



To Thomas
the
Honey Farm
on
the Hill

H
REVIEW



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Chapter One

I take a deep breath as I step out of the plane door and on to the steel platform at the top of the steps, lifting my face to the hot Cretan sun. The wind catches the ends of my curly, red hair, just as I remember it doing last time I was here, eighteen years ago. I gather my hair up in one hand and hold it at the nape of my neck as I make my way slowly down the steps. That's when it hits me. That smell, filling my nostrils, my head, my chest, catapulting me back to a time when I was young, happy; when anything was possible. I sigh blissfully, despite the nerves turning somersaults in my tummy. The aroma of wild mountain thyme on the wind wraps itself around me in a huge hug, and I hold the handrail tighter to steady myself. It feels as if no time has passed at all. I touch the necklace at my throat; I'm still getting used to its weight again. My heart fills and the widest smile spreads across my face. I'm here. I'm actually here.

'Excuse me, madam, is everything OK?'

I turn to see the flight attendant and a line of impatient faces behind me. A group of young girls are giggling, fooling around with excitement, and suddenly I'm reminded of the sound of Gena's shrill laugh coming from Mike's bedroom. The memory makes me shudder all over again,

leaving me suddenly cold despite the intense heat.

As I walked away from Mike's ground-floor flat that day, from a relationship in which I thought it was just me stalling and we were waiting for the right time to take the next step, I realised that everything had to change. For seven years I had known where I was, what I was doing every day of the week. I'd had someone there to share the odd takeaway and telly night with. Now it was just me, and I felt like a balloon with its string cut, not knowing which direction to fly in.

'Everything all right?' asks the flight attendant again. I look at her and at the queue behind me, the harassed expressions of the parents with the child who was sitting near me. I look down at the man in ear protectors, overalls and a high-vis jacket despite the heat rolling in a haze off the tarmac, holding his hands up against the bright sunlight as he squints at me. 'Do you need a hand?'

'No, no . . . I'm fine. Just perfect, in fact,' I say, pulling down my sunglasses from my head, making my hair fly about even more. Despite my thrill at being here, my nerves spin like acrobats in my tummy. I take one more deep breath, then grip the handrail again and continue on down the slightly swaying steps, snatching glances at that oh-so-familiar landscape.

'Goodbye, thank you,' says the flight attendant. 'Hope you have a good stay.'

'I hope so too,' I reply, gripping the pendant in the palm of my spare hand.

The brilliant blue sea is just beyond the airport. Large jagged rocks are dotted along the shoreline, white spray dashing against them. All the while that scent is still there,

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like a good friend that has come to greet me, and suddenly all my nerves start to seep away. I did the right thing coming here, I tell myself as I make my way across the hot tarmac towards the terminal building. The sun's reflection is bouncing off the glass like it's part of a welcoming committee. I have no idea why I was so nervous, or why I've put this off for so long. I haven't felt like this in . . . years! It was time to get away from the empty house. To get a life of my own, as Demi insisted during our rather stilted Skype call on the night of the fire. I'd wanted to tell her how much the fire, the roof caving in, had scared me, and how I wanted her to stay safe and that I'd always be there for her. In return she told me about the posh house she was living in, describing the decoration and the fluffiness of the towels in her en suite in detail. I could never have given her those things. I bought what I could in second-hand shops and post-Christmas sales. Gracie was always popping round with little finds, a marked-down shower curtain or a dented tin of who-knows-what. Surprise dinner, we used to call it. A far cry from the sorts of fancy meals Demi will be eating now, by the sounds of it.

At least here I can get away from the loneliness and the heartache. I can forget about the idea of Gena and Mike together and take time to be myself again . . . or remember who I was, at least, and the dreams I once had. I clutch my bag and shuffle forward on the worn blue linoleum floor.

'*Kalimera*.' I smile nervously when I reach the front of the queue, and the passport control officer nods slowly.

'*Kalimera*,' he replies, opening the pages of my passport. Then, '*Efharisto*.' He thanks me and hands it back, smiling. The nerves settle again and I walk towards the exit.

'Hello,' I hear the passport officer say behind me to the family with the boy who used my seat as band practice all the way here. They have a teenage girl with them too, on her phone, barely grunting at her parents when she's asked to take out her headphones for immigration. 'I can't get Wi-Fi,' she wails, and I have a sudden pang, wishing Demi was here.

I pull out my phone and switch it on to see if I've got any signal yet, desperate to hear from her and to let Angelica know that I've arrived; that I did it. Gracie doesn't have a mobile, but Angelica will tell her my news. I might even find a postcard to send her.

When I finally decided to book my plane ticket out to Crete, I rang Angelica, desperate to persuade her to come with me. If I was going to do this, I wanted her by my side. But despite my best efforts, she turned me down. Wendy Davies, Alwyn's personal assistant at the factory, was pregnant. They'd found out at hospital when she'd had a funny turn after the fire. Angelica had been asked to step in to oversee the repairs and to get the factory up and running again.

'It's my big chance, Nell! If I can run a Christmas decoration factory, well, the fashion industry is just a step away. I could be in charge of a fashion house in London in no time. Following your Demi to the smoke.'

She couldn't turn it down, I knew that. I don't think she believed I'd actually get on the plane on my own. But I suddenly had to know. I couldn't just sit in an empty house waiting for Demi to come home. I was going to return to where I'd left off, with or without Angelica's support. I had to. I needed to know that the decision I'd made all those

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years ago was the right one. Let's just call it unfinished business. I touch the pendant around my neck again.

And anyway, there were only so many times I could watch reruns of *Mamma Mia!* and *Shirley Valentine*. Sitting there on the settee a week after the fire, having finished a packet of Hobnobs and started on a box of Cheerios, I realised I was standing at the top of a slippery slope. So instead of watching *The Holiday* again, I heaved myself off the sofa and started spring-cleaning, wiping away tears as I cleared drawers and cupboards, trying to take my mind off how much I wanted Demi home, and how frustrated I felt by the wasted years I'd spent with Mike.

There were boxes that hadn't been touched in years under my bed and on top of my wardrobe. Stuff I'd put away and hadn't looked at. Baby clothes, paintings and cards Demi had made. Old clothes, a pair of cut-off shorts I'd customised with stick-on gems and patches. Nan obviously never threw away anything. And that was when I found it: the necklace. Under a pile of photographs. I'd taken it off when I'd gone into hospital to have Demi, bundled by Nan into a taxi, and never put it back on again. I picked it up. The little ruby in the corner was duller than I remembered, but still there. The black leather lace was worn. As I looked at the silver, now greying, outline of half of the island, it all came rushing back to me, the person I was before. This felt like fate, what with the fire, Gena and Mike, and Angelica talking about WWOOFing. As I fastened the pendant around my neck, it felt as if it belonged there.

With my phone in one hand I googled Crete, then, with Gracie's initial horror still ringing in my ears and making me

smile, I looked up WWOOFing and working abroad. An advert on a volunteering website jumped out at me: *Help wanted in a honey factory in Crete*. I love honey, especially Cretan honey – I remember the taste so well – and I know all about factories. It was perfect. In just a couple of moments I'd gone from utter despair to booking a flight on my supermarket saver points, all from my phone on my bedroom floor. With the factory closed for the foreseeable future, what else was I going to do? I'd sold my old banger and had the money from that to tide me over. WWOOFing seemed like a perfectly sensible idea. I was getting a life and it wasn't costing me anything.

'Find yourself a gorgeous Cretan waiter!' Angelica shouted as I got into the taxi to the airport. Gracie was on the front step of her little terraced house next door, puffing on a cigarette, watching the world pass by as usual. Other neighbours appeared at their doors to see what all the fuss was about. I shook my head at Angelica.

'That's the last thing I want,' I told her. There was only one man I wanted to find. Then perhaps I'd remember who I was too . . . because if I wasn't Demi's mum, or Mike's girlfriend, who was I?

Now I step outside the terminal building, my nerves returning with the heat, not knowing how I'm supposed to be getting from here to where I'm staying.

A battered old truck with dents in every panel and a black and white wire-haired terrier barking for all it's worth in the open boot pulls up in a cloud of yellow dust. I step back, putting my hand over my mouth, but still coughing. The window is open and a man in a large crooked-brimmed hat

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with a scarf around his neck, looking like something out of an Indiana Jones movie, leans out.

‘Woof!’ barks the man gruffly. He’s about my age but with a face that says he’s lived many more lives than just this one. I can’t see much of his expression, his hat casting a shadow over it, but it doesn’t look like the brilliant sunshine is making his day any brighter. Hoping that he finds whoever he’s looking for quickly, I turn away, looking for some sign of an official representative sent to meet me.

‘Woof!’ the man barks again, sounding as fierce as the dog. The family with the teenagers emerge through the sliding doors behind me and glance at him suspiciously. He rummages through a pile of rubbish on his dashboard, pulls out a crumpled piece of paper and waves it, seemingly at me. ‘Woo . . . *fer?*’ he repeats slowly, eyes narrowing.

I look from side to side and then step forward. He couldn’t be waiting for me, could he? A sinking feeling creeps over me as I take hold of the paper and look at it.

‘Oh God! Yes! I mean *nai!*’ I try and breathe despite my tight chest, my nerves made worse by this man barking at me, leaving me hot, tongue-tied and blushing. ‘WWOOFer . . . yes, I’m a WWOOFer,’ I finally manage.

He nods, grunts, nods again and then leans over to open the passenger door with a shove, the hinges creaking loudly. ‘*Ela!* Come! I’ll take you,’ he says.

My mouth is dry and a knot tightens in my stomach. My fickle friend, the warm, welcoming scent of wild mountain thyme, has deserted me, no doubt gone to meet other returning guests, and in its place is the stink of engine fumes and some kind of other smell that could be animal-related.

I hold the back of my hand to my nose as I drag my case round the back of the truck and wrestle it into the cab. As soon as I get in after it and shut the door, the truck shoots off, a plume of yellow dust billowing in through the open window as we career out of the airport and slew round the first roundabout.

Clutching my case, a barrier between me and the driver, I glance across at him. His eyes are fixed on the road ahead. His hands grip the wheel, making the veins on his dark forearms stand out. He has a scar down the side of his cheek that I can just see under the brim of his hat and above the scarf.

Suddenly I realise that he is watching me in the mirror, emerald-green eyes with golden flecks whipping between me and the road ahead. When he looks at me, they narrow like a sniper's, as if he's suddenly spotted his prey and is keeping a watchful eye on it. The scenery whisks past as we head away from the airport towards the coast road, and all my resolve leaves me.

I'm in a truck with a man I don't know, travelling at speed. I have no idea where I'm going or who I'm staying with, and clearly this driver doesn't do small talk. Suddenly the excitement that filled me when I first arrived is turning to mild concern, possibly with a hint of panic in there too. What have I let myself in for?