

‘C’MON, HOPE, LIGHTEN up!’ he says to me, his hand closing round mine, and the rest of the boys laugh.

‘You guys are disgusting,’ I say, turning away, and that only makes them laugh harder.

To be fair, I can’t help smiling either, even when Dev lets off another rancid fart next to me. It smells of rotten Egg McMuffin – unsurprising, given he ate three of the things on the way here – and would be an antisocial thing to do even if we *weren’t* all stuck in a cramped plane with the air being recycled for the next five hours. But yep, I’m still smiling. Because we’re finally off. We’re finally on *holiday*.

JB, who’s sitting across the aisle from me, seems to find it less funny. He’s gone a strange greenish colour. Nate nudges him, probably about to make some snide remark, but JB lurches out of his seat, and just makes it to the tiny toilet in front of us before we hear him hurl *his* McMuffin back up.

This is also unsurprising, given that JB lost almost every round of the drinking game we played in the minibus taxi to the airport, and also got dared to down two dirty pints in the Wetherspoon’s back at Stansted.

Some people say that girls and boys can’t be friends, and with the combined smell of Dev’s bumhole and JB’s regurgitated

breakfast mingling around me, I can understand why. But I've also laughed so much this morning that my stomach's already aching, and I'm feeling really glad that they invited me to tag along on their 'lads' holiday'. They've had it planned for months, and for a while, the girls were kind of planning one too. But that didn't pan out, because, well, reasons. And secretly I was glad. Lately there's been a bit of tension between a couple of the girls and it feels like we're starting to drift apart.

'Any drinks? Snacks?' The air hostess bumps her trolley back up the aisle past us. We're near the front of the plane – which has turned out to be lucky for JB – and I think she's a bit sick of us already. You'd think that the fact we have to pay for our drinks on this uber-budget flight might put the boys off ordering round after round. You would be wrong.

'Six Stellas, please!' Zack says, beaming at her and waving his credit card. He's always buying rounds. OK, so it *is* his dad's money, but still, he doesn't have to share, does he? It's like a job he's given himself in the group – always trying to make sure we're having a good time. The air hostess smiles at him – one of those smiles that's so tight at the corners and at the eyes that you know it's meant to be a *screw you* – and starts dolling out our cans of beer. My head's feeling a *little* bit fuzzy but not too bad; I managed to skip a couple of drinks in the cab and one at the airport and I've also been carb-loading like mad all morning. So actually I kind of enjoy the taste of this one, the way it fizzes over my tongue. I can feel my whole body relaxing as we fly higher, higher, away from England and the stress of AS exams.

The only slight kill to my buzz comes when I glance past

Dev and his cloud of weapons-grade gas and see Logan in his window seat. Don't get me wrong; me and Logan are cool. Now, at least. Well, actually we have been for ages. Almost a year. It definitely feels like the break-up was a long time ago anyway.

But still – it's never going to be easy, going on holiday with your ex, is it? Even though we're mates now, sometimes it's hard to forget that we've, you know, seen each other naked. And he's looking good at the moment. His smooth brown skin is a shade darker from the freak sunshine we had at home last week and he's let his hair grow out a little bit, the way I always liked it.

I guess that's the way Daisy likes it too.

'Hey, Hopey,' Zack says, leaning across the aisle and interrupting my thoughts. 'How's your first lads' holiday turning out?'

There's the sound of a fresh round of retching from the toilet and the boys all laugh. And even though it's totally gross, the beer is going to my head in a lovely, bubbly way, and I can't help joining in.

WE LAND AT Heraklion airport just after 3 p.m. Greek time, and are shepherded onto a waiting coach by Zack, who somehow manages to get his dad act on despite having downed about seven beers on the flight. It was Zack who organised the apartment too, but as we watch all the other groups of guys and girls boarding the coach – some of them in matching tour T-shirts with nicknames printed on the back, including a hen party complete with veiled (and hammered) bride – I'll admit that I'm sceptical about where we're going to end up.

JB, now perked up (and mouthwashed), sits down next to me, and as the coach sets off, we watch the rocky road ahead as we climb through dusty hills. Logan sits across the aisle from us, along with Nate, who's been quiet all day, while Zack and Dev have already started chatting to the two Welsh girls sitting opposite them.

'You excited then, Novak?' JB offers me the crumpled pack of Monster Munch he's just rescued from his bag. He needs to hurry. He's got about thirty seconds before someone notices and starts up the 'Eating's cheating' chant.

'Course,' I say, glancing out of the window as we hit some kind of main road. 'So good to be away.' I reach out and pinch his cheek with its patchy attempt at stubble. 'We're free!'

He laughs. 'Sure are. Hey, sorry about your girls' holiday. Georgie was really disappointed.'

Georgie is JB's stepsister, and I get on really well with her. But things have been a bit awkward between her and Charlotte, one of our other friends, since Georgie started going out with Josh, who Charlotte's had a crush on since we were about nine. It's silly and I'm sure it'll all blow over – it's hardly a good reason to lose a friend. But I also don't think Georgie *was* that disappointed about our holiday plans not working out – I get the feeling she'd much rather spend the time with Josh, anyway.

But I just shrug, because that's easiest. 'Thanks for letting me tag along on yours.'

'Hey, any time, Novak. You've always been one of the boys.'

'Course she is,' Dev says, turning round and pressing his angular face through the gap between the seats. 'Hopey, I'm expecting you to be my wing-woman alllllll week.'

'She's not a miracle worker, Devdas,' JB says, flicking Dev's nose.

I meet Dev's eye and wink. He needs this holiday, and JB knows it. Dev might be pretending he doesn't miss Mollie, who he broke up with a couple of months ago, but it's obvious he's still gutted. I don't know exactly what went on there, but Dev hasn't been the same for weeks. It's really good to see him in such a good mood today, back to the goofy joker he usually is.

I've known all of them since Year 7 – well, not *known* them, not really, because I came from the tiny little village school while most of them had gone to the big primary in town. I

was cripplingly shy when we started at Dean Valley and so spent most of Years 7 and 8 in a spasm of panic and terror of being called on or noticed or in any way not invisible. It was only in Year 9 that I ended up in a maths class with Nate, Dev and Charlotte and got chatting to them about the sheer suckiness of SOHCAHTOA, after which we ended up sitting together. And then I started to get to know the others, at lunchtimes and stuff, and now we've just finished Year 12 and I can't imagine life without them. I love their stupid nicknames for each other and for me, and I love their stupid goofy jokes and their awkward hugs. The boys stink a lot of the time, but still. It's like having a whole bunch of extra older brothers. And since my actual brother decided to skip off to New Zealand for the next five years, that's been kind of welcome.

The barren road is starting to give way to civilisation: villas and abandoned building sites, everything bleached out in the bright afternoon light. The Welsh girls are still laughing at Zack's jokes, which is kind of normal. He has this way of talking to people – even if he's just met them – that puts them totally at ease. Making jokes but not *too* many jokes, interested but not *too* interested. He does it with boys as well as girls and the more time I spend with him, the more I wish I could do it too. He's the friend you always want to have in a group, the person who makes any awkward situation kind of fine.

Behind JB and me are a couple of girls who look a bit nervous about the rowdy crowd they've found themselves in the middle of – everyone chatting and singing and standing up to yell stuff at friends in other seats. I hear one of them

mutter, 'I thought you said it was a chilled-out place,' but then I get distracted by the shots of some violent green spirit Zack is pouring out of a tall bottle he's pulled from I have no idea where, into plastic shot glasses he also seems have magicked from yet another pocket in his fancy holdall.

I think I'm quite drunk now.

The two girls behind us get dropped off first, at some gorgeous-looking hotel with pillars outside the front door and giant palms in the driveway. But the next group *aren't* quite so lucky. Their hotel is up a dusty drive with spiky, dead-looking plants filling a ditch along one side. We can't quite see the building properly from where the coach has pulled up, but the bit we *can* see is covered by scaffolding. The hen party get off here, looking annoyed, and a group of boys also have to get off, all of them jeering and jostling one of their friends, who was apparently in charge of booking their accommodation.

JB makes a pretend scared face at me. 'Hope Zack hasn't stitched us up.'

And he hasn't. We pull up outside Amity Apartments ten minutes later. It looks freshly painted, brilliant white, with a bright orange sign beside the sliding doors. It's five floors high and I can just see the neon blue of a swimming pool behind the reception. It's nothing fancy, but it looks clean and, you know, finished.

We climb off the coach, Dev and Zack pretending not to be ecstatic that the Welsh girls – who are called Lucy and Rachel – are staying here too.

‘Well in, Zack,’ Nate says, looking up at the building and then through the glass at the pool. ‘You’ve done all right here.’

‘As usual,’ Zack says, grinning, before following Lucy into reception.

‘Are you guys here for a week?’ Rachel asks, as we step into the cool of the lobby.

‘Just four nights,’ I say. ‘The flights were really cheap that way.’

She nods. ‘Yeah, we got cheap ones too – although our flight back is at like stupid o’clock on Tuesday.’

‘You been here before?’ Nate asks her, and she shakes her head.

‘We went to Kavos last year, but we heard it was better here. More going on.’

‘Yeah, our mate Zack found this page, Malia Unlocked,’ Dev chips in, leaning on my shoulder. ‘It has all the cool secret stuff listed – you should check it out.’

Rachel smiles at him. ‘Cool, thanks.’

‘All sorted!’ Lucy says, skipping over with a form and a set of keys clutched in her hand. ‘First floor, pool view.’

‘Nice work!’ Rachel smiles at us. ‘Well, catch you guys later.’

‘Yeah, we should all hit the strip together,’ Dev says, although they’re already halfway down the corridor. Lucy turns round and smiles, gives him a little wave.

‘They’re nice,’ he says with a grin, once they’re (just about) out of earshot.

‘Very nice,’ Nate says, clapping him on the back. ‘Come on then, let’s see what Zack’s lined up for us.’

Zack pads over to us. ‘Right, boys and girl, we’re all set.

Someone call the lift – we’re up on the third floor.’

We’ve been given three sets of keys – each with a fob for the front door afterhours, and a big gold key for our own door – one of which is immediately entrusted to me.

‘Don’t give Hope one,’ Logan laughs. ‘She’s always losing stuff.’

He looks at me with this kind smile, that same twinkle in his eyes that I know so well. The look that says, *I’m only kidding*. That says, *I love you*. Except it doesn’t, not any more. ‘I trust her more than I trust Dev,’ Zack says, also laughing, as the lift pings open and we step out into the third-floor corridor. Our apartment is right at the end, and we all stand outside the front door and watch Zack slot his key into the lock. He takes his time over it, turning to grin at us all like we’re his kids. And that’s kind of the way things are, Zack looking out for us. When Logan and I broke up, it was Zack who came and found me in the common room the next day, his hands full of packets of sweets from the vending machine. He sat next to me and he didn’t ask if I was all right, just handed me the sweets now and then, and after a while he just said, ‘You’ll be all right though, won’t you? You can still be friends?’

And he was right. We are friends.

‘Honey, we’re hooooome,’ Zack says now, clicking the door open ceremoniously and letting it swing open.

It’s probably a bit *too* much ceremony, to be honest, because the room inside is pretty basic. It’s clean and tiled, a wooden-framed sofa in front of a wooden coffee table, three wicker chairs dotted around it too. There’s a kitchen – well, a sink and two electric rings, a microwave, a tiny fridge and a

couple of cupboards. The bathroom's there, through another door, and then, beside that, sliding doors out onto a little balcony, which we all crowd towards.

'The sofa turns into a bed,' Zack is saying, 'so one of us can kip out here.'

The hot air outside hits us in a wave as Nate slides open the balcony door. The pool is below, with its smell of chlorine and suntan lotion and damp towels. Beyond that are the grey concrete buildings of another, bigger hotel, and a scrubby bit of wasteland; behind that, in the distance, the sea.

'Ahhhh,' Dev says, taking in a lungful of pool air. 'Now this is what I'm talking about.'

On the other side of me, JB burps. It smells faintly of McMuffin. And Monster Munch.

'Let's take a look at the bedrooms,' I suggest.

There are two bedrooms, one with a double bed and a little fold-out camp bed, and the other with two singles.

'So obviously,' Zack says, in his most gentlemanly voice, 'Hope should sleep in here.' We're in the room with the two singles. 'And then whoever's not shagging can take the other bed each night.'

I mean, firstly: *Eww*.

But also: *What if I want to shag?*

'I can just stay on the sofa,' I seem to be saying. 'I'm the smallest, so that seems fair.'

I mean, sure, Hope. Give away all your privacy – why not?

Zack shakes his head in that over-the-top way he has, like a dog trying to get water out of its ears. 'No way, Novak. You're one of the lads but you're also one of the ladies, so you get an

actual bed, with the least amount of man-stink in the vicinity. That's just how it works.'

He's sweet – although I feel kind of confused being described as a lady and a lad; what the hell do either of those things even *mean* anyway? – and I don't want to be out in the living area, with the whole lot of them thumping back and forth to the bathroom all night. Plus the bedroom with the two beds has its own little balcony. Only a slice of one really, but enough for two people to stand on and look out at the sun setting over the hotel next to ours.

Plus – look, I'm not proud of it – I can't help thinking how Logan has a girlfriend and so won't be 'shagging'. So maybe, just maybe, it'll be Logan who ends up in the other single bed.

No. Hope. Seriously.

I can't think like that. Logan's my friend. *Daisy's* my friend, for God's sake, although how that's happened is anyone's guess. And I'm OK with it all, I am. It's just that he's here, and I'm here, and we're not at school and that, suddenly, feels just ever so slightly confusing.

It'll take time, I guess. That's what Zack said too, actually.

So I just shrug, and dump my bag at the end of one of the beds in the smaller room. The sun is starting to sink but only just, and I think ahead to tonight, butterflies turning in my stomach. The strip is a ten-minute walk from here, Zack said, and I can just picture it all sparking into life now, neon signs stuttering on, ice being shovelled into bars and fridges getting filled with bottles.

I wander back into the main room, and it's like we're all in sync because Zack says 'Well, apparently the strip doesn't get

going till a bit later, so we should go for dinner and beers first.
But that's ages away, so shall we just chill by the pool first?
Get some cocktails in?'

And so we do.



IT'S ONLY WHEN I'm getting changed that I start feeling a bit weird about going out in front of all of them essentially naked. Bikini is basically naked, right? It's not *technically* naked, but with a touch of imagination to fill in the particulars, it's naked. I don't know, maybe it's just me, but I think it's always going to feel slightly wrong being in what is basically your underwear in front of a load of guys, good friends or not.

So when I first exit the little bedroom (which, so far, seems to be just mine), in my new bikini, a towel around me, I do feel insecure. It's not like I really want them to think I look *good* – it's just I'm a bit freaked out at the idea that they might be looking at all.

But none of them bat an eyelid. They're all in their swimming shorts, standing around with towels chucked over their bare shoulders.

'Ready, Hope?' Zack says, already gripping the door handle.

'Yup.' I pick up my key from where I left it on the coffee table, and I can't help raising an eyebrow at Logan. *See, I don't always forget things!* He grins at me, getting my message loud and clear. I'm glad to find that we still have that, that talking without speaking, the way you only get with the people you're closest to.

We pad down to the lift, flip-flops squeaking against the tiled floor. The air-conditioning isn't exactly futuristic, but it's still cool enough, and so when we're back on the ground floor, heading out of the huge sliding doors to the pool, the heat hits me again. I'm glad I packed factor fifty along with my more optimistic twenty.

The pool is packed with people splashing around and lolling with their elbows on the side. The white plastic loungers around the edge are also full, but as we step out onto the hot patio Zack spots a group starting to pack up in one corner. He marches over, his broad rugby shoulders pale beside the oiled bodies on the loungers. Within seconds he's chatting to a couple of the guys in the group like they've been friends for years, one of the girls standing up to join in as they all laugh at some joke he's made. He waves us over and we go, a dutiful little crocodile, to say hello to this group of friends from Swansea and take their still-sweaty loungers.

I settle into mine – Logan to my left, Nate on the right – and lean back, eyes closed, soaking up the warmth of the sun. There's music playing from speakers by the pool, some club number I half know, and everyone's conversations melt into one big blur of sound, a comforting kind of white noise.

'Hey, Hope, you got sun cream on?'

I jerk awake – realising, belatedly, that I've actually fallen asleep – and see Nate smiling at me from the edge of his lounger. He's wet from the pool, which means I've been asleep for longer than a second. I glance down at my legs, which are turning red. I swing them over the edge of the lounger and reach for my bag.



‘Can I nick some after you?’ Nate asks. The rest of our loungers are empty – I glance towards the pool and see the four of them over there, deep in a game of water volleyball with a bright pink inflatable ball that only travels a feeble distance through the air before sinking sadly back to the water.

I lotion up my legs and then the rest of me, rubbing extra into my face, which feels tight and hot. And then I offer the bottle to Nate, who takes it and squirts it directly onto his shoulders, rubbing it in with his long, elegant hands. He glances up and sees me looking – *where are my sunglasses?* – and he passes the bottle back after going over his face and the back of his neck with both hands.

I add another blob to my stomach, just to be sure. As I settle on my lounger, I can’t help feeling a bit insecure again, because look at all these girls with their neon bikinis against their perfect airbrushed skin, glowing. No dry patches, no stray hairs, no cellulite. Does a tan hide cellulite? I know I’m not supposed to care about cellulite or stray hairs, and most of the time I really don’t . . . But, I don’t know. *Look* at them all. It’s like I just dozed off and woke up in the middle of a magazine shoot or something.

I find my sunglasses beside me on the lounger; slide them on. That feels better. They’re not rose-tinted but they do put a kind of gold sheen on everything.

Nate settles back on his own sunbed, water still dripping from its plastic slats where he first sat down. His footprints on the concrete are slowly evaporating. The music changes to an old tune, one I know and used to like, by an indie band



who aren't really in fashion any more. Nate sings a line or two, putting his Ray-Bans on, and then he gets up again.

'I'm going to the bar, Novak – you want anything?'

I tip my head and look at him over the top of my sunglasses. 'Maybe. What you getting?'

'An ice cream and a beer.'

I reach for my purse. 'That sounds perfect.'

When he's gone, I think about how nice it is to be talking, and just *being*, with Nate. It's not like we fell out after me and Logan broke up or anything. It's just that we used to do a lot of stuff together, just the three of us, a lot of movie nights and hanging out at lunchtime and WhatsApping each other stupid jokes, and then me and Logan broke up and it'd have been weird to keep doing those things with Nate, so I kind of lost him too.

So yeah, it's nice. Things are getting back to the way they were and I think that's what I want.

Zack comes splashing over, water still pouring off him. He flops onto his sun-lounger and grins at me. 'Done all right, haven't I, Novak?'

'Yeah, it's great. Thanks for sorting it.'

'No problem. Right, I'm getting a disco nap in because tonight we are getting *on it*.'

He flips his sunglasses down from the top of his head and promptly falls asleep, arms crossed over his chest. The others slowly filter back too, bringing drinks from the bar. Dev's got two Magnums, both of which he eats before Nate's even returned with mine.

'Uhhhhh,' Logan says, dropping onto his lounger. 'The sun feels *so good*.'

‘I know,’ I say, just a tiny bit conscious of the fact that my boobs aren’t staying exactly in line with the sides of my bikini.

He leans lazily over and raises his beer to me in a sort of cheers, before doing the same to Nate, who’s finally returned with our drinks after failing to chat up the girl at the bar.

‘Thanks, Nate.’ The cold ice cream feels amazing in my mouth and, weirdly, is even good when washed down with a mouthful of sour beer.

Soon half the boys are asleep, while JB is engrossed in something on his phone and Logan is texting on his; Daisy, I guess. I slide off my lounger and go over to the pool. The sun is starting to dip towards the horizon now, and things are a little quieter, people starting to congregate around the bar instead of in the water.

I sit down on the edge and dunk my legs in. It’s cool against my skin, washing away the beery drowsiness, and so I lower the rest of my body in. I look out at the setting sun and then back at my friends.

I smile and then I dive under the water and swim until my lungs feel like they’re about to burst. When I break the surface and take my first gasp of air, I start to laugh.

THE STRIP IS heaving with people already, even though Zack said it wouldn't get *really* busy until after midnight. It's like nothing I've ever seen before – just bar after bar after bar, bright colours and flashing lights. Music thumps out of speakers while people spill onto the street, clutching bottles and plastic cups of fluorescent-looking drinks. Everyone is smiling and laughing, and people in branded T-shirts are handing out leaflets and vouchers and grinning at groups, stopping them to try to tempt them into the bars. Within five minutes we get offered a free fishbowl, a free round of shots, then a free fishbowl *and* shots. Within seven minutes Zack has negotiated for us to get *two* fishbowls and a round of shots at a small bar with plastic chairs around bright yellow tables. The girl who brought us over, in a matching yellow vest top, lets go of Zack's arm and goes over to the bar. The barman, a guy not much older than us, with a full tattoo sleeve on one arm and some pretty oiled-up hair, nods and flips two empty fishbowls up onto the bar. I'm not close enough to see the names on the bottles he picks up, but plenty of their contents goes into the bowls.

Meanwhile the girl pours pink shots out of an unmarked bottle into glasses on a tray, and then winds her way back through the tables to give them to us. About half of the other

tables are full, most of them with people sitting around their own fishbowls, the coloured straws streaming out of them while the liquid – layers of yellow and orange and pink – slowly turns murky.

‘Here you go, guys.’ The girl plonks down the tray of shots. ‘Enjoy! Fishbowls are on the way.’

‘Thanks,’ Zack says with one of his winning smiles. ‘Right team, ante up!’ He hands out the shots. We all grin at each other, all say, ‘Cheers.’ My shot is sugary and sharp in my throat, and the empty plastic glasses slam back onto the table like a drumbeat. My fuzzy drunk feeling from the pool has totally gone now – after a shower and a can of Coke and a bowl of pasta at the restaurant at the end of our dusty road, I feel properly awake and alive and ready to go. Buzzing.

When the fishbowls are delivered, I end up sharing one with Nate and Logan. I’d be quite happy to sit and sip it – especially as it tastes like a mix of orange and hairspray, not exactly appealing – but Zack, who’s sharing the other one with JB and Dev, yells, ‘Race ya!’ and they start hoovering theirs up with about three straws each. I roll my eyes, but Nate nudges me and says, ‘Come on, Novak!’ and I find myself with three straws in *my* mouth, sucking as hard as I possibly can.

It tastes pretty disgusting, but when we win, when Nate and Logan high-five me, I get this warm feeling in my chest and I don’t know if it’s the booze or just . . . everything.

After the fishbowls, we carry on down the strip, half walking, half dancing our way between bars, until suddenly it’s midnight and I am *drunk*.

I find myself by the bar with Logan, both waiting to be served. He has the sort of dozy look he gets on his face when he's pretty drunk, like everything around him makes him both sleepy and happy, and he grins when he sees me and puts an arm round me.

'I love this holiday already,' he says, raising his voice so I can hear him over the music.

'Me too.' I'm feeling pretty dozy myself, the heat and music thudding through me and Logan's skin warm next to mine. When he lets go to turn and order from the barman, I feel sad. *Stop that*, Sober Me (now a very small and quiet voice) tells Drunk Me.

'Another?' Logan says, gesturing to my empty glass, and I nod, fumbling for euros.

'Here.' He passes me my new drink and then waves my money away. He picks up his own and then, just as we're about to head back to the group, he looks down at me.

'I'm really glad you're here,' he says, and I feel warm all over again.

After that cocktail, things become a little broken.

We're dancing on a bar somewhere, Zack with his top off, all roaring along to '99 Problems'.

We're standing outside in the warm night, watching Dev get a henna tattoo after losing a bet with Nate. The bet was that Dev could pull a girl faster than Nate in the last bar we were in – I remember it being purple, the floor sticky, but

I don't remember a name or what we did there – and Nate completed the challenge in under five minutes. Zack, doling out the forfeit, has chosen the tattoo for Dev. It's a cartoon penis, and it's going on his bum. Dev pulled a girl too, just not quite as quickly as Nate. Otherwise the tattoo would have gone on his face.

We're dancing on a table somewhere, Logan, JB and me, and the table is not very steady. The bouncer looks angry. Zack lifts me down and throws me over his shoulder. He spins around until I think I might be sick from laughing.

He falls.

We both fall.

I'm still laughing.

There are more shots.

There are more fishbowls.

We are sitting at a table outside a place I don't remember, sweat cooling on our skin. Some of the boys are smoking and there are cold bottles of beer in front of us. A girl walks past in denim cut-offs and a suede bralet, and Dev makes the mistake of muttering aloud, 'She'd get it.'

'Tell her!' the others roar, and *Tell her* is the law.

Dev swears and hurtles off down the street. He taps the girl on the shoulder and we see his lips move.

The girl throws her drink at him.

I'm still laughing.

* * *

We are still sitting at a table outside a place I don't remember, and Dev's shirt is slowly drying. The beers are almost empty. A girl walks past in a black cut-out dress, slices of tanned hip showing through, and Dev makes the mistake of muttering aloud, 'Oh my days, she is fine.' But he's quicker this time – he glances up and remembers to say, 'Tell her,' just before the others say it and so he's safe.

The girl walks on by.

We are dancing on a flashing dance floor in a dark, dark bar where all our white bits glow blue. Dev is kissing the girl in the cut-offs and Zack is with a girl whose face I don't remember. Logan holds my hand and twirls me around.

'You caught the sun,' he says, and the music is so loud he has to come right up close to say it.

We're in McDonalds, ordering food. JB is outside McDonalds, throwing up orange and yellow and pink.

We're walking home, the laughter and the music and the smell of the strip fading behind us, hands greasy and speckled with salt, open burger boxes wobbling as we walk.

I am happy.

I am so happy.



I AM HUNGOVER.

I am so hungover.

I groan and throw the sheet over my head, trying to block out the bright sunlight that's flooding through the thin white curtains. My mouth feels dry and sticky and my eyes are still crusty with last night's make-up.

I turn onto my side and peep out from under the sheet. JB's in the bed beside mine, and I have a vague memory of the two of us sitting up in bed eating chips – yep, there are the empty cartons on the floor – and talking intensely about life. No idea what we actually *said* though – I vaguely remember him saying something about Josh not treating Georgie very well, and I wish I could remember it properly because it feels like it was important.

JB's flat on his back, snoring. He's clutching his phone, his hand flopped over the edge of the bed. I close my eyes, wondering if I can get back to sleep – with any luck, I'll feel better next time I wake up – but music starts playing from the pool outside. My eyes pop open again. I'm wide awake and I need a wee and my head feels like it's about to fall off. I throw the sheet aside again and get up as quietly as I can, padding barefoot around JB's bed.





Nate is asleep on the sofa in the living area, although he was obviously too drunk to unfold it into a bed – so he’s scrunched up uncomfortably on it, his feet hanging over one wicker arm and his head propped awkwardly against the other. The other bedroom door is wide open and I can see Zack’s stomach rising and falling as he snores, loudly, flat on his back, Dev curled on his side with a pillow pressed over his head. I can’t see Logan on the camp bed on the other side of the room, but I imagine he’s in a similar position – he hates snoring, although he’s just as bad half the time. I sneak into the bathroom and close the door as quietly as I can – although I probably don’t need to bother, given that Zack’s currently drowning out most other sounds.

I sit on the loo, pressing my hand against my forehead as another bolt of pain throbs through my skull. Like an idiot, I didn’t drink any water last night. That, plus mixing all those drinks . . . I’ve really only got myself to blame.

Bits of the night come back to me and I can’t help smiling, thinking of Zack’s goofy dad-dancing, Nate’s one-liners, Dev trying to leapfrog a bin and tipping sideways into a bush. And then I’m smiling in a different sort of way, because I’m thinking of Logan’s arm round my shoulders, Logan’s face near mine.

Nope. Stop that right now.

I flush and then go to the sink to wash my face, scrubbing hard to get the dried mascara traces from under my eyes. I look at myself in the mirror. Ponytail half falling out and skew-whiff on my head; sunburnt streaks on my cheeks and collarbone. The rest of me stubbornly pale. I’ll have to do a better job of



putting on sun cream today. My stomach gurgles, which is a good sign – maybe I'll be able to kick this hangover with a fry-up and a pint of orange juice.

I jump in the shower while I'm still feeling all right, and by the time I come out Nate's pottering around in the living room and Zack's got the little plastic kettle boiling.

'Mooooorning, Hope-Dogg,' Zack says. 'Sugar and a half, right? Just show it the milk?'

I grin at him. 'Spot on, Zack. Thanks.'

'Yeah, well, there's only three mugs,' Nate says, 'so you better drink it fast before that lot show their faces.' He reaches up and stretches, all the muscles in his chest flexing. 'God, I am *hanging*.'

I'm actually feeling pretty good now, especially after my first slurp of tea from the chipped plastic mug. I keep that to myself though. Nobody likes a smug face first thing in the morning, and besides, my hangovers have a tendency to creep back as the day goes on.

'Morning.' Logan leans against the bedroom doorframe, wearing just shorts and a sleepy smile. I have to look away.

'Mornin' Lo-Dogg,' Zack says. 'You are the lucky winner of the last mug. You mug. Milky, two sugars, right?'

I go into the bedroom to dress, my cup of tea warm in my hand.

We eat breakfast out on the patio by the pool. As suspected, my headache's back with a vengeance, but it retreats again briefly when my fry-up is put in front of me. It's properly greasy, bacon pale and fatty, the sausage beige with a single



burnt stripe on each side. And I get stuck straight in. I shovel the entire fried egg onto a triangle of cold toast and shove half of that into my mouth in a single mouthful.

'Bloody hell, Hope,' Dev says. 'That is impressive. It used to take Mollie about an hour to eat a bowl of cereal.'

I concentrate on forking beans onto the chunk of sausage I've sawn off and choose not to mention that Mollie has been worried about her weight since she overheard Freddie, Zack's older brother, saying she was 'pretty for a chubby girl' at Zack's birthday party two years ago.

'Urghhhhhhhhh,' JB says. He's sitting with his forehead resting on the table and he's been making that noise roughly every five minutes. His breakfast is a pint of Coke which is sitting in a slowly growing puddle of condensation as the ice melts.

'I feel you, man,' Nate says, pushing his breakfast away and slurping up the dregs of his pint of orange juice. 'My head is *banging*.'

'Pull it together, boys,' Zack says, reaching over to grab the sausage from Nate's plate and eating the majority of it in one bite. Zack never seems to get hangovers. I've known him to go and play rugby while everyone else has still got their head stuck down the nearest toilet. 'You've got about an hour before Operation Get Back On It begins.' He tosses the last bit of sausage into his mouth. 'In fact, I fancy a beer now.' He signals to a waitress. 'Hope, you in?'

There's something about the way he looks at me, like he knows I'm going to say no. There's something about the way Logan looks at me, with a small smile like he's pretty sure

I'll say yes. And I'm just the right amount of hungover for it to seem like a good idea.

'Yeah, all right,' I say, enjoying the surprise on Zack's face although it doesn't last long. He waves to the waitress and then turns to the rest of the table. 'Well, come on then, lads,' he says. 'Who else is man enough?'

I don't really understand what having a penis has to do with being able to drink a beer with breakfast, but I'm distracted by the fact that Logan is scowling at his phone. After typing out a text, he slams it face down on the table then leans back in his seat. 'Count me in,' he says.

'You OK?' I ask, while the others are distracted by JB legging it to the disabled toilet on the other side of the restaurant. Zack and Dev stand up and jeer at him, while the waitress waits patiently for the order.

'Yeah,' Logan says, sounding anything but. 'Some things aren't meant to be, right?'

I hate that my first reaction is just a tiniest glimmer of hope. I remind myself that Daisy is my friend. I remind myself that *Logan* is, and that he's upset. I reach out and rub his arm. But what am I meant to say? I don't really know anything about their relationship.

Luckily the others are sitting back down now, and the waitress is pretty quick at delivering beers to Zack, Logan and me, and another orange juice to Nate. Now that it's in front of me, beer at this time of the morning – although, when I check my watch, it's actually just gone midday – doesn't seem like such a great idea. There's a whole afternoon and most of the night to get through . . . But I figure I'll just eat lots throughout the day

and pace myself. Besides, we're on holiday. This is the whole point of being on holiday, right? Having fun. Treating myself.

The next time the waitress passes, I order a piece of cheesecake.

I like holidays.

THE SHOWER FEELS good on my hot skin, sand sticking to the tray as the water trickles down the drain. I glance down to check out the sunburn situation and it looks like I've done OK today with the sun cream – just a weird red-lined finger-streak under my left boob where I've obviously missed a bit. My face feels hot and tight but I think that's from the salt and the wind – JB and I walked right down the beach, just chatting about school and things, to get to an ice-cream stall someone told Zack about. It was nice actually, looking out at the sea and just talking about *stuff* – about funny things that happened last night but also about Year 13 and exams and what happens after all that. JB is really good to talk to. I kind of wish I remembered more of what we said last night.

I switch off the shower and squeeze the water out of my hair, which feels like knots on knots. It's going to be *really* fun trying to comb this out. But then I see that someone has thoughtfully poured a vodka and Coke into a plastic cup and left it outside the bathroom door. I pick it up and take a swig. Hmm. A bit too much vodka and it doesn't taste *quite* like real Coke, but it's still quite sweet and refreshing, given I was starting to flag a bit.

Nate and Dev are ready to go out and sitting in the living



room, playing Shithead with a battered deck of cards on the little coffee table. It's a game I've always been good at – hoarding up my power cards and picking the exact right moment to drop them on someone else – but I know from past experience that Nate is even more ruthless than me.

Someone's playing music on travel speakers in Zack and Logan's bedroom, and there's the smell of deodorant and hairspray and aftershave drifting out. As I pad into my room, JB strolls out, wearing a neon Hawaiian shirt and drinking from the novelty plastic glass he stole from the Flamingo Cafe where we had a cheeky drink on the way back from the beach. He's also carrying his phone, which is playing Drake at a pitiful but valiant decibel level.

'Just farted in there,' he tells me, raising his voice to be heard over the two competing tracks and the yells as Nate decides to 'shit' on Dev. 'Soz, babe.'

Nate and Dev laugh at this, and Nate deals out a hand for JB to join them. I carry on into the bedroom, feeling a bit annoyed at JB – that was so put on for the others, he'd never have said it if it was just me and him. I close the door behind me and then crouch in front of my suitcase, fumbling through my clothes. I settle on a grey T-shirt dress and flip-flops because I'll be comfy in that, and right now I feel lazy and relaxed. Yeah, last night there were loads of girls dressed up, and maybe if I'd been with the others like we'd originally planned I would've felt like I had to as well. But I'm with the boys – they don't care what I'm wearing.

Apart from Logan maybe, that evil bit of me whispers, and that's all the more reason to wear the plainest thing I have.



I'm going to kiss someone tonight, I tell myself. Someone who gives me that little sparky looping feeling in my stomach, someone I don't know. That's what I need – I need reminding that there's a whole world outside of Kings Lyme and even Malia and that I can be whatever I want to be if I meet someone new. I comb out my wet hair and finish my drink as I put on some make-up. When I go back into the living room, Zack and Logan are out and ready too.

'Guys,' Zack says, standing up and looking at his phone, 'someone's just posted on the Malia Unlocked page about a booze cruise tomorrow – we're game, right?'

JB pulls a face. 'I get seasick.'

Zack reaches out to ruffle his hair, messing up what probably took a not inconsiderable amount of time and product. 'It's not exactly sailing the high seas, Popeye. It's a huge fancy yacht that moves at about half a mile an hour. They take you to some tiny little island, throw a party on the beach and then bring you back. Fifty euros each. It'll be bants.'

'Yesssss, boi,' Dev says, pouring himself an extra inch of vodka. He's wearing neon blue Wayfarers even though we're indoors, and an equally neon orange vest. He's a big fan of brights. 'Sounds sick.'

'Yeah, sounds good,' Nate says, but he's also looking at his phone and seems distracted. He frowns at the screen and then flips it round to show Logan. I can't see what's on there, but Logan's smile drops. He studies whatever it is for a second, then pushes the phone back to Nate and downs the rest of his drink.

'I'm in,' I say, going the rest of the way into the room and sitting down next to Dev.



‘Yes, Hope-Dogg!’ he says, high-fiving me. I pour myself a new drink.

‘Cool,’ Zack says. ‘Booking tickets now. Hand your cash over.’

I hand over the contents of my purse to him – I’ll have to go back into the bedroom and get some more out of the balled-up pair of socks in my suitcase. Fifty euros is a quite a big chunk of my holiday money – the money I spent hours waitressing at Starburger in town for. I think my hair will always smell just faintly of chip fat, but it was worth it, because here I am, on holiday with my friends for the first time ever.

And this boat trip sounds like the perfect way to celebrate.

