

Looking for the Durrells

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Some summers change
us forever

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INSPIRE

About the Author

After deciding she wanted to be a book illustrator, Melanie went to art college at the age of 18. Halfway through the year, she changed her mind and secured a place at Swansea University to study English. However, after eighteen months, she left, moved home, and started looking for work as a nanny in London.

A local job advert for a reporter changed her life and career. She took up the post at the Doncaster Advertiser, later became Editor, and then worked in PR. She now works in education as Communications Lead for the XP Schools Trust based in Yorkshire, and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

Looking for the Durrells is her first novel.

For my family and all the animals we've loved, and love.

In Memory of:

*Brian Cartlidge, my father (1931–1998). An artist and reader
of a million books, who loved the Durrells, Greece, and us.*

*Nikos Louvros (1947–2021). A Corfiot who shared his
beloved island with those he knew instinctively needed its magic
and would, in return, cherish it, as he did.*

Prologue

The weak winter sunlight squeezed itself through the hospice blinds and fell in pale stripes on the bed. The squeaking wheels of a trolley being pushed along the corridor, beyond the closed door, made Penny pause.

She had been reading aloud. A paperback lay open on the bed, her hand grasped her dad's, until she realized with mild interest that her hand was starting to feel a little numb. Reluctant to let go of him for more than a second, she pulled her hand away, flexed it a few times and then placed it back.

Cold hands, warm heart. She wondered how many times he'd said that to her as he'd helped her put on her woollen mittens as a child. Now, it was winter again, but it could have been any season beyond the confines of this small hospice room. Their roles were reversed too – all the help to put on anything, eat, wash had come from her for a while now.

She winced, feeling the decline of the last months in a single spasm of mental and physical pain. Things had never been the same since the day he had come out of the consultant's room and confirmed, 'It's cancer'.

It had been just the two of them as she'd grown up, but this news had isolated her, as though she was at the top of a high

mountain, looking down on the world below. Detached from the normal flow of life below, elevated from the here and now.

The countdown to Christmas was denoted by the regular delivery of presents, usually tins of biscuits dropped at the nurses' station, and the dusting-off of slightly garish and faded decorations from a dusty stockroom. The hospice existed as a world within a world and Penny and her dad had been citizens of it for over a week now.

The door opened suddenly. Penny looked up and smiled at Carol, the nurse who had begun to feel like an extended family member; a companion in arms in this fight against pain and its inevitable end.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' Carol walked across the room gathering up the plates of half-eaten sandwiches and a couple of untouched cakes, almost apologetic in their overly bright paper cases.

Penny wondered whether the kind and comforting Carol had heard the raised voices, before Bruce, his anger barely controlled, had walked out of the building a few minutes earlier. Her fiancé had, for a few days, been the darling of the nurses' station, but the fact that his casual and sometimes devastating charm had soon worn off, like the rolled gold on costume jewellery, did not surprise her.

How could they actually fall out in a hospice, as her dad lay dying, arguing about . . . what was it? . . . whether it was possible – realistic even – for her to travel to Italy and back every weekend, while Bruce settled in there, if he was offered the new job he had applied for. Why did he always have to almost bully her into submission, win every point or argument? Discussion seemed to be a long-forgotten and abandoned part of their relationship.

'That would be great, thanks,' she answered Carol absent-mindedly.

‘Are you okay?’ Carol paused at the door, looking at Penny and then across at the unconscious, grey and drawn man in the bed.

Penny nodded, afraid that if she used her voice, it would break and then so would she. There was something of the art of brinkmanship about waiting for someone to die; so many moments when the temptation to let go was overwhelming; to stop holding in, holding back, and give in to the hopelessness and pain. To let her heart and all the love trickle through her fingers. But what if it was too soon and there was nothing left to carry her through the days ahead?

She turned back to the book and, remembering that Carol had said that her dad might still be able to hear her, Penny began to read again.

After a while, she paused and flicked the book over, looking for the hundredth time, at the dragonfly on the cover of the old favourite book in her hands – *My Family and Other Animals* by Gerald Durrell.

As a child, she’d listened in awe to tales of tortoises and tempests, sun-scorched days and star-laden nights. She and her dad had talked then, and in later years, of visiting Corfu for themselves and discovering the magical island where the book was set. School, then university, followed by work and the hurry of life in general, had resulted in other plans.

Twenty years earlier, her dad had read the novel to her. Now he was dying. Only yesterday he had still been semiconscious, rising above the waves for a moment of clarity and connection, before sinking again into the sea of morphine.

He was only 60 years old, but looked ancient in this fading afternoon light. Like a carved, stone Grail knight, coming to life, if only for a brief moment.

As long as there was still a chance that some of the golden

words might reach him, this book had felt like the perfect choice. It had always transported both of them somewhere else, into a world of sparkling seasons and rich anecdotes.

It was easier, strangely, to carry on now *without* Bruce here. When he was around, she had to admit reluctantly that it felt like looking after two people. Bruce had to be managed, his dislike of hospitals palpable and ever-present.

Now, after yet another argument about nothing and everything, he had grabbed his car keys and, no doubt pulling out of the car park too fast in his fury, had left.

The situation was tiresome and tiring. His handsome face, which she had once sometimes watched as he slept, had lost its fascination. His sullen moods muted and soured the impact of the good looks that made people take notice when he entered a room.

They'd been together for three years, moved in together after a year and, for the last six months, as she'd helped her dad cope with a vicious cancer diagnosis and decline, Penny realized she'd begun to dislike Bruce. The knowledge flashed across her consciousness and disappeared just as swiftly, but it left its mark.

Any love and tenderness between them, she thought, was now more about something lost than the reality of something genuine or current.

She shook her head as though to clear her mind, overloaded with too much to compute or resolve, and began to look again at the words on the page. They danced, elusive and jumbled, then suddenly blurred.

A tear fell onto the yellowing page. She swallowed in a vain attempt to rid herself of the lump in her throat, and continued aloud.

Back to a moonlight swim with the Durrells on Corfu, with its balmy air, fragrant with the sea and sun-ripened

flowers, laughter and languor filling the night with memories to catch and bottle.

‘Here we go, Dad,’ she said softly. ‘We’re climbing into the little wooden boat. You can trail your hand in the water. It’s so relaxing and peaceful. All you have to do is be in the moment, let the boat take you to the bay with the silver sands.’

Chapter 1

Six months later

The summer had barely begun. After two days of scudding white clouds, a light breeze, and erratic sun creating a patchwork landscape of light and shade, the promising weather had reverted to scowling dark skies and a stiff breeze seemed to come straight from a cruel Arctic landscape.

Train stations in England felt cold at any time of year. The airport was only a short journey away, thank goodness, and in a few hours she would walk down the steps of the plane and experience for herself the magical transition from the capricious weather of an England in late June to the confident, established heat of a Greek-island summer.

Penny's anticipation of this spontaneous and possibly indulgent adventure was tempered by a heaviness in her heart and stomach. Some days it felt like another era, sitting in the hospice at her father's bedside, watching him slip away. Other days it was as sharp and vivid as something that had happened a moment ago.

The outcome had been inevitable and in a world of narrowing choices, how it all ended – to make the parting the

best it could be – had enveloped everything. Imaginings of what might have been shared and said in the last days were far from the reality of what had happened. But somehow that didn't matter. There was nothing more to say that could have been said.

His passing marked the end of thirty-three years of love, learning, and safety. He had always made her feel safe.

It puzzled her that she was still breathing, making plans, and waking up every morning. How could her heart, mind, and body deal with so much pain, such grief and still work, still function?

Penny checked herself as she pulled her suitcase onto the train. She didn't like the idea of inviting interest or sympathy by letting the pain out in public.

Once wedged into the window seat, and boundaries established with her fellow passengers above and around the unforgiving table between them, she stared passively as the patchwork fields and small towns rolled by. Eyes half-closed, she fell back slowly into the film playing out in her head: the endless dialogue, regrouping, replaying scenes from the last months, years.

This new world would take some getting used to. This planet that didn't have her father on it. She was also now facing whatever lay ahead as a newly single woman, with an ex-fiancé.

The past came back, like a familiar tune played time and time again, as she unravelled how this had come about in the end. The endless back and forth of who had said what in the final days before the packing up and the moving out. It had made more sense for her to be the one who moved, with her childhood home now empty, and the flat they'd shared to go on the market eventually if Bruce got his new post – which he had.

How strange, she thought, that she'd be flying so close to his new home in Italy. So close and yet so far. It was hard to imagine him at a new university she'd never seen or heard of before. It wasn't hard though to think of how he would fit in.

Bruce had always had an innate sense of style and confidence, with the white shirt, the heirloom watch, the hair that behaved. If she was honest, this had sometimes made her feel a little inadequate, if not eccentric, in her choice of clothes. particularly on painting days in the studio, when a large apron with pockets and a baggy shirt with rolled-up sleeves formed her uniform – more nineteenth century than twenty-first.

Penny smiled at herself for a moment, feeling the smooth material of her retro summer dress between her fingers. The old cotton looked a little faded, but for her this only added to its beauty. When she'd found it in a vintage shop a few years before, it had felt like meeting an old friend. The roses in neat rows, and the bands of blue that framed them in hoops around the skirt, enchanted her.

She'd never worn it until today though. There had never been the right time. It was a dress that needed to be taken on an adventure, although wearing it didn't necessarily guarantee the courage she felt she needed. And when her best friend Lizzie had dropped her off at the station, she had, just for an instant, wished she was getting back in the car and going home.

Why am I heading for Corfu, on my own, for a month? Why do I do these things to myself? It had seemed like such a terrific idea at the time, a glass or two into a girls' night in with Lizzie. The conversation had turned, as it often did, to the last days of her dad's life in the hospice and her farewell to Bruce in the days that followed . . . the things she and her dad had promised they'd do – the trip to Corfu, the Durrells' pilgrimage.

‘Why not go, while you can? No ties, no children, no one to stop you.’ Lizzie had got excited about the idea in a heartbeat and became carried away with her own vision of this trip to paradise. ‘I’d come with you if it wasn’t a madly busy time with the business, and then there’s the after-school stuff with the twins, before you even factor in the rest of the random happenings that make up my life.’

As she’d listened, Penny, sitting cross-legged on the floor in the sitting room that she’d known since a small child, glanced up at a painting on the wall.

It was at that moment, noticing for the first time in years the painting of Corfu she’d drawn from imagination as a child, and which her dad had treasured, framed, and put in pride of place, that she realized why she was going, why she had to go.

How many times had she dreamed of walking into that picture as it magically came to life like a scene from a children’s film?

Now, on this packed and stuffy train, rushing almost recklessly towards the airport, she knew that whatever the next four weeks might bring, this trip had to be made. It was unfinished business, a part of the journey to healing, or whatever it was she needed right now. To mend the hollowness of the grief and hurt left by the loss of one man and the departure of another; even if Bruce’s exit had felt, at the time, like a release.

Chapter 2

For Penny, the thrill of flying had always been tempered with a sense of the possibility of something going horribly wrong. As Lizzie had once said to her, ‘It’s not the flying that worries me; it’s the crashing.’

Her dad had hated it. Whenever they flew, he would barely move, as though afraid he would tip the plane if he leant forward or turned his head. He used to say it was like being trapped in a metal corridor at 30,000 feet. This memory made her smile as she moved into the window seat and started to browse through the duty-free catalogue.

The soothing tone of the pilot’s voice told everyone they were on time, no turbulence expected, and in Corfu that morning it was already 32 degrees.

For the hundredth time in as many days Penny opened Gerald Durrell’s *Corfu Trilogy* and started to read. The beginning, the description of the first sight of Corfu, always enchanted her. Now, as the Homeric wine-dark sea, infused with turquoise and lilac, drew closer, there was a warming rush of anticipation and for the first time in a very long time, a sense of peace.



Two hours, a glass of rosé and something that had masqueraded as a goat's-cheese baguette later, the plane, having soared gloriously over the Alps, began its run down the Italian coast. The sea, now crystalline and blue, dazzled thousands of feet below.

Looking to her left at the seat occupied by a stranger rather than Bruce, she felt a pang of regret and arguing inwardly with herself, a misplaced longing. He was somewhere there on the ground, no doubt striding purposefully, but ever so slightly self-consciously, between lectures, the tan leather belt on his carefully chosen casual trousers matching his loafers, the sunglasses understated but making a statement.

It was easy to dismiss him for his ultimate shallowness, his vanity, but even after six months of the single, Bruce-free life, older memories of when they'd first met and all was golden sometimes caught her off-guard. There had been no one in her life quite like him; so vibrant, so confident. She'd tried to paint him once, but hadn't been happy with the result. He wasn't one of her book illustrations, created so meticulously. He was real and even now she could not, as a professional artist, dilute his handsomeness, even though it would have helped her to move on.

Corfu's runway stretched out across the old lagoon at the edge of the sea; a spectacular site reached at the end of a slow, breathtaking descent along a coastline of great beauty. Green, felt-textured hills and peaks, with rocks that appeared white where they broke the surface. Pale houses and white-rimmed island contours appeared and then finally the plane swooped down so close that the sea could be seen rippling in the gentle cross winds.



Mouse Island – in legend, Ulysses' ship turned to stone – and the southern end of Kanoni welcomed the passengers lucky enough to be able to look out of a window. To the west, if one approached from the south, were the Chessboard Fields Gerry Durrell had visited as a boy; a matrix of ancient waterways and home to many creatures.

It was really Gerry's writing, the adventures of a ten-year-old boy recounted twenty years later, that had brought her here. A miraculous experience, which had begun when he'd been lifted from Bournemouth and replanted in the richness of the land and life of Corfu, along with his family: his mother Louisa, Leslie and Margo, all following Gerry's eldest brother Larry, who was already there with his wife Nancy.

Nothing ever stayed the same, whether a person or an island. Would Corfu still smell and sound the same as it had for the Durrells when they had lived there in the 1930s? Would the air shimmer with waves of nostalgia and remembrance, like radio signals bringing the lost past into the present, powerful echoes she might feel travelling through time? Or would there just be sadness for those no longer there, with memory conjuring melancholy on an island saturated with sunshine and sun-seekers.

As the plane bounced down onto the runway Penny hoped that a month would be enough time to find all the answers to the questions in her heart and head. Or would a month be too long? Would disappointment – or the discovery that this was a silly, indulgent idea – leave her morose and lost?

As she stood at the top of the plane steps blinking against the light and feeling the warm, heavy, pine-and-herb-scented air of Corfu for the first time, Penny knew one thing for certain – she wished her dad was with her more than anything in the world.

Chapter 3

Guy Frobisher had already had a difficult day and it was only noon. The airport was getting hotter by the second, one of the luggage carousels had broken down, and there were two people who he had sent off to their transfer coach three times, who kept bouncing back. How difficult could finding Bay 22A be?

After ten weeks the novelty and perks of being a holiday rep had almost vanished for the university student, who had imagined freer, finer, and altogether more glamorous things. To add to the day's woes, he'd also just had to say goodbye to a tearful Ellie from Newcastle, to whom he had promised regular text messages and perhaps more.

His day brightened at the thought of the possible arrival of another 'Ellie' on the next flight. After all, he mused, who could resist the significant charms of his slightly plummy accent, entertaining stories, and blue-eyed, floppy-haired handsomeness?

At 20, Guy thought he had peaked and his irresistible personality and pulling power were not to be squandered. It would be wrong, he thought, not to share his gifts with an ever-changing cast of female leads in the *Guy Frobisher Show*.

A smitten college friend had once told Guy that he looked a little like Rupert Brooke, the war poet, and from that moment he often brandished an embossed leather notebook and a silver fountain pen, just in case the muse came upon him.

‘Guy, which bay is the Gouvía bus in?’ A small blond lad with an impish face puzzled over a collection of papers taped clumsily to a clipboard that bore the legend *Greektime* in pseudo-Greek lettering, on a bright blue and yellow background. A happy sun with large white-gloved hands in the thumbs-up position, wearing sunshades, dominated the logo.

Guy responded with a casually raised arm and pointed vaguely to the right. ‘Over there, Rich, but it doesn’t seem to matter today, my friend, because wherever you send ’em, they keep coming back in droves and telling me the bus or the bay doesn’t exist.’

Richard Leigh smiled, aware in his quiet and accepting way that Guy wasn’t in the best mood. They had arrived together on Corfu, feeling lucky and happy to be on the same island for their summer job, as they were pals and roommates at university. For their final year they planned to share a small flat, in which Guy had already claimed the en-suite bedroom.

In spite of the bus and bay confusion outside the airport, within thirty minutes all the coaches were full and Guy and Rich were heading south. Between them they looked after five resorts, some lively, others more sedate. The last stop on the journey was St George South and as the air-conditioning began to soothe everyone’s nerves, the noise level on the coach dropped and minds turned to thoughts of beaches, bars, and relaxation.

In a few hours, thought Guy, the rest of the day will be all mine. Corfu Town was calling and as the following day only involved a couple of welcome meetings, he would no doubt be out until dawn – or his money ran out.

As he handed out welcome packs to the passengers, he caught the eye of a young woman travelling with friends and smiled. She smiled back and Guy immediately channelled Mr Brooke as he took out his antiquated notebook with a flourish and – not too ostentatiously – looked thoughtful and began to write.



After waiting for the carousel to behave, Penny emerged from the airport with the right suitcase and looked for a Greektime rep. The bright yellow uniform was easy to spot and within seconds she arrived in a bus bay, directed by a small lad with a clipboard, who seemed to be part of a double act with a tall floppy-haired chap of about the same age.

Morecambe and Wise, Pete and Dud, Stan and Ollie? Penny wasn't sure which iconic duo they reminded her of, but there was something comic about their interaction that made her smile. When the pair joined her coach they handed out welcome packs and the driver slowly navigated the road from the airport. As they doubled back to follow the coast road, from the left-hand side of the coach, she saw another plane floating above the sea as it began its elegant descent. The Greek mainland glowed green, grey, and blue in the distance, the channel between the island and the mainland narrower than Penny had imagined.

The local radio station delivered its eclectic soundtrack of Greek and international pop music, as the film set of the road south rolled by the bus window. Past Perama, site of the Durrell's first home, the Strawberry Pink Villa, and on through Gastouri, famous for its charming donkeys with a distinctive white circle around their eyes.

Benitses, Moraitiki, Messonghi . . . on they went, stopping

occasionally to decant holidaymakers at their hotels and apartments. As they turned inland the roads became narrower and the corners tighter. Gnarled and ancient olive trees, their nets folded in the lower branches, featured at the side of the roads. Chickens and a goat or two worried the soil in the welcome shade, their surroundings bleached by the relentless sun. Painted shutters of china blue, now looked washed-out and pale, the grass patchy between each village, apologetic and sparse.

Eager to absorb every inch of the journey's unfolding story, Penny closed her eyes every few minutes as though trying to imprint an image on her mind's eye. The camera inside her head clicked away and treasured every single view that presented itself, beautifully composed and framed. Picture-perfect.

To her surprise, unbidden and unexpected, Bruce pushed himself again into that same space inside her head. She straightened her back in her seat, as though preparing for an argument or a difficult conversation – an old, familiar sensation.

She had acknowledged when they broke up that far from being the man she had thought he was, Bruce had also failed in her eyes to be the human being she'd hoped most people could be. As her father had become more confined and frustrated by his cancer, Bruce had competed childishly for her attention. He commented in a passive-aggressive way on the time Penny spent in her old family home, creating an unwelcome, exhausting layer of conflict and appeasement. An opportunity for him to work in Italy had brought things to a head. He had to go as it was the opportunity of a lifetime, he'd explained: 'You have to understand, Penny, this is a top university. A professorship at my age doesn't happen every day.'

What Bruce didn't realize was that she'd already stepped away from him by the time he shared the news of the job in Brindisi. A phrase, a sentence, a collection of words had begun this process, but the impact had been profound: 'I don't like hospitals,' he declared as she pushed her father, who was in acute pain, in a wheelchair down a busy hospital corridor. Bruce's petulance, after a sudden call from Penny asking him to meet her at the local infirmary, had surfaced in an ugly but ultimately timely way.

She had realized at that moment and in the weeks that followed that this was not – as her father used to say – 'someone who's wagon you would want to hitch your star to'. Bruce had sent a short letter of condolence when her father had died, informing her he was about to move abroad, but that he was thinking about her as he knew how much her dad had meant to her.

She imagined him now just across the water in Italy, still disliking hospitals and still happily believing that the world should revolve around him.

The bus stopped suddenly and, pulled back into the present, Penny saw a tourist in a hire car reversing frantically to let the bus through. A sign on the bend in the road declared, 'Welcome to St George South'.

She had made it. For the next month this would be home.

Chapter 4

St George South spread out to the left and right, radiating from a small picturesque harbour; a safe haven that day for four boats, anchored neatly, waiting patiently for a fisherman or holiday sailor. Restaurants, bars, cafés, several supermarkets, and a jewellery shop followed the shoreline. On the horizon, a tiny island shimmered luminously, as though part of an imaginary world.

A number of small hotels, apartments and tour, and car-hire companies lined the main road through the resort. Individual homes, some with beautifully manicured gardens, colour and fragrance escaping over the low whitewashed walls, made up the rest of the street landscape. To the north, the beach widened out into sculptured sand dunes.

The true secret of St George's success however, as with most places, resided with its people. Visitors returned each year as dear friends or extended family, building relationships and showered with warm, welcoming Greek hospitality. For decades, generations of residents had welcomed thousands of sun-seeking, tired, frazzled, and expectant families and individuals to this little piece of paradise. Most came looking for something prosaic or profound, or days by the pool with

suntan oil and swimming costumes, or sometimes a need for rest, release, or hope.

The answer each found at the end of their week or fortnight stay was, quite often, one that they hadn't expected. Sometimes they felt the positive glow of a week well spent with friends old and new. Others left with a determination to change their lives or lifestyle, to find a better work-life balance or perhaps – with balmy sunset meals still vivid in the memory – just to eat outside in the garden more.

Everyone took back with them a speck or two of the magic Corfiot dust that had settled on every visitor, even before the likes of Nero and Mark Antony had arrived in the harbour at Kassiope.

It was into this world that Penny stepped as the coach stopped outside the Athena restaurant.

Penny had barely turned around with her suitcase when a small boy, who looked around 7 years of age, approached the bus. Guy and Rich greeted him with the easy familiarity of established friends and shared some banter with their young pal, who showed them a small kitten, before Rich guided Penny across the road and along a lemon-tree- and honeysuckle-lined path. It was early afternoon, hazily hot, and the small lizards that populated this little lane hid in shady gaps in the wall. One poked its nose out for a moment to take a closer look at Penny. They would emerge in the cooler evening, she thought.

Two double-storey villas came into view, each painted pale blue with creamy yellow shutters and divided into four separate apartments, with one bedroom, an en-suite bathroom, and a small kitchen and living area. A small

balcony or veranda, depending which floor you were on, accommodated a circular table and two chairs.

Deep pink, abundant bougainvillea softened the stucco. To the right a few intrepid residents braved the high sun, as they melted slowly beside a small pool. The heat would defeat them soon and a late-afternoon nap would beckon in their shuttered rooms.

‘Here we go,’ said Rich as he led Penny up a set of cool marbled stairs. ‘You’re on the best side of the building, so you get a mountain view and a glimpse of the sea.’

Penny opened the shutters and stepped onto the balcony. A triangle of azure glistened to her left and a plane glided over the green and silver mountain to her right, on its way to the airport.

‘I’ll leave you to it then. There’s a meeting this evening at the Athena across the road at seven. Just a little welcome meeting for all our new arrivals – and a free drink. If you have any questions about anything, that’s a good time to ask. See you then!’ Rich backed out of the room and closed the door behind him.

Penny sat down on the bed closest to the balcony windows, the mustard-coloured bedspread soft between her fingers as she smoothed it down. For a second, she felt more alone than she’d ever done in her life.

She lay back on the bed, lifting her feet from the cool floor, and closed her eyes for a moment. Her left hand stretched out across the blanket, as though looking for human contact. Six months of sleeping alone and she still hadn’t got used to it. She turned her head on the pillow, eyes open now, and fixed her gaze on the empty space beside her.

A mosquito enjoying the shelter of the room buzzed around laconically. Penny watched it cross the ceiling and settle on the light fitting. Getting up, she opened her suitcase

mechanically and found the mosquito plug-in she'd bought the day before. Laughing quietly at herself – the ever-practical, ever-organized Penny – she plugged it in and acknowledged that her sense of loneliness, if accompanied by itching bites, would definitely make things worse. There was always something she could do to help herself, some small thing to help lift her mood, until the low passed.

He dad had said that nothing stayed the same. Good, bad, indifferent, it all moved on, whether we wanted it to or not. Change was part of life. Each wind, each tide brought something new. So, she would force herself to the Athena at 7 p.m. and meet her fellow Greektime travellers.

The temptation to wander out now, then shower and change before the meeting, was too great. *The unpacking can wait*, she thought, as the large suitcase stood like a monolith, accusingly in the corner.

This place is only really for sleeping and showering, she told herself, realizing suddenly how eerily quiet a room could feel when you were the only one staying in it.

Grabbing her slightly battered, but jaunty, wide-brimmed sunhat, she took a quick look in the mirror above the dark, wooden set of drawers next to the second bed. *I look hot*, she thought, *but not in a good way*. Picking up the leaflets the reps have given her, she fanned her face for a few seconds and then, dropping her keys in her small rucksack, left the apartment.

Chapter 5

It had been a steady day for Tess, with the usual mini-crises that running a popular restaurant and apartments brought. The heat had been fierce in the middle of the day, but happily she had been mostly in the shade. The air was cooler now and the breeze from the sea made the Athena the perfect place to sit in the early evening.

How lovely, she thought, to stop just for a few minutes, close your eyes, and take in all the sounds and sensations hanging in the air. The low murmur of relaxed chatter competed with the rhythmic sweep of the waves below, muffled laughter, and calls from the kitchen.

Keeping busy was a financial necessity, but also an emotional one. She had lost her husband three years earlier. Theo her son had been 5, and her 40th birthday only days away, when Georgios had stepped out onto the road and a tourist, who had forgotten momentarily which side of the road he was meant to be driving on, had hit him. A helicopter flight to Athens and all the expertise of the team at the hospital had failed to revive him from the coma the head injury had caused.

Her desolation mingled with remorse. That morning she

and Georgios had argued – not an unusual occurrence, but all the more painful now because no more words could be said, and the last ones between them, if not meant, had been harsh and shrill.

She pulled two tables together and rearranged the chairs. The twice-weekly holiday rep welcome meetings at the Athena were a useful advertisement for the restaurant's ambience and perfect setting. But the Athena had no real need for advocacy and signposting. The welcome was warm, the team professional and helpful, the food, created in the cosy kitchen by the indomitable Anna, outstanding. The tables, pale-blue and shabby chic rather than rustic, were well spaced and matched by solid wooden chairs.

The idyllic setting embodied the true secret of the Athena's well-deserved popularity, as it perched on the side of gently sloping rocks, about ten feet from the sea below. To the right was the harbour and beyond it, a cluster of palms and beautiful flowers.

All tavernas and wine bars were now beginning to fill with holidaymakers, anticipating their first glass of wine or lager. Across the sea a large yacht sailed sedately along the coast, reflecting a flash of radiance from the setting sun back to the shore.

Tess felt the warm breeze as she stepped into the outside area of the Athena, its soft stone a gentle contrast with the white-veined, marble floor of the open-sided interior. Clear blinds could be drawn down if the wind whipped up too much, or a summer squall trespassed near the diners.

The bar on the left was quite high and crowded with mementos from visitors and friends: photos, trinkets, tea towels from English seaside resorts, and good-luck charms were all part of the eclectic decor.

For decades, ever since Tess's father-in-law Spiro and

his late wife had opened the taverna in the 1970s, an ever-growing band of Athena superfans had considered the spot to be their own personal holiday paradise. Now there were three members of the Ioannidis family left, one for each generation: Spiro, Tess, and Theo.

Young Theo, now 7, had English grandparents in Devon, so the question, unspoken but already hanging in the air, was would he stay in St George South when he grew up? He should have been called 'Spiro' after his grandfather, but after a difficult birth Tess had wanted to call her new and miraculously delivered son after the doctor who, she felt, had saved them both. Georgios was so grateful to have his wife and child safe, he gave in easily. So, Theo it was.

The chatter of Guy and Richard interrupted her thoughts and she turned, hand on hip, cloth in hand, to greet them. The boys made her smile and Theo, with his menagerie of rescued local flora and fauna, sought out their company whenever he could. There was always an ailing kitten to save, a dog to feed, or a friendly lizard to coax into the house.

Rich and Guy always drew a suitably awed and interested audience. This, along with a dozen other maternal and protective reasons, was why she had, in a few short weeks, grown fond of them.

'Good day, Tess?' Guy flopped down and stretched his legs.

'Fine. You two?'

Rich smiled at Tess and gave her a thumbs-up.

'Bay 22A at the airport still seems to be perplexing people. It's like the Bermuda Triangle of coach terminals: people either can't find it, or they disappear.' Tess enjoyed Guy's exaggerated tall tales, his well-practised mock annoyance and impatience one of the charming things about him.

'So, who are you expecting, gentlemen? How many glasses shall I put out?'

‘I make it five,’ Rich said. ‘A couple who arrived last night, two from this morning, and a woman who arrived earlier. Shall I go and tell Lily, or fetch the glasses from Anna?’

Tess smiled inwardly at his eagerness. Rich’s willingness to help her waitress Lily had not gone unnoticed.

‘That’s great. Thanks, Rich. There should be three jugs ready: ouzo, orange juice, and water. Also, ask Lily if she checked the fridge this morning, would you, please?’

She liked to give him reasons to chat to Lily and help the potential romance along. However, although Rich was lovely, kind, and clever in his quiet way, sadly he was not the man occupying most of Lily’s waking thoughts – although, luckily for Rich, Ryan Gosling wasn’t likely to pop into the Athena any time soon. So, in that sense he had the advantage.

‘Here they come,’ drawled Guy as he spotted a middle-aged, sunhatted couple cross the road. ‘Showtime!’

Chapter 6

Penny savoured every step, as she walked slowly the few hundred yards to the Athena from her room. The air washed over her in a gentle wave of warmth and calm, laced with rich scents, but not heavy or cloying. The milky yellow, peach-tinged petals of the honeysuckle that grew randomly along the side of the thoroughfare had a subtlety of colour that gave it the quality and texture of a painting. A ginger cat in its sparse shade lazily followed Penny's progress without moving an inch, as cicadas provided a noisy soundtrack.

This tiny snapshot of Corfu at that moment reinforced Penny's earlier impressions from her walk around the harbour and along the beach. Pellucid-blue waters, quicksilver fish, the air heavy with heat, all contributed to this beautiful, serene, if slightly alien environment. If she'd wanted to be in another world, she had surely found it here.

She heard laughter and a loud confident voice as she reached the Athena and took the side entrance where the outside tables stretched to the sea. A small group, including the two holiday reps, had gathered there.

'Hello,' the confident voice greeted her and motioned her to sit down. 'Welcome. What would you like to drink? We

have water, ouzo, and orange juice, or any combination of the three.'

Penny smiled at each member of the group in turn, as Guy launched into his hard, but disarming sell of the 'sensational, not-to-be-missed, life-changing' daily excursions by land and sea, delivered so brilliantly by Greektime. Penny's mind wandered.

She already knew that the places she wanted to see and experience did not form part of the regular trips on offer. She intended to take her time, savour, absorb the visits to each location in the order she had planned in her mind for so long. Places made so special by the books she loved. The Strawberry Villa first; then the Daffodil Yellow; and then the Snow White. Finally, in some ways the most anticipated of all because it was a place where she could touch the ancient walls and dine with the same view Larry Durrell had enjoyed . . . the White House, at Kalami.

Each house had acquired an almost mythical quality in Penny's mind, as though they were portals into a secret garden from another time. From behind her sunglasses, she observed her fellow travellers: a middle-aged couple and two older ladies.

Both couples hung on Guy's every word and the women filled any gaps in his monologue by giving the group the benefit of their knowledge of many Greek islands, particularly the location of the best English breakfast and cheapest wine on Corfu.

Only half-listening, but managing to look fully engaged, Penny glanced at the little harbour entrance only a stone's throw from the Athena, to see a small blue and white boat ploughing valiantly through the white wave peaks on its way in. The two dark-haired men on board wore jeans and loose shirts. One had a white cap. As the boat touched the

harbourside the hatless one jumped effortlessly onto the quayside and secured the vessel.

Brothers? Friends? she wondered.

‘If you have any questions at all, or if you’d like to book now for any of the excursions, Rich and I will be here for the next half hour.’ Guy’s closing words brought Penny back into the room and she smiled across at the two reps.

‘Thank you. I hope you can help me,’ she said, ‘but my question is more about local knowledge and getting around the island, rather than the trips, if that’s okay?’ Penny looked across at the other guests and saw they were already getting out their credit cards to pay, so added quickly, ‘Please, look after everyone else first. I’ll get myself a drink and wait over there.’

Guy nodded and Rich smiled. ‘If you’re having wine, ask for the house rosé; it’s really good apparently,’ he told her. It was Lily’s favourite drink.

Sitting at the sea’s edge Penny had an uninterrupted view of the reddening sun, which looked as though it had stayed out too long under its own rays and was now eager to reach the cooling sea and sink with a sigh beneath the waves. With a glass of rosé in hand, she let her shoulders fall and savoured the sharp and sweet wine, perfectly chilled and smooth. The place, the calm, the peace created a precious moment. Corfu’s all-embracing welcome, echoed in the texture of each plant, leaf, and vivid orange and pink flowers and fruit, was already penetrating her skin and soul.

New voices muttered in the background and she turned to see the woman she assumed ran the restaurant talking to the two men from the boat. They sat down at the bar and drinks appeared. An animated conversation followed, punctuated by the older man with sweeping hand movements and a deep, powerful laugh. The son, if that was who his companion was, seemed quieter.

Penny could only see the back of his head, his sunglasses balanced on top, and his dark hair curled into his neck. For the second she caught him in profile, he appeared quiet but not relaxed; as though he didn't want to stay, couldn't settle.

His nose was aquiline and even at this distance, without seeing him face-on, his demeanour possessed a kind of nobility, like a marble sculpture that came to life at night and then forgot how to sit still and behave like a statue.

Restless. Yes, that was it.

She suddenly realized she was staring and turned back to look at the sea. Guy and Rich headed over.

'Thanks for your talk, but I need some local info,' Penny began. 'I'm on a mission and have some specific locations in mind. I'd like to hire a car, but also need someone, who you'd recommend or know personally, who could take me by sea to Kalami from Corfu Town.'

It came out in a rush, but even so she thought she sounded as if she knew what she was doing. Her usual confidence, though buoyed by the welcoming feel of St George, had a tendency these days to ebb and flow.

'I think we can help you there,' Guy said. 'I know you've just arrived,' he continued in an almost comedic theatrical tone, 'but Rich and I are more than happy to act as your *unofficial* guides. Our speciality is the delights of Corfu Town, particularly of an evening.' Penny almost expected a flourish or a bow at the end of this sentence, but Guy just smiled and she smiled back.

He had a winsome, warm energy about him and she suddenly found herself thinking he'd make a smashing younger brother.

'Tess, what time does Spiro open up in the morning?'

'Usually 9 a.m., but Alexia will be there from 8.30.'

'Penny needs a car. For a month?' he asked her.

‘Most of the month. There’ll be some days when I’ll just stay here,’ Penny answered. ‘I don’t know whether there’s a way I can book the car for days at a time.’

Tess wandered over from the bar and Guy introduced them. ‘Spiro’s a sweetheart. Just tell him Tess sent you. His cars are immaculate and you won’t find a more reasonable deal on the island.’

Penny smiled her thanks and asked Tess how long she had been in St George South.

‘When I arrived here, I was single, no child, and about to meet the love of my life,’ Tess began. ‘So, be warned.’ She smiled. ‘What are you planning for your month here? Or are you taking each day as it comes?’

Penny explained the pull of the Durrells’ connection, the promise she and her dad had made to visit one day and that, although there was no itinerary, she had a sort of plan. The last location on her list was the White House, at Kalami, which she hoped to travel to by boat from Corfu Town, as she knew Lawrence Durrell had made the trip many times.


‘Ah,’ said Tess, ‘then you need Dimitris. He fishes with his father some days, but has his boat moored at the Old Port and is sometimes available for chartered trips.’

Tess looked over her shoulder. ‘He was here a minute ago with his father. I can ask him to speak to you if you like.’

Penny looked across at the bar and the now-empty barstool where the restless sculpture had sat, and nodded her thanks to Tess.

‘He’s gone now, but don’t worry – he’ll be back. He sometimes stays overnight at his dad’s house in the village when they’ve been fishing.’ She paused then added. ‘I can detect a little bit of an accent there. Are you from Yorkshire?’ Penny, still looking across at the harbour, turned back to Tess.

‘Yes, born and bred.’



‘I’m a Devon girl myself, originally, but home is really about the people, isn’t it, wherever they are, rather than the place?’

Tess looked down at her feet for a moment and then before Penny had a chance to respond someone called her name from the kitchen and with a smile she was gone.