Max's phone and get back to me. I'm praying she can get through to him, but when she calls me again, it's to tell me she has drawn a blank. 'He's probably in bed right now sleeping it all off. Max isn't much of a drinker, as you know, so he might have been in a right state last night and stayed over with a friend. Or

maybe he went on to a party or something. Staying out all evening doesn't necessarily mean you're up to no good, does it?' she says pointedly. 'Look,' she continues, 'if you're that worried, I'll call round to your house, if you like. Do you still keep a spare key with Iris next door?'

I tell her that we do, and that I would appreciate the gesture and hope that she finds Max sound asleep at home. I also ask her to tell him that I'll be staying here at Kerry's tonight and then follow that up with a quick text to Max myself.

'Are you two okay?' Molly asks more gently.

'I hope so. I think maybe we just need a little space between us for the time being, but I'm sure we'll be able to sort things out.'

Molly doesn't push, so we finish the call and I try to concentrate on being here, supporting Kerry. I suppose it's entirely possible that Max has lost his phone, especially if he drank a little more than usual. Molly will tell Max that I've tried to get in touch, so for now I try to push things out of my mind.

'Do you want to go to the cinema tonight?' Kerry interrupts my thoughts. 'There's a new Gerard Butler film, if you fancy it?'

'You mean 'cos *you* fancy *him*?'

Kerry is scrolling through her phone, looking at the films showing at the local Odeon. 'Maybe, but it's one of those action thrillers that's guaranteed to entertain. It might take both our minds off things.'

The last thing I feel like watching tonight is a romantic girlie film so I say yes, an action movie sounds perfect. I decide to leave a message on Max's phone, just in case he does have it with him. I tell him I'm worried about him and that I hope he's alright, and try to keep any anger out of my voice even though I'm bloody furious with him.

An hour later, having just showered, I receive a message from Molly that simply reads: *Home and sleeping like a baby x*

I'm filled with relief that Max isn't lying in a gutter somewhere, or holed up in someone else's home, and decide I'll deal with it in the morning. For now, he can go to hell.

'Alice, it's gorgeous, thank you.' Kerry runs her hands over the soft, blue, leather shoulder bag, similar to the one she admired in town before our holidays, but purchased from a sale on a leather website.

'I'm glad you like it. And you can wear it loud and proud this evening, as Hal isn't here.'

‘Stuff Hal. And thanks again, it really is perfect.’

‘Oh, and there’s this. Happy birthday!’

I hand her a shop-bought card with ‘To a Great Friend’ on the front. We’ve stopped making each other home-made painted cards now, as we’ve got so many from each other and the novelty has kind of worn off.

As we sit in the cinema later, waiting for the film to start, I glance at my phone one last time, before it goes onto silent, but there’s nothing from Max so I toss it in my bag and try to forget all about him. It doesn’t take long for my mind to be distracted, as Gerard Butler, along with a host of other hunky males, ooze testosterone from the cinema screen as they chase the bad guys, hurling hand grenades and blowing up cars and frequently ripping their shirts off to assess the damage from a bullet.

We finish the evening with a nightcap in a nearby bar and toast Kerry’s birthday, with a promise to go out on the town and celebrate properly with Ria, when she’s recovered from a twenty-four-hour bug she’s caught. I finally take my phone out of my handbag to find three missed calls from Max, who has obviously surfaced and didn’t lose his phone after all. Normally I would ring him immediately, but thinking of how he left me worrying for half the night I decide I’m not going to spoil my evening with Kerry. She’s having her own problems and could use a friend right now.

I’m furious to think that Max had his phone with him all along, yet couldn’t even be bothered sending me a text to let me know he was staying out for the night. I think of Gail’s comments about me being too soft and decide that I’m not going to run to him as soon as he’s contacted me. This time, Max can wait.

Surprisingly, I sleep like a log in Kerry’s spare room and after an early breakfast of coffee and a bagel, decide it’s time to head back home. The weather has dulled a little this morning and the boat is quiet as it makes its way along the Mersey with only a few passengers aboard. I imagine it’s quite a nice way to travel to work in the morning and think of the movie *Working Girl*, in which the office workers of New York travel to Staten Island every morning by ferry, although I suppose it would be pretty chilly in the winter months.

I put the key into the front door a little after eleven o’clock and find Max standing in the kitchen making coffee.

‘Alice, hi, are you alright? You never answered my calls,’ he says quietly,

barely able to look at me.

‘Why, were you getting worried about me?’ I’m finding it difficult to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. ‘I thought you might have lost your phone, but obviously that wasn’t the case. Why didn’t you tell me you’d be staying out all night two nights ago?’

‘I’m sorry, I was drunk.’ He retrieves another cup from a cupboard and pours me a coffee. ‘We ended up in a nightclub drinking shots. I’m not much of a drinker anyway, as you know. I ended up going home with one of the blokes who has a flat down near the Albert Dock. I can’t remember much about it, to be honest. I got home here just after ten.’

Which I calculate was just after I left yesterday morning.

‘Why so late?’ I find myself imagining all kinds of scenarios, including one where an attractive woman makes him breakfast in bed before he sets off.

‘I was wasted. I didn’t wake until after nine yesterday morning. Chris made me two coffees, as I chucked the first one up. Alice, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you.’ He turns to face me and I can see genuine remorse in his eyes.

‘Well, I guess I’ll have to trust you, won’t I? Can we please put all this behind us now?’

Max hands me the coffee and I notice bags etched under his eyes, which I don’t think I’ve ever seen before. It seems the last few days have taken their toll on him, along with the drink-fuelled evening.

‘Have you eaten?’ I go to the cupboard and take out a loaf of bread, but he tells me he isn’t hungry.

‘We could go for a pub lunch later this afternoon though, if you fancy it?’

‘Sure, why not?’ I fill a glass with water and hand him a couple of dispersible tablets before heading upstairs for a shower. As I feel the warm water cascade over my body, I’m hoping we can finally put things behind us and move on. Max put me through all kinds of emotions yesterday and the night before. I know I’ve probably done the same to him. I know I’ve hurt him. I also know that I love him with all my heart.

TWENTY-FOUR

We end up having a Sunday roast in a local pub around five o'clock, which is perfectly pleasant but not like the usual jokey afternoons we have when we chat to the other regulars who we've got to know quite well. Occasionally, Hal and Kerry would come over and join us, Hal piling his plate with vegetables, and I'd laugh at Kerry, who would furtively bury a generous slice of roast beef under her Yorkshire pudding.

That evening, at home, we watch an action movie and I tell Max all about the Gerard Butler movie, which he says he quite fancies seeing himself. Later, we lay side by side in our huge bed and, as we get comfortable, Max gently lifts his arm for me to snuggle into and I thank the Lord. Perhaps everything will be alright after all.

On Monday – the following day – I do something I've been talking about doing for a long time. I make a call to the local Community Centre to ask if it would be possible to arrange a meeting with someone to outline my idea for running an art class. I'm promised someone will call me later that day and luckily they do, just as I am on my lunch break. A lady called Mrs Harper tells me they always welcome new classes at the centre because, if the council thinks it isn't being sufficiently used, it could face closure. We agree to meet on my next day off and I put the phone down feeling positive and a little bit excited.

I have a text from Kerry telling me that Hal has returned from London and they've had a long chat and she's told him she is leaving. I give her a quick call before I return to work and she tells me he barely reacted, confirming to her that it was the right thing to do.

'Oh, Kerry, are you sure you're okay?'

'Yeah, I'm fine, really. If I'm honest, we've just been like mates for a long time now, nothing more. He's told me I can stay here as long as I want

until I find a place, which is a bit of a relief. I'm moving into the spare room though.'

We finish chatting, with a promise to meet up soon, and I head into the shop just as a delivery of flowers is being made.

'Wow, they're gorgeous,' I say to Gail, who has taken receipt of a huge bouquet of red roses.

'They're not for me,' she says, handing them over.

I turn a card over that simply reads: *Love you. x*

'Are they from Max? Have you two made up then?' Gail asks me. 'Or has he been up to no good himself?'

I haven't told Gail anything about Max staying out all night and bat away a flicker of doubt. We're making a fresh start, whatever has or hasn't happened between us, and I'm not going to let anything spoil that.

'Does a man have to have been up to something to send his fiancé a bunch of flowers?' I plaster a huge smile on my face as I inhale the scent of the fragrant blooms.

'Of course not, I'm only jealous. I can't remember the last time a bloke sent me a bunch of flowers.'

She goes to serve the next customer at the till with a cream bedroom clock fashioned inside a birdcage and I think it's a shame that no one sends her flowers. She's a strong, outspoken woman and perhaps her husband feels she isn't the type who would appreciate flowers. Yet I saw how she smiled when she took receipt of the blooms from the courier, feeling the petals and inhaling their scent.

A little after five thirty, I pick up my flowers and head off home, when I'm surprised to find Mum outside the shop. 'Mum, hi! This is a surprise. Is everything alright?'

'Do you think I only come to see you when there's a problem?' she asks.

Uh, yes, usually, I think to myself.

'Although maybe falling out with Max *is* a problem. I knew there was something wrong the other day when I bumped into him in the village. Maybe you've made up though, judging by the flowers.'

'It was nothing that we haven't managed to sort out, Mum. Have you really come all this way to ask about Max and me?'

Has her life really become so boring that she needs to find out everything that's going on in our life?

‘Well, no, of course not. I’ve just been at the hairdresser’s and I ran into Molly in the street on the way out. She told me everything.’ She’s looking at me with that judgemental look on her face, which I knew she would, and my shoulders sink. I really can’t be doing with this after a day’s work.

‘I don’t know exactly what she told you, but Max and I don’t have a problem with anything.’

For a second I wonder whether Molly has simply told her about the catering problem and she’s just asking if everything has been sorted out.

‘Honestly, Alice. Did you really think Max wouldn’t find out about you being with another man on holiday when his own sister was there to witness it?’ She shakes her head.

‘What? Whoa, wait a minute, Mum. Before you become judge and jury, I should say that nothing happened on that holiday. I spent the evening chatting to someone, that’s all. Not that I should have to explain myself to you,’ I reply angrily.

I resist the urge to tell her that I was talking about the terrible Christmas when we lost everything, including my relationship with my father.

Standing here having this conversation with my mother, I wonder what the hell Molly thought she was doing in telling her anything. Although Mum has an uncanny way of extracting information from people, so she probably quizzed the poor girl into submission.

‘You’re a fool, that’s what you are. Fancy risking the wedding by messing about like that. You should count your blessings that you have a bloke like Max. Lexie would love to have someone like him in her life.’

‘Unless you have something constructive to say, Mum, maybe it’s best that we don’t continue this chat.’

I think of all the times over the years when I’ve needed her but she’s been off somewhere doing her own thing with her friends, especially when she worked as a hotel receptionist before she retired. A party or a girls’ night out always came first, before Lexie and me. We spent many evenings being looked after by an easy-going Rex, who would keep us entertained by playing board games with us.

I also think of her comment about how Lexie would love someone like Max. ‘And I know Lexie would like to settle down, Mum, but she’s a grown woman not a child. She’ll do that in her own time; you need to stop worrying and fussing over her. She wants to find the right one and not just settle for someone. There’s nothing wrong with that.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with wanting to see your daughters happy,’ she says in a low voice, before fumbling in her bag for a cigarette. ‘And maybe I would like her to find someone successful, there’s nothing wrong with that.’ She blows a cloud of cigarette smoke into the air. ‘I don’t want either of you making the same mistakes I did.’

‘You mean spending money that you never had? What are you saying? Find a rich husband and spend all his money? That’s a bit last century, isn’t it?’

‘Not really, plenty of people live like that if it’s what they both want. And I know I drove your father away, Alice, I don’t need reminding of that. He earned the money alright, but he was tight-fisted. I wanted us all to have nice things.’

The generosity Dad showed whenever he took Lexie and me on holiday bears no resemblance to the man Mum has just described. And he was always generous on birthdays too, but maybe he liked to keep treats for special occasions, whereas Mum spent money like there was no tomorrow.

We walk to the end of the road, with me trying to remain calm. I don’t want to argue with Mum any more. Deep inside, I’m still angry that she never really nurtured a relationship with my father. She blamed him for moving so far away, but that was where his job opportunities took him at the time. He returned to his first love – art – embracing a career that used his creative skills and, as I’ve grown older, I’ve come to understand that.

Mum is silent for a few minutes, glancing into a shop window as we walk on, then she says, ‘And you’re wrong, you know. I don’t fuss over Lexie the way you say I do, but even if it were true I only do it to encourage her. She never seemed to know what to do with her life when she was younger, but you had your talent for art; it was all you were ever interested in. I knew you’d make a success of things.’

So Mum acknowledges that I have a talent for art, but in all these years she’s never actually told me that. In fact, at times, she’s made me feel as though I don’t even have a ‘proper’ job, preferring to gush about Lexie’s latest achievements at work. I feel emotional, knowing Mum thinks I have a talent, but dearly wish she’d told me that before.

‘And don’t you think I needed encouragement?’ I say now. ‘I never had a shred of confidence when I was young, because you never seemed to show any interest in my art or praise me for anything, for that matter. Talent alone isn’t enough. A child needs to be supported and encouraged. Dad always did

that but he wasn't around for very long, was he? And whose fault was that?' I can't help adding.

Mum turns to face me and I can see tears pricking her eyes. 'Well, none of us is perfect, Alice. I've made mistakes in my life, which I've lived to regret, but you can't turn the clock back, can you? And whether you believe it or not, I was just concerned about you and Max, that's all. I think the world of Max. I think I'd better go now.'

As she walks off, I stare after her for a moment and think about what she has just said. *None of us is perfect*. I consider running after her and hugging her, but I'm certain she would shrug me off as her heart is so cold. But I must try.

'Mum, wait!' I race after her, my heart pumping, and when I catch up with her I crush her in an embrace that takes her breath away.

'Those bloody cigarettes,' she says, coughing slightly, with her arms by her sides and feeling awkward in my embrace. She raises a hand and gently pats me on the back. 'I'm sorry I wasn't the mother you wanted me to be and I'm sorry I broke my marriage up,' she sobs. 'Your father was a good man and you're right, I screwed it all up. I liked to buy expensive things and keep up appearances, because deep down I thought I wasn't good enough for him and it turns out I was right.'

'But, Alice, I'm trying to make things up to you. I know it might be too late, but I want you and Max in my life, which is why I'm keen to have you both round for dinner. No ulterior motives, I promise. I'm sorry,' she whispers again, as we stand there, embracing, with Mum's arms fully around me now as we attract the attention of passers-by.

When we pull apart, I invite Mum to a nearby coffee shop for a drink and she accepts. I think we probably have a lot to talk about and we won't be able to resolve things overnight. But we have to start somewhere. And today seems like as good a day as any.

TWENTY-FIVE

Max and I have spent the last few weeks having heart-to-heart talks, promising one other there will never be any secrets in our marriage, and thankfully it's now full steam ahead for the wedding. I am trying to push away any nerves regarding the number of guests and to stop worrying that I'll stumble over my vows. I'm determined to just get on with things.

I've decided to shelve the idea of teaching at the Community Centre until the wedding is over, when I will be able to give any students my full attention. That's if it even happens in the first place as, according to local news reports, the council is cutting services. Besides I've been thinking a lot more about opening a little gallery and have been scouring for suitable premises.

I can hardly believe that it's just over a week now until the wedding. To my surprise, Max hasn't spoken about it as much, which makes me wonder if he's still feeling as excited as he was. Maybe when we celebrate our golden anniversary, I may recall how our marriage was almost put in jeopardy and will thank our lucky stars that we went ahead with it. It's strange to think that one day we might have children. It's not something I want right now, but further down the line, who knows? It's even stranger to think that one day we might have their children – our grandchildren – calling round to our home. It's really hard to imagine ourselves as an old couple.

I'm thrilled that Max and I are back on track, although on one or two occasions he's hung up from a phone call rather quickly when I've walked into the room, but perhaps that's all in my imagination. I must push any negative thoughts from my mind and be grateful that we are okay, as I feel sick at the thought of us not being together and can't believe a holiday crush almost ruined things.

Lexie has recently had her cast removed and Mum, Lexie and I met for

lunch last week in town and had the most wonderful day. Mum laughed a lot, which is something I haven't really seen her do in a long time, so maybe she's beginning to forgive herself.

'So I was thinking' – Gail is putting the finishing touches to a new display of wedding gifts – 'maybe we could find a corner to put some baby shower gifts in. It's a big thing now, isn't it? Everyone seems to have a baby shower.'

'It's true, but I'm not sure I would have one. I'm a bit superstitious about that kind of thing. I'd like to meet the baby first before I go giving it a present. Although it's not really about the baby present, I suppose, it's about the mother-to-be getting together with her friends and having a good time.'

'Exactly. Which is why I want to have a whole range of gifts, including some new champagne glasses that say "My First Drink in Nine Months", you know, to toast the new arrival, with the words written in gold lettering.'

'A nice idea, although you don't want anything that looks cheap and tacky,' I say honestly.

'My goodness, who is this girl that regularly speaks her mind? Although I have to say I rather like her. I suppose I can get a bit carried away with the fun stuff.' Gail places a silver-leafed fake flower into a vase and I take it out again.

'Too much. Let the vase speak for itself.'

She rolls her eyes at me but the flower remains out of the vase.

'Of course it's fine having fun stuff,' I reassure her. 'You don't want to narrow your market too much. As long as you remember that a lot of your regular customers have a lot of disposable income.'

'I know. Which is why I source one-off products like that.' She points to a stunning patchwork chaise longue, which has been hand-made and has a price tag of almost £4,000.

'Fair enough.'

Placing a wedding album into the bridal section, Gail asks me about my own wedding plans. 'You must be getting excited now... not long to go. I bet Max's excitement must have reached fever pitch by now.'

'Funnily enough, he hasn't said too much lately, which, I'm not going to lie, is worrying me ever so slightly.'

'First you worry about him talking about it too much, now it's not enough! Honestly, Alice!' Gail grins at me to let me know she's joking. 'I'm

sure there's nothing to worry about. He probably just doesn't want to panic you, as he knows you're a little nervous.'

'Possibly.'

Gail locks up and walks with me to the station, where she nips into the Sainsbury's inside it. 'Right, see you in the morning. I'm going to grab a magazine and an early night.'

Gail, who's in her fifties and has been married for twenty-four years, seems to have a lot of early nights these days. I wonder whether her husband Frank joins her on these early nights, but get the impression that he spends a lot of time doing his own thing, notably following his beloved football and watching a lot of it on television. I'm kind of grateful that Max isn't a big sports fan. Once a year, he likes to go and watch the Formula One racing with his pals at Silverstone, and he attends the occasional race day, but nothing more. I hope Gail's husband has something nice planned for their silver wedding anniversary next year.

When I arrive home just after six, I inhale the unmistakable aroma of Chinese food and I'm surprised to find Max in the kitchen setting out a takeaway onto some plates.

'Mmm, that smells amazing.' I was going to cook fish for dinner, but my taste buds are salivating.

I shrug my coat off and give him a hug before he hands me a glass of white wine.

'Thanks for the flowers, Max, they are absolutely beautiful.'

It feels so good to bury my face into his chest. The pain of not being able to do it is still fresh enough that I savour this moment.

He looks down at me seriously until I'm finished hugging him. 'I love you, Alice.'

I smile happily as I open a cupboard and retrieve a vase for the flowers. 'You're home early today.'

'Yep. I've been flat out all day, tying a few ends up before I set off on holiday.'

'Holiday?' I ask, with a confused and slightly sinking feeling growing in my chest. I've been thinking that Max has been a bit secretive on his phone recently, when I've been around. And now, a week before our wedding, I'm worried he's been talked into a short skiing break one of his friends has suggested. 'Why didn't you say anything?'

'As it happens, I'm not going on my own.' He goes to a drawer and hands

me a flight ticket.

‘Greece? What is this, Max? Is this for our honeymoon?’

We’ve talked about returning to Greece for our honeymoon but haven’t decided on a location.

‘Look at the dates.’ Max takes a sip of wine, before he takes the lid off a container of salt-and-pepper ribs.

I wonder if he’s booked our honeymoon to Koutouloufari and for a split second I selfishly hope he hasn’t, as I don’t want to risk running into Vangelis.

As I look closely at the flight dates and the destination, my hand flies to my mouth. ‘Santorini? Tomorrow?’

‘Correct. Those photos of your day in Santorini looked amazing and that painting you did seems to have cast a spell over me, as every time I walk past it I wish I could be there,’ he says, his voice full of excitement.

‘But *tomorrow*, Max... I’m not sure Gail will let me have the time off.’

‘I’ve already sorted it. She thought a little break before the wedding would do you the world of good. Students are queuing up for part-time jobs at this time of the year, so she’s got you covered.’

I think of how Gail and I said good night and she never said a thing.

‘I think we deserve a little break before the big day,’ Max continues. ‘I know you’ve been stressing about the wedding and maybe I was a little over the top with some things, so I thought we deserved a little time to chill.’

‘You mean, a kind of honeymoon before the wedding? Will that really make it less stressful?’ I’m so stunned I can barely speak.

‘If you like, yes.’ Max threads his hand through mine and kisses me. ‘I want us to spend some time together, just the two of us. No interruptions, no thinking about work, just enjoying ourselves. I love you, Alice, and for a short time I thought I was going to lose you.’

‘Oh, Max, that will never happen. I love you too.’

TWENTY-SIX

I'm thrilled to find that Max has booked us one of the swish, glass-fronted apartments that the girls and I admired on our trip. The inside, if that were possible, is even more stunning than the outside, with white walls, pale wooden furniture and turquoise cushions and fittings that match the colour of the sea view outside. It's gorgeous.

Every room has a view of the sea and the master bedroom has the most enormous bed I have ever seen. On the bedside table are a bottle of champagne, two glasses and a small box of hand-made chocolates. It's the most luxurious place I have ever stayed in in my entire life. Opening the door from the bedroom, I gasp when I spot our own private pool and Jacuzzi, completely shielded from the other apartments.

'Max, this is unbelievable. It's absolutely perfect.'

I kick my shoes off and climb onto the huge bed and run my hand over the expensive cotton sheets, as Max pops the cork on the champagne and pours me a glass.

'Right, much as I'd love to climb in there with you, there are a few things we ought to be getting on with.'

I'm wondering what Max is talking about, when there's a tap on the door of the apartment and standing outside is a courier carrying two clothes bags and a holdall. Max takes delivery of the luggage and hands the man a tip.

'Max, what on earth is going on?' I ask as he lays the clothes bags on the top of the bed.

'Why don't you have a look?'

I slowly unzip one of the bags, my hands shaking, wondering if what I'm imagining is inside could really be there. As I inch the zip down my wedding dress slowly reveals itself.

'My wedding dress! But how...? Why...?'

Max pulls me to him and silences me with a kiss. ‘We’re getting married, that’s why.’

‘*Married? Here?*’ For a second I can’t seem to think straight and struggle to take it all in. I think of the guest list, the caterers and everything else that has been organised for the big day in ten days’ time.

‘Yes.’ Max glances at his watch. ‘In two hours from now, so you might want to grab a shower before the make-up lady arrives. And, before you ask, it will be just us two at the ceremony,’ he says, with a sincerity in his voice. ‘Alice, I can’t believe I got everything so stupidly and spectacularly wrong and I’m so sorry. I just got carried away with the whole celebration thing, not really considering what you wanted. So, we’re marrying here, just the two of us.’

‘Are you sure it’s what you want, Max?’

‘I’ve never been more sure.’

A while later, Sonia, a lovely chatty lady, arrives and puts me completely at ease as she listens to how I would like my make-up and sets about styling my hair into soft curls. As I slip my dress on and glance at my reflection in a full-length mirror, I think I look pretty good, even though I do say so myself. Max steps out of the second bedroom a few minutes later and he has never looked more handsome. He’s wearing a light blue, checked, three-piece suit over a white shirt.

‘You’re so beautiful.’ Max crosses the room and takes my hand in his, his voice breaking with emotion.

‘So are you. But I think there’s something missing.’ I eye the buttonhole on his lapel and realise we don’t have any flowers.

‘All sorted. The car will be arriving in’ – he glances at his watch – ‘around fifteen minutes and the driver will be bringing the flowers with him. Let’s have a toast before he arrives.’ Max pours us each a small glass of champagne. ‘To us, and whatever the future holds for us. May it be one long adventure.’

Max knocks the drink back in one and I wonder whether he is a little nervous. My own nerves have diminished now that I know I won’t have to say my vows in front of dozens of other guests and I hope Max really is alright with this. I would have gone through with it for him although it seems he has done the same thing for me.

Half an hour later, the car drops us off outside the church and I clutch my

fresh, pink and white roses and step outside into the warm sunshine. A dozen or so white steps lead up to a little church, where the ceremony will take place on a veranda outside, with a backdrop of the Caldera in the sparkling Aegean Sea. A table is set with flowers and a smiling registrar warmly welcomes us.

As we say our vows, with the warm sun caressing our hands as we prepare to exchange rings, I feel like the luckiest girl in the world.

Afterwards, drinking in the view of the jumble of white buildings, blue domes and a ship sailing into the port, takes my mind back to the holiday with the girls and of how I almost ruined things forever. I'm so happy Max and I have been married here, today, in this utterly perfect place.

Max has organised a photographer, who doubled up as a witness at our wedding, and he follows us to a restaurant a short drive away. When we step out of the car, some locals who are enjoying a drink burst into applause and congratulate us.

'I've reserved a very special table for us,' Max tells me. 'It's on a private balcony at the rear of the property.'

'Oh, Max, it sounds absolutely perfect.' We thread through a busy indoor seating area to more applause.

'I just hope you don't mind your mum and your friends not being here to share in this,' Max says, sighing.

'I would have loved them to be here, but you can't expect people to travel abroad for a wedding last minute.'

'I'm sure they wouldn't have minded,' Max reassures me.

We step outside onto a huge balcony, where a table has been set with balloons and ribbons for a wedding meal. As I walk closer, I am absolutely stunned to find Ria and Kerry seated at the table. Along with Molly, Max's parents, Mum and Lexie. There's also Gail from the gift shop and her husband Frank. Ria pops a party popper and we are doused in confetti as we approach the table.

'I can't believe it.' Tears are falling down my cheeks, but Mum pulls me into a hug and dashes them away before they can ruin my professionally applied make-up. 'What are you all doing here?'

'Watching you get married, what else?' says Ria, a beaming smile on her face. 'Congratulations!'

'I'm so sorry you didn't see it,' I say, wishing I hadn't wasted time worrying about the wedding guests. The only ones who really matter are

those closest to me, who are all sitting right around this table now, sharing in the wedding meal.

‘No, I mean it. We watched you getting married,’ Ria says, lifting her iPad.

It seems the photographer was videoing the whole ceremony, which was being live-streamed for the guests to watch from the restaurant.

‘*Oh my goodness!*’ I can hardly breathe as everyone gets to their feet to hug us tightly and raise a toast.

Later, after the most amazing meal, which included a fish course and a fall-off-the-bone lamb kleftiko, we are sitting around picking at a cheeseboard and eating grapes.

‘So you organised everything online?’ I ask Max. ‘But wouldn’t I have to have signed something?’

‘You did. One day when you were dashing to work, I asked for your signature on that bank form about the mortgage. Discreetly covered over with a file.’

It would also explain all Max’s hurriedly finished phone calls when I walked into a room over the last few weeks.

‘And were the caterers okay?’ I thought about Joe and Sarah and how they had saved the day when we went to visit them at their café in town.

‘They’re still doing the catering. In fact, I think they were a little bit relieved that it would now be a hot buffet.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, we’ve done the quiet wedding, but do you really think you would get away with not having a party? All the other guests on the list will be coming to a party when we get back home. I couldn’t bear to cancel the fireworks.’

‘Oh, Max. It’s perfect.’ I reach up and kiss my new husband on the lips.

‘I know you would have liked Crete as a wedding place but, what with...’ I shush him with another kiss.

‘I just hope this place is as Greek as you would have liked. I know how you love those little villages,’ he muses.

As I glance at the scene below the restaurant in the early evening, a Greek woman carries a basket of bread into a small house, followed by a tabby cat, as the outline of a giant orange sun is preparing to set over the horizon, casting a glimmering sheen on the water. I toss my bridal bouquet over my shoulder to the table and Ria catches it.

‘Are you kidding, Max Jenkins? This place is as Greek as it gets.’

EPILOGUE

‘It’s an *interesting* piece,’ I say, as I stare at the watercolour in front of me. It’s a black and white rainbow with red paint dripping down the arc.

‘The red represents blood. It’s to remind us that there isn’t always magic at the end of the rainbow. Life’s hard and we have to experience pain. There’s often disappointment,’ the bearded bloke standing in front of me laments, with a faraway look in his eyes.

Oh dear.

‘Well, um, as I say, it’s interesting. I’d love to display it.’

I’m thinking that it won’t be everyone’s cup of tea, but then again art is purely subjective, isn’t it? Besides, paintings are meant to represent something and like it or not this painting does exactly that. Well, to the artist, at least.

We discuss details and the previous sombre expression is transformed by a huge smile that lights up his whole face.

‘Really? Thanks so much. People don’t always get it.’

I’m not sure I do either, but I reckon everyone deserves a chance of pursuing their dreams.

‘He’s a cutie,’ Ria says, when he’s left the shop. ‘If a little serious, although maybe he’s just had a lot of rejections.’ She pauses. ‘His face really lit up when you took the painting, though. Things could be on the up for him now, thanks to you.’

‘If his painting sells, you can be the one to ring him, if you like,’ I suggest with a wink.

Two weeks after we returned home from our surprise wedding in Santorini, I led Max into the village to show him a surprise of my own. We were here to meet a letting agent who, when I’d enquired, had told me that the lease on one of the shops would be up the following month and would not

be renewed by the current tenants. (The Community Centre idea had ended up being a bit of a non-starter after all, which may actually have been a blessing in disguise, since it had prompted me to look for my own premises.)

‘Which means,’ I told Max excitedly, ‘this could be my new gallery.’

Max was open-mouthed and followed me around the shop in a daze, before the agent showed us a huge adjoining room, with a good-sized garden beyond it, which could be used for classes, together with a rear kitchen and bathroom.

‘It’s absolutely perfect.’ Max lifted me from the ground and twirled me around before kissing me. ‘I’m so proud of you, Alice.’

It seems all my saving had paid off, as I was able to pay the deposit on the rent myself, and a year ago my dream finally became a reality.

Business has been steady from the moment I opened the doors. Messy Painting for Toddlers is a huge hit on Wednesday and Friday mornings and I’ve installed French doors from the room that leads out into the garden, where there’s now a play area. Young mums can have a coffee in a newly installed covered patio area, with soft furnishings, and have welcomed the classes with open arms.

It’s Saturday morning now and Ria occasionally pops in to help out in the gallery and sell some of her jewellery, which is displayed in a tall, narrow glass case, while I teach the watercolour painting class in the adjoining room. Today, the class is being held outside, as the weather is fine.

‘Elsie, that’s really very good.’ I am looking at the picture that this grey-haired lady has produced: a stone church with a huge tree near the entrance, the leaves of which are beginning to turn a pale yellow as autumn approaches. ‘And to think you once told me that you enjoyed painting but weren’t very good at it,’ I tell her.

‘Ah, but that was before I had a good teacher like you. The tutor at the library sessions spent half her time on her phone, as I recall,’ Elsie huffs, as she dabs at her painting.

Elsie is the lady I met in town on the day I was sketching the ferry at the pier head. She was thrilled to hear of the painting classes and now takes a fifteen-minute bus journey across town, every Saturday morning, to be here. We have eight people in total for the eight-week courses, which is a bit of a squeeze, but I was surprised and delighted to find that there was soon a waiting list for tuition.

Max and I are going for dinner tonight with Kerry and her new boyfriend

Chris, who is a barber and runs a very busy shop a few miles away from here. She's currently renting a small flat, although she tells me things are going so well with Chris that she's sure it won't be long before they'll be looking for somewhere to live together. Ria is still single, although the bearded guy with the unusual painting seems to have caught her eye. So, you never know.

And Mum and me? Well, we continue to rebuild our relationship, which I have to say is going really well. We've had quite a few meet-ups for lunch, sometimes with Lexie, sometimes without, *and* she hasn't cancelled a single one. It's her birthday soon and I'm going to surprise her with a trip to the theatre to watch Michael Bubl . I can't wait to see her face.

As the afternoon comes to a close, Max texts to say that he can't remember if he booked the restaurant for this evening or not and, if he didn't, would anyone mind a takeaway at home followed by a few beers at the local pub?

I tap out a reply to tell him that I'm sure no one will mind. It's about the company just as much as the food, and he replies with a heart emoji and a dozen kisses.

As I lock the door of the shop, I cast my eyes upwards and offer a silent prayer of thanks for my life, which is as near perfect as it can be. Something I will never, ever take for granted again.

* * *

Can't get enough of Sue's escapist holiday reads? Return to the Greek islands and get swept away by the sunshine, laughs and mouth-watering food in [*My Big Greek Summer!*](#) The perfect sunny beach read.

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MY BIG GREEK SUMMER

‘A fantastic story... laugh-out-loud... I literally flew through the pages. I loved every minute.’ *The Cosiest Corner*

A holiday can solve everything... can't it? A hilarious, hot new summer escape about kissing your past goodbye and learning to love again...

Carefree, **thirty-something Mandy** thought she'd be married to first-love **Danny** forever.

So when she discovers her heart-throb husband has had a fling, she realises it's time to make some BIG changes. But what will Mandy do now she's single for the first time in her adult life?

Determined to find her spark again, Mandy hops on a plane, ready for adventure and a second chance at happiness. Escaping to a sun-drenched Greek island, the glittering blue seas, golden beaches and delicious cocktails are exactly what she needs.

Over one spontaneous summer, Mandy has the time of her life making new friends in a pretty little Mediterranean village by the sea. And she finds herself unexpectedly falling for a tall, dark, handsome stranger. But Mandy soon realises that even paradise has its problems...

Can a holiday romance really heal her broken heart? Or will someone in Mandy's old life call her home again?

A hilarious feel-good story of laughter, sunshine and living life to the full, perfect for fans of Kat French, Jenny Oliver and Carole Matthews.

[Get it here!](#)

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You, Me and Italy

A Very French Affair

As Greek as it Gets

Some Like It Greek

AVAILABLE IN AUDIO

My Big Greek Summer ([UK listeners](#) | [US listeners](#))

A LETTER FROM SUE ROBERTS

Dear reader,

I want to say a huge thank you for choosing to read *As Greek As It Gets*. It was such a joy to return to the Greek islands and I hope you enjoyed the journey too! If you did enjoy it, and want to keep up to date with all my latest releases, just sign up at the following link. Your email address will never be shared and you can unsubscribe at any time.

[Sign up here!](#)

I hope you loved *As Greek As It Gets* and, if you did, I would be very grateful if you could write a review. I'd love to hear what you think, and it makes such a difference helping new readers to discover one of my books for the first time. It also gives me an idea of readers' likes and dislikes!

I love hearing from my readers – you can get in touch on my Facebook page, through Twitter, Goodreads or on my website.

Thanks,
Sue Roberts

Facebook: Suerobertsauthor
Twitter: @suerobertsauthor

MY VERY ITALIAN HOLIDAY

A beautiful guesthouse, a fresh start and a hunky Italian. Does it sound too good to be true?

When **Gina** arrives in Lake Como, thousands of miles away from her life in the Lake District, she wonders if she's bitten off more than she can chew.

Working for **Fabio**, running his lakeside hotel, seemed like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. After her world was tragically turned upside down, breaking her heart in the process, she was in desperate need of a fresh start.

Plus, it didn't hurt that Fabio was easy on the eyes...

But it's not all picturesque mountains, pizza and prosecco. The crumbling guesthouse that Fabio has inherited from his family needs some serious TLC.

Is she up to the challenge?

As Gina and Fabio work in close quarters, sparks start to fly. But Fabio has a secret he is scared to share, and Gina has her past to come to terms with.

Does her heart belong back home or is a life in the sun – with a very handsome Italian – just the change of scenery she needs?

Escape to the gorgeous mountains and glittering Lake Como in Northern Italy! This laugh-out-loud funny and feel-good story of starting over and living life to the max is perfect for fans of Kat French, Jenny Oliver and Carole Matthews.

[Get it here!](#)

A VERY FRENCH AFFAIR

From Southport to the South of France – this is going to be a summer to remember!

Life just got a whole lot more complicated for thirty-eight-year-old single mum Liv. Her son Jake is practically perfect in every way, but he's started asking some difficult questions, and the answers lie in a holiday romance twenty years ago. Back when Liv was staying with her aunt on the French Riviera...

Returning to the Cote d'Azur, with its white sandy beaches, her supportive aunt, and exquisite wine and cheese is harder than it sounds though. Because – if she's going to give Jake the answers he needs – Liv knows she has to hunt down her first love Andre. And since she's a professional baker rather than a professional investigator, she doesn't even have a clue where to start. At first, finding the one that got away proves even trickier than she thought. And if she succeeds, how will he take the bombshell secret Liv has been keeping? Liv has to do the best thing for her family, but does that mean closing the door on this very French affair?

A joyful, laugh-out-loud story about second chances, secrets and sunshine! The perfect summer read for fans of Carole Matthews, Jenny Colgan and Sophie Kinsella.

[Get it here!](#)

YOU, ME AND ITALY

Three best friends, Italian sunshine and a handsome stranger can fix just about anything... Can't it?

Maisie Knight had it all. A gorgeous husband. A successful business. A beautiful home. Until one day, after walking into the storeroom of their shop, she loses it all at once – catching her husband cheating on her with the girl from Checkout 3. So when she wins a holiday to Italy, a week under the Tuscan sun couldn't come sooner.

Treating best friends **Cheryl** and **Emma** to a girl's trip, the terracotta-roofed Villa Marisa on a rustic farm awaits them. The fields of golden sunflowers could be the perfect cure for Maisie's broken heart – and local farmer, suspiciously perfect **Gianni**, with his thick black hair and twinkling brown eyes is a welcome distraction from her broken heart.

Mornings waking up to freshly brewed coffee and views of the rolling hills, moped rides with cheeky Italians, and feasts of prosecco and pasta help Maisie forget her troubles. After all her heartache, she's surprised when she starts opening up to Gianni – she's even more surprised when the temperature rises and it's not just the rays of the Italian sunshine...

Maisie could get used to the good life. But just as she's getting her spark back, disaster strikes. The next thing she knows, her past is catching up with her, reopening old wounds and Maisie has a life-changing decision to make.

Should she say ciao to her summer of love and limoncello?

A laugh-out-loud page turner about second chances, finding happiness when you least expect it and the restorative power of Italian food! Fans of Carole Matthews and Sophie Kinsella will be totally hooked by.

SOME LIKE IT GREEK

[Get it here!](#)

There's nothing like a summer escape. A sun-kissed story about living life to the full.

In the month-from-hell, incurable optimist **Anna** has lost her father and her job, and her trademark smile is dimming. Clearing out her dad's house, she discovers **a postcard of a beautiful sandy beach and a map with a route plotted to the Greek island of Kefalonia**. With an empty summer stretching ahead, Anna's eyes stray to her father's old camper van. Next thing she knows, she's hitting the road with friend Demi in tow, on a course from Salford to Skala!

Over one unforgettable summer, Anna and Demi make their rickety way along the sparkling Mediterranean coast, the hot sun shining down on their frequent mishaps with cheerful local characters. It's the trip of a lifetime, and the scent of lemons in the air – as well as an unexpected romance – are **just what Anna needs to awaken her inner Greek goddess**.

But there are big surprises in store when they arrive at the island paradise, which could change both women's lives forever. And as summer comes to an end, Anna has to decide whether she has had enough of the Greek life, or whether this is only just the beginning...

A joyful, hilarious summer read, perfect for fans of Carole Matthews, Jenny Colgan and Sophie Kinsella.

[Order it now!](#)

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