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The Aegean Sea

I will always remember exactly where I was and what I was doing when I heard that my father had died.

I was lying naked in the sun on the deck of the *Neptune*, with Theo's hand resting protectively on my stomach. The deserted curve of golden beach on the island in front of us glimmered in the sun as it sat nestled in its rocky cove. The crystal-clear turquoise water was making a lazy attempt at forming waves as it hit the sands, foaming elegantly like the froth on a cappuccino.

Becalmed, I'd thought, *like me*.

We'd dropped anchor in the small bay off the tiny Greek island of Macheres at sunset the night before, then waded ashore to the cove carrying two cool boxes. One was filled with fresh red mullet and sardines that Theo had caught earlier that day, the other with wine and water. I'd set down my load on the sand, panting with effort, and Theo had kissed my nose tenderly.

'We are castaways on our very own desert island,' he'd announced, spreading his arms wide to gesture at the idyllic

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setting. ‘Now, I’m off in search of firewood so we can cook our fish.’

I’d watched him as he turned from me and walked towards the rocks forming a crescent around the cove, heading for the tinder-dry sparse bushes that grew in the crevices. Given he was a world-class sailor, his slight frame belied his strength. Compared to the other men I crewed with in sailing competitions who seemed to be all rippling muscles and Tarzan-like chests, Theo was positively diminutive. One of the first things I’d noticed about him was his rather lopsided gait. He’d since told me how he’d broken his ankle falling out of a tree as a child and how it had never mended properly.

‘I suppose it’s another reason why I was always destined for a life on the water. When I’m sailing, no one can tell how ridiculous I look walking on land,’ he’d chuckled.

We’d cooked our fish and later made love under the stars. The following morning was our last aboard together. And just before I’d decided I absolutely had to resume contact with the outside world by switching on my mobile, and then subsequently discovered my life had shattered into a million tiny pieces, I’d lain there next to him perfectly at peace. And, like a surreal dream, my mind had replayed the miracle of Theo and me, and how we’d come to be here in this beautiful place . . .



I’d first set eyes on him a year or so ago at the Heineken Regatta in St Maarten in the Caribbean. The winning crew was celebrating at the victory dinner and I was intrigued to discover that their skipper was Theo Falys-Kings. He was a

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celebrity in the sailing world, having steered more crews to victory in offshore races during the past five years than any other captain.

‘He isn’t what I imagined at all,’ I commented under my breath to Rob Bellamy, an old crewmate with whom I’d sailed for the Swiss national team. ‘He looks like a geek with those horn-rimmed glasses,’ I added as I watched him stand up to move across to another table, ‘and he has a very odd walk.’

‘He’s certainly not your average brawny sailor, admittedly,’ agreed Rob. ‘But Al, the guy is a total genius. He has a sixth sense when it comes to the water and there’s no one I’d trust more as my skipper on stormy seas.’

I was introduced to Theo briefly by Rob later that evening and I noticed his hazel-flecked green eyes were thoughtful as he shook my hand.

‘So, you’re the famous Al D’Aplièse.’

Behind his British accent, his voice was warm and steady. ‘Yes, to the latter part of that statement,’ I said, embarrassed at the compliment, ‘but I think it’s *you* who’s famous.’ Doing my best not to let my gaze waver under his continued scrutiny, I saw his features soften as he let out a chuckle.

‘What’s so funny?’ I demanded.

‘To be frank, I wasn’t expecting *you*.’

‘What do you mean “*me*”?’

Theo’s attention was diverted by a photographer wanting a team photo, so I never did get to hear what it was he meant.

After that, I began to notice him across the room at various social events for the regattas we took part in. He had an indefinable vibrancy about him and a soft, easy laugh that, despite his outwardly reserved demeanour, seemed to draw people to his side. If the event was formal, he was usually

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dressed in chinos and a crumpled linen jacket as a nod to protocol and the race sponsors, but his ancient deck shoes and unruly brown hair always made him look as if he'd just stepped off a boat.

On those first few occasions, it seemed as if we were dancing around each other. Our eyes met often, but Theo never attempted to continue our first conversation. It was only six weeks ago, when my crew had claimed victory in Antigua and we were celebrating at the Lord Nelson's Ball that marked the end of race week, when he tapped me on the shoulder.

'Well done, Al,' he said.

'Thanks,' I replied, feeling gratified that our crew had beaten his for a change.

'I'm hearing many good things about you this season, Al. Do you fancy coming to crew for me in the Cyclades Regatta in June?'

I'd already been offered a place on another crew, but had yet to accept. Theo saw my hesitation.

'You're already taken?'

'Provisionally, yes.'

'Well, here's my card. Have a think about it and let me know by the end of the week. I could really do with someone like you aboard.'

'Thanks.' I mentally pushed aside my hesitation. Who on earth turned down the chance to crew for the man currently known as 'The King of the Seas'? 'By the way,' I called out as he began to walk away from me, 'last time we talked, why did you say you weren't expecting "me"?''

He paused, his eyes sweeping briefly over me. 'I'd never met you in person; I'd just heard titbits of conversation about

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your sailing skills, that's all. And as I said, you aren't what I was expecting. Goodnight, Al.'

I mulled over our conversation as I walked back to my room in a little inn by St John's harbour, letting the night air wash over me and wondering why it was that Theo fascinated me so much. Street lights bathed the cheerful multi-coloured house fronts in a warm nocturnal glow, and from a distance, the lazy hum of people in the bars and cafés drifted towards me. I was oblivious to it all, exhilarated as I was by the race win – and by Theo Falys-King's offer.

As soon as I entered my room, I made a beeline for my laptop and wrote him an email to accept his offer. Before I sent it, I took a shower, then stopped to read it through again, blushing at how eager I sounded. Deciding to save it in my drafts folder and send it in a couple of days, I stretched out on my bed, flexing my arms to relieve the tension and soreness from the race that day.

'Well, Al,' I muttered to myself with a smile, '*that* will be an interesting regatta.'

I sent the email as planned and Theo contacted me immediately, saying how pleased he was I could join his crew. Then just two weeks ago, I found myself inexplicably nervous as I stepped aboard the race-rigged Hanse 540 yacht in Naxos harbour to begin training for the Cyclades Regatta.

The race was not overly demanding as competitive racing went, the entrants comprising a mix of serious sailors and weekend enthusiasts, all buoyed up by the prospect of eight days' fabulous sailing between some of the most beautiful islands in the world. And as one of the more experienced crews involved, I knew we were strongly fancied to win.

Theo's crews were always notoriously young. My friend

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Rob Bellamy and me, both thirty, were the ‘senior’ members of the team in terms of age and experience. I’d heard that Theo preferred to recruit talent in the early stages of a sailor’s career to prevent bad habits. The rest of the crew of six were in their early twenties: Guy, a burly Englishman; Tim, a laid-back Aussie; and Mick, a half-German, half-Greek sailor who knew the waters of the Aegean like the back of his hand.

Although I was eager to work with Theo, I hadn’t stepped into it blindly; I’d done my best beforehand to gather information on the enigma that was ‘The King of the Seas’, by looking on the internet and talking to those who had crewed with him previously.

I’d heard that he was British and had studied at Oxford, which would account for his clipped accent, but on the internet, his profile said that he was an American citizen who had captained the Yale varsity sailing team to victory many times. One friend of mine had heard he came from a wealthy family, another that he lived on a boat.

‘Perfectionist’, ‘Control freak’, ‘Hard to please’, ‘Workaholic’, ‘Misogynist’ . . . These were other comments I had gathered, the latter coming from a fellow female sailor who claimed she’d been sidelined and mistreated on his crew, which did give me pause for thought. But the overwhelming sentiment was simple:

‘Absolutely the best bloody skipper I have ever worked for.’

That first day aboard, I began to understand why Theo was afforded so much respect from his peers. I was used to shouty skippers, who screamed instructions and abuse at one and all, like bad-tempered chefs in a kitchen. Theo’s understated approach was a revelation. He said very little as he put

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us through our paces, just surveyed us all from a distance. When the day was over, he gathered us together and pinpointed our strengths and weaknesses in his calm, steady voice. I realised he'd missed nothing and his natural air of authority meant we hung on every word he said.

'And by the way, Guy, no more sneaking a cigarette during a practice under race conditions,' he added with a half-smile as he dismissed us all.

Guy blushed to the roots of his blond hair. 'That guy must have eyes in the back of his head,' he mumbled to me as we trooped off the boat to shower and change for dinner.

That first evening, I headed out from our pension with the rest of the crew, feeling happy I'd made the decision to join them in the race. We walked along Naxos harbour, the ancient stone castle lit up above the village and a jumble of twisting alleys winding down between the white-washed houses. The restaurants along the harbour front were teeming with sailors and tourists enjoying the fresh seafood and raising endless glasses of ouzo. We found a small family-run establishment in the back streets, with rickety wooden chairs and mismatching plates. The home-cooked food was just what we needed after a long day on the boat, the sea air giving us all a ravenous appetite.

My obvious hunger elicited stares from the men as I tucked into the moussaka and generous helpings of rice. 'What's the problem? Have you never seen a woman eat before?' I commented sarcastically, as I leant forward to grab another flatbread.

Theo contributed to the banter with the occasional dry observation, but left immediately after dinner, choosing not to participate in the post-supper bar crawl. I followed him

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shortly afterwards. Over my years as a professional sailor, I'd learnt that the boys' antics after dark were not something I wished to witness.

In the next couple of days, under Theo's thoughtful green gaze, we began to pull together and quickly became a smoothly efficient team, and my admiration for his methods grew apace. On our third evening on Naxos, feeling particularly tired from a gruelling day under the searing Aegean sun, I was the first to stand up from the dinner table.

'Right lads, I'm off.'

'Me too. Night boys. No hangovers aboard tomorrow, please,' Theo said, following me out of the restaurant. 'Can I join you?' he asked as he caught up with me in the street outside.

'Yes, of course you can,' I agreed, feeling suddenly tense that we were alone together for the first time.

We walked back to our pension along the narrow cobbled streets, the moonlight illuminating the little white houses with their blue-painted doors and shutters on either side. I did my best to make conversation, but Theo only contributed the odd 'yes' or 'no', and his taciturn responses began to irritate me.

As we reached the lobby of the pension, he suddenly turned to me. 'You really are an instinctive seaman, Al. You beat most of your crewmates into a cocked hat. Who taught you?'

'My father,' I said, surprised by the compliment. 'He took me out sailing on Lake Geneva from when I was very small.'

'Ah, Geneva. That explains the French accent.'

I readied myself for the typical 'say something sexy in French' type of comment that I usually got from men at this point, but it didn't come.

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‘Well, your father must be one hell of a sailor – he’s done an excellent job on you.’

‘Thanks,’ I said, disarmed.

‘How do you find being the only woman aboard? Although I’m sure it’s not a one-off occurrence for you,’ he added hastily.

‘I don’t think about it, to be honest.’

He looked at me perceptively through his horn-rimmed glasses. ‘Really? Well, forgive me for saying so, but I think you do. I feel you sometimes try to overcompensate for it and that’s when you make errors. I’d suggest you relax more and just be yourself. Anyway, goodnight.’ He gave me a brief smile then mounted the white-tiled stairs to his room.

That night, as I lay in the narrow bed, the starched white sheets itched against my skin and my cheeks burnt at his criticism. Was it *my* fault that women were still a relative rarity – or, as some of my male crewmates would undoubtedly say, a novelty – aboard professional racing boats? And who did Theo Falys-Kings think he was?! Some kind of pop psychologist, going around analysing people who didn’t need to be analysed?

I’d always thought I handled the woman-in-a-male-dominated-world thing well, and had been able to take friendly jibes and asides about my female status on the chin. I’d built myself a wall of inviolability in my career, and two different personas: ‘Ally’ at home, ‘Al’ at work. Yes, it was often hard and I’d learnt to hold my tongue, especially when the comments were of a pointedly sexist nature and alluded to my supposed ‘blonde’ behaviour. I’d always made a point of warding off such remarks by keeping my red-gold curls scraped back from my face and tied firmly in a ponytail, and

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by not wearing even a smidgen of make-up to accentuate my eyes or cover up my freckles. And I worked just as hard as any of the men on the boat – perhaps, I fumed inwardly, harder.

Then, still sleepless with indignation, I remembered my father telling me that much of the irritation people feel at personal observations was usually because there was a grain of truth in them. And as the night hours drew on, I had to concede that Theo was probably right. I wasn't being 'myself'.

The following evening, Theo joined me again as I walked back to the pension. For all his lack of physical stature, I found him hugely intimidating and I heard myself stumble over my words. As I struggled to explain my dual personas, he listened quietly before responding.

'Well, my father – whose opinion I don't normally rate to be fair,' he said, 'once stated that women would run the world if they only played to their strengths and stopped trying to be men. Maybe that's what you should try to do.'

'That's easy for a man to say, but has your father ever worked in a completely female-dominated environment? And would he "be himself" if he did?' I countered, irritated at being patronised.

'Good point,' Theo agreed. 'Well, at least it might help a little if I called you "Ally". It suits you far better than "Al". Would you mind?'

Before I had a chance to answer, he halted abruptly on the picturesque harbour front, where small fishing boats rocked gently between the larger yachts and motor cruisers as the soothing sounds of a calm sea lapped against their hulls. I watched him look up to the skies, his nostrils flaring visibly as he sniffed the air, checking to see what the dawn would bring

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weather-wise. It was something I had only ever seen old sailors do, and I chuckled suddenly at the projected image of Theo as an ancient, grizzled sea dog.

He turned to me with a puzzled smile. ‘What’s so funny?’

‘Nothing. And if it makes you feel better, you’re welcome to call me “Ally”.’

‘Thanks. Now, let’s get back and grab some sleep. I have a hard day planned for us all tomorrow.’

Again that night, I was restless as I replayed our conversation in my mind. *Me*, who usually slept like a log, especially when I was training or competing.

And rather than Theo’s advice helping me, over the next couple of days I made numerous silly mistakes, making me feel more like a rookie than the professional I was. I castigated myself harshly; but ironically, even though my crewmates teased me good-naturedly, never once was there a word of criticism from Theo.

On our fifth night, feeling horribly embarrassed and confused by my uncharacteristically sloppy performance level, I didn’t even join the rest of the crew for dinner. Instead, I sat on the small terrace of the pension eating bread, feta cheese and olives provided by the kind owner. I drowned my sorrows in the rough red wine she poured me, and after a number of glasses, began to feel decidedly queasy and sorry for myself. I was just lurching unsteadily from the table, headed for bed, when Theo arrived on the terrace.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked, sliding his glasses up his nose to see me properly. I squinted back at him, but his outline had become inexplicably blurry.

‘Yes,’ I replied thickly, sitting back down hurriedly as everything I tried to focus on started to sway.

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‘Everyone was worried about you when you didn’t turn up tonight. You’re not sick, are you?’

‘No.’ I felt the burning sensation of bile rising in my throat. ‘I’m fine.’

‘You know, you can tell me if you are sick and I swear I won’t count it against you. Can I sit down?’

I didn’t answer. In fact, I found I couldn’t as I struggled to control my nausea. He sat down in the plastic chair across the table from me anyway.

‘So what’s the problem?’

‘Nothing,’ I managed.

‘Ally, you’re an awful colour. Are you sure you’re not ill?’

‘I . . . Excuse me.’

With that, I staggered up and just made it to the edge of the terrace before I vomited over it onto the pavement below.

‘Poor you.’ I felt a pair of hands clasp me firmly around my waist. ‘You’re obviously not well at all. I’m going to help you to your room. What number is it?’

‘I am . . . perfectly well,’ I muttered stupidly, horrified beyond measure at what had just happened. And all in front of Theo Falys-Kings, who, for some reason, I was desperate to impress. All things considered, it could not have been worse.

‘Come on.’ He hoisted my limp arm over his shoulder and half-carried me past the disgusted gaze of the other guests.

Once in my room, I was sick a few more times, but at least it was into the toilet. Each time I emerged, Theo was waiting for me, ready to help me back to the bed.

‘Really,’ I groaned, ‘I’ll be fine in the morning, I promise.’

‘You’ve been saying that in between rounds of vomit for the past two hours,’ he said pragmatically, wiping the sticky sweat from my forehead with a cool, damp towel.

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‘Go to bed, Theo,’ I murmured groggily. ‘Really, I’m fine now. Just need to sleep.’

‘In a while, I will.’

‘Thanks for looking after me,’ I whispered as my eyes began to shut.

‘That’s okay, Ally.’

And then, as I drifted in the half here, half there world of the few seconds before sleep, I smiled. ‘I think I love you,’ I heard myself say before I descended into oblivion.

I woke the next morning feeling shaky but better. As I climbed out of bed, I tripped over Theo, who had used a spare pillow and was curled up on the floor fast asleep. Shutting the bathroom door, I sank onto the edge of the bath and remembered the words I’d thought – or Christ, had I actually *spoken* them? – last night.

I think I love you.

Where on earth had that come from? Or had I dreamt I’d said it? After all, I’d been very unwell and might have been hallucinating. *God, I hope so*, I groaned to myself, my head in my hands. But . . . if I hadn’t actually said it, why could I remember those words so vividly? They were ridiculously inaccurate, of course, but now Theo might think that I actually meant them. Which of course I didn’t, surely?

Eventually, I emerged sheepishly from the bathroom and saw that Theo was about to leave. I couldn’t meet his eye as he told me he was going to his own room to take a shower, and would come back to collect me in ten minutes to take me down for breakfast.

‘Really, you go on your own, Theo. I don’t want to risk it.’

‘Ally, you have to eat something. If you can’t keep food

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down for an hour afterwards, I'm afraid you're banned from the boat until you can. You know the rules.'

'Okay,' I agreed miserably. As he left, I wished with all my heart that I could simply become invisible. Never in my life had I wanted to be somewhere else as much as I did at that moment.

Fifteen minutes later, we walked onto the terrace together. The other crew members looked up at us from the table with knowing smirks on their faces. I wanted to punch each and every one of them.

'Ally has a stomach bug,' Theo announced as we sat down. 'But by the looks of it, Rob, you missed out on some beauty sleep too.' The assembled crew members chuckled at Rob, who shrugged in embarrassment as Theo proceeded to talk calmly about the practice session he had planned.

I sat silently, appreciating that he'd moved the conversation on, but I knew what the others were all thinking. And the irony was, they were so, so wrong. I'd made a vow never to sleep with a crewmate, knowing how quickly women could get a reputation in the close-knit world of sailing. And now, it seemed I'd acquired one by default.

At least I was able to keep my breakfast down and was allowed aboard. From that moment on, I went out of my way to make it clear to everyone – especially to him – that I was not the slightest bit interested in Theo Falys-Kings. During the practices, I kept as far away from him as was possible on a small craft, and answered him in monosyllables. And in the evenings, after we finished dinner, I gritted my teeth and stayed on with the crew as he rose to leave and return to the pension.

Because, I told myself, I did not love him. And I did not

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wish for anyone else to think I did either. However, as I set about convincing everyone around me, I realised there was no real conviction in my own mind. I found myself staring at him when I didn't think he was looking. I admired the calm, measured way he dealt with the crew and the perceptive comments he made that pulled us together and made us work better as a team. And how, despite his comparatively small stature, his body was firm and muscled beneath his clothes. I watched him as he proved himself time and again to be the fittest and strongest of all of us.

Every time my treacherous mind wandered in *that* direction, I did my best to reel it firmly back in. But I'd suddenly started noticing just how often Theo walked around without a shirt on. Granted, it was extremely hot during the day, but did he really have to be topless to look at the race maps . . . ?

'Do you need anything, Ally?' he asked me once, as he turned around to find me staring at him.

I don't even remember what I mumbled as I turned away, my face bright red with shame.

I was only relieved that he never mentioned what I may have said to him on the night I was so ill, and began to convince myself that I really must have dreamt it. But still, I knew something irrevocable had happened to me. Something that, for the first time in my life, I seemed to have no control over. As well as my usual clockwork sleeping pattern deserting me, my healthy appetite had disappeared too. When I did manage to doze off, I had vivid dreams about him, the kind that made me blush when I awoke and made my behaviour towards him even more awkward. As a teenager, I'd read love stories and dismissed them, preferring meaty thrillers. Yet, as I mentally listed my current symptoms, sadly, they all seemed to fit the

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same bill: I'd somehow managed to develop a massive crush on Theo Falys-Kings.

On the last night of training, Theo rose from the table after supper and told us we'd all done a spectacular job and that he had high hopes for winning the forthcoming regatta. After the toast, I was just about to depart for the pension when Theo's gaze fell on me.

'Ally, there's something I wanted to discuss with you. The regulations say we have to have a member of the crew who's in charge of first aid. It means nothing, just red tape and a case of signing a few forms. Would you mind?' He indicated a plastic file, then nodded to an empty table.

'I know absolutely nothing about first aid. And just because I'm a woman,' I added defiantly as we sat down at the table away from the others, 'doesn't mean I can nurse anyone better than the men. Why not ask Tim or one of the others to do it?'

'Ally, please shut up. It was just an excuse. Look.' Theo showed me the two sheets of blank paper he'd just taken out of his file. 'Right,' he said, handing me a pen, 'for the sake of form, particularly yours, we will now conduct a discussion about your responsibilities as the appointed crew member in charge of first aid. And at the same time, we will discuss the fact that on the night you were so ill, you told me that you thought you loved me. And the fact is, Ally, I think I might feel the same about you too.'

He paused and I looked at him in total disbelief to see if he was teasing me, but he was busy pretending to check the pages.

'What I'd like to suggest is that we find out what this means for both of us,' he continued. 'As from tomorrow, I'm

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taking my boat and disappearing for a long weekend. I'd like you to come with me.' Finally, he looked up at me. 'Will you?'

My mouth was opening and closing, probably in a very good impression of a goldfish, but I simply didn't know how to answer him.

'For goodness' sake, Ally, just say yes. Forgive the feeble analogy, but we're both in the same boat. We both know that there's something between us and has been ever since we first met a year ago. To be frank, from what I'd heard about you, I'd been expecting some muscly "he-she". And then you turned up, all blue eyes and gorgeous Titian hair, and completely disarmed me.'

'Oh,' I said, totally lost for words.

'So.' Theo cleared his throat and I realised that he was equally nervous. 'Let's go and do what we both love best: spend some time mucking about on the water and give whatever this "thing" is a chance to develop. If nothing else, you'll like the boat. It's very comfortable. And fast.'

'Will there . . . be anyone else on-board?' I asked him, eventually finding my voice.

'No.'

'So, you'll be skipper and I'll be your only crew?'

'Yes, but I promise I won't make you climb the rigging and sit in the crow's nest all night.' He smiled at me then, and his green eyes were full of warmth. 'Ally, just say you'll come.'

'Okay,' I agreed.

'Good. Now, perhaps you can sign on the dotted line to . . . er, seal the deal.' His finger indicated a spot on the blank sheet of paper.

I glanced at him and saw that he was still smiling at me. And finally, I offered him a smile back. I signed my name and

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passed the sheet of paper over to him. He studied it in a show of seriousness, then returned it to the plastic file. 'So, that's all sorted,' he said, raising his voice for the benefit of our fellow crew members, whose ears were no doubt on elastic. 'And I'll see you down at the harbour at noon to brief you on your duties.'

He gave me a wink and we walked sedately back to join the others, my measured pace belying the wonderful bubble of excitement I felt inside me.

2

It was fair to say that neither Theo nor I were sure what to expect as we set sail from Naxos on his Sunseeker, the *Neptune*, a sleek and powerful motor yacht that was a good twenty feet longer than the Hanse we were sailing in the race. I'd become used to sharing cramped quarters on boats with many others, and now that it was just the two of us, the amount of space between us felt conspicuous. The master cabin was a luxurious suite with a polished teak interior and when I saw the large double bed, I cringed as I remembered the circumstances of the last time we had slept in the same room.

'I picked her up very cheaply a couple of years ago when the owner went bankrupt,' he explained as he steered the craft out of Naxos harbour. 'At least it's put a roof over my head since then.'

'You actually live on this boat?' I said in surprise.

'I stay with my mum at her house in London during the longer breaks, but in the last year, I've been living on this in the rare moments I'm not sailing a boat to a race or competing. Although I've finally got to the stage of wanting a home of my own on dry land. In fact, I've just bought a place,

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although it needs an awful lot of work and God knows when I'll have the time to renovate it.'

I was already accustomed to the *Titan*, my father's ocean-going super yacht with its sophisticated computerised navigation, so the two of us shared the 'driving', as Theo liked to call it. But that first morning, I found it difficult to slip out of the usual protocol of being aboard with him. When Theo asked me to do something, I had to stop myself answering, 'Yes, skipper!'

There was a palpable air of tension between us – neither of us was sure how to cross over from the working relationship we'd had so far to a more intimate footing. Conversation was stilted, with me second-guessing everything I was saying in this strange situation and mostly resorting to idle small talk. Theo remained virtually silent and by the time we dropped anchor for lunch, I was starting to feel that the whole idea was a complete disaster.

I was grateful when he produced a bottle of chilled Provençal rosé to accompany our salad. I'd never been a big drinker, certainly not on the water, but somehow we managed to swiftly down the bottle between us. In order to prod Theo out of his awkward silence, I decided to talk to him about sailing. We went over our strategy for the Cyclades and discussed how different the racing would be in the upcoming Beijing Olympics. My final trials for a place in the Swiss squad were to take place at the end of the summer and Theo told me he'd be sailing for America.

'So you're American by birth? You sound British.'

'American father, English mother. I was at boarding school in Hampshire, then went to Oxford, then to Yale,' he clarified. 'I always was a bit of a swot.'

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‘What did you study?’

‘Classics at Oxford, then a masters in psychology at Yale. I was lucky enough to be selected for the varsity sailing team and ended up captaining it. All very ivory-tower-type stuff. You?’

‘I went to the Conservatoire de Musique de Genève and studied the flute. But that explains it.’ I eyed him with a grin.

‘What explains “what”?’

‘The fact that you’re so keen on analysing people. And half the reason you’re such a successful skipper is because you’re so good with your crew. Especially me,’ I added, the alcohol making me brave. ‘Your comments helped me, really, even if I didn’t particularly like hearing them at the time.’

‘Thanks.’ He ducked his head shyly at the compliment. ‘At Yale, they gave me free rein to combine my love of sailing with psychology and I developed a style of command that some might find unusual, but it works for me.’

‘Were your parents supportive of your sailing?’

‘My mother, yes, but my father . . . well, they split when I was eleven and an acrimonious divorce followed a couple of years later. Dad went back to live in the States after that. I’d stay with him there during the holidays when I was younger, but he was always at work or travelling and he employed nannies to look after me. He visited me when I was at Yale a few times to watch me compete, but I can’t say I really know him very well. Only through what he did to my mum, and I accept that her antipathy towards him clouded my judgement. Anyway, I’d love to hear you play the flute, by the way,’ he said, suddenly changing the subject and meeting my gaze properly, green eyes on blue. But the moment passed and he looked away again, shifting in his seat.

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Frustrated that my attempts to draw him out seemed to be failing, I lapsed into an irritated silence too. After we'd carried the dirty plates down to the galley, I dived off the side of the boat and swam hard and fast to clear my wine-infused brain.

'Shall we go up onto the top deck and get some sun before we move on?' he asked me as I appeared back on-board.

'Okay,' I agreed, even though I could feel my pale freckled skin had already had more than enough sun. Normally when I was on the water, I covered myself in heavy-duty total sun-block, but as it was practically akin to painting myself white, it wasn't the most seductive look. I'd deliberately used a lighter sunscreen that morning, although I was beginning to think that the sunburn wouldn't be worth it.

Theo took two bottles of water from the ice box and we made our way to the comfortable sun deck on the prow of the yacht. We settled ourselves next to each other on the luxuriously padded cushioning and I glanced at him surreptitiously, my heart pounding uncontrollably at his half-naked nearness. I decided that if he didn't make a move soon, I'd have to do something very unladylike and simply pounce on him. I turned my head away from him to prevent further salacious thoughts from running through my mind.

'So, tell me about your sisters and this house that you live in on Lake Geneva. It sounds idyllic,' he said.

'It is . . . I . . . ?'

Given my brain was scrambled with desire and alcohol, the last thing I wanted to do was commence a long spiel about my complex family scenario. 'I'm feeling sleepy, can I tell you later?' I said, turning onto my front.

'Of course you can. Ally?'

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I felt the light touch of his fingers on my back. ‘Yes?’ I turned back over and looked up at him, my throat tightening with breathless expectation.

‘You’re burning on your shoulders.’

‘Oh. Right,’ I snapped. ‘Well, I’ll go and sit downstairs in the shade, then.’

‘Shall I come with you?’

I didn’t answer, just shrugged as I stood up and clambered along the narrow part of the deck that led aft. Then his hand grabbed mine.

‘Ally, what is it?’

‘Nothing, why?’

‘You seem very . . . tense.’

‘Ha! So do you,’ I retorted.

‘Do I?’

‘Yes,’ I said as he followed me down the steps into the stern and I sat heavily on a bench in the shade.

‘Sorry, Ally,’ he sighed. ‘I’ve never been very good at this bit.’

‘What exactly is “this bit”?’

‘Oh, you know. All the preamble, knowing how to play it. I mean, I respect you and like you, and I didn’t want to make you feel as though I’d brought you aboard for a roll in the hay. You could well have thought that’s all I wanted, since you’re so sensitive anyway about being a female in a male world and—’

‘For God’s sake, Theo, I’m not!’

‘Really, Ally?’ Theo rolled his eyes in disbelief. ‘To be honest, these days us guys are all scared we’ll get slapped with a sexual harassment charge if we so much as gaze

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admiringly in the direction of a woman. It happened to me once with another female sailor who was on my crew.'

'Did it?' I feigned surprise.

'Yup. I think I said something like, "Hi Jo, so nice to have you aboard to liven all us boys up." I was doomed from that moment on.'

I stared at him. 'You *didn't* say that!'

'Oh, for God's sake, Ally, what I meant was that she would keep us all on our toes. Professionally, she had a fabulous reputation. And she took it the wrong way, for some reason.'

'I can't think why,' I commented acidly.

'Nor could I.'

'Theo, I was being facetious! I can see exactly why she took offence. You can't imagine the kinds of comments us women sailors get. No wonder she was sensitive about it.'

'Well, that's why I was extremely nervous about having you aboard in the first place. Especially as I found you so attractive.'

'I'm the polar opposite, remember?' I rounded on him. 'You criticised me for trying to be a man and not playing to my strengths!'

'Touché,' he said with a grin. 'And now here you are with me, alone, and I work with you and you might think—'

'Theo! This is getting ridiculous! I think it's you who's got the problem, not *me!*' I shot back at him, by now completely exasperated. 'You asked me onto your boat and I came of my own free will!'

'Yes, you did, but to be honest, Ally, this whole thing . . .' He paused and looked at me earnestly. 'You matter so much to me. And forgive me for behaving like an idiot, but it's been

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so long since I've done this . . . courting thing. And I don't want to get it wrong.'

My heart softened. 'Well, how about if you just try to stop analysing everything and relax a little? Then maybe I will too. Remember, I *want* to be here.'

'Okay, I'll try.'

'Good. Now,' I said, as I studied my sunburnt upper arms, 'as I really am starting to resemble an overripe tomato, I'm going to go downstairs to take a rest from the sun. And you're very welcome to join me if you want to.' I stood up and made my way to the stairs. 'And I promise I won't sue you for sexual harassment. In fact,' I added boldly, 'I might positively encourage some.'

I disappeared down the stairs, giggling at the blatancy of my invitation and wondering whether he'd respond to it. As I entered the cabin and lay down on the bed, I felt a sense of empowerment. Theo might be the boss at work, but I was determined to have parity in any personal relationship the two of us might have in the future.

Five minutes later, Theo appeared sheepishly at the door and apologised profusely for being 'ridiculous'. Eventually, I told him to shut up and come to bed.

Once *that* had happened, all was well between us. And in the following days, both of us realised it was something far deeper than physical attraction – that rare triumvirate of body, heart and mind. And finally, we immersed ourselves in the mutual joy of having found each other.

Our closeness grew at a faster pace than normal because we were already aware of each other's strengths and weaknesses, although it's fair to say we didn't talk much about the latter, simply glorifying in how wonderful we seemed to each

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other. We spent the hours making love, drinking wine and eating the fresh fish Theo caught from the back of the boat, with me lying lazily in his lap reading a book. Our physical hunger was coupled with an equally insatiable appetite to learn everything we could about each other. Alone together out on the peaceful sea, I felt we lived outside of time, needing nothing but each other.

On our second night, I lay under the stars in Theo's arms on the sun deck and told him about Pa Salt and my sisters. As everyone always did, Theo listened in fascination to the tale of my strange and magical childhood.

'So, let me get this straight: your father, nicknamed "Pa Salt" by your eldest sister, brought you and five other baby girls home from his travels around the world. Rather like other people would collect fridge magnets?'

'In a nutshell, yes. Although I like to believe I'm slightly more precious than a fridge magnet.'

'We'll see,' he said, nibbling my ear gently. 'Did he take care of all of you by himself?'

'No. We had Marina, who we've always called "Ma". Pa employed her as a nanny when he first adopted Maia, my oldest sister. She's practically our mother and we all adore her. She's from France originally, so that's one of the reasons we all grew up fluent in French, apart from it being one of the Swiss national languages. Pa was obsessed with us being bilingual, so he spoke to us in English.'

'He did a good job. I'd never have known it wasn't your first language, apart from your gorgeous French accent,' he said as he hugged me to him and pressed a kiss onto my hair. 'Did your father ever tell you why he adopted you all?'

'I asked Ma once, and she said that he was simply lonely

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at Atlantis and had plenty of money to share. Us girls never really questioned why, we just accepted where we were, as all children do. We were a family; there never had to be a reason. We just . . . *are*.'

'It's like a fairy tale. The rich benefactor who adopts six orphans. Why all girls?'

'We've joked that maybe once he'd started naming us all after the Seven Sisters star cluster, adopting a boy would have spoilt the sequence,' I said with a chuckle. 'But to be honest, none of us have a clue.'

'So your proper name is "Alcyone", the second sister? That's a bit more of a mouthful than "Al",' he teased me.

'Yes, but nobody ever calls me that, except for Ma when she's cross with me,' I grimaced. 'And don't you dare start!'

'I love it, my little halcyon bird. I think it suits you. So why are there only six of you, when there should have been seven to fit with the mythology?'

'I've absolutely no idea. The last sister, who would have been called Merope if Pa had brought her home, never arrived,' I explained.

'That's rather sad.'

'Yes it is, although considering how much of a nightmare my sixth sister, Electra, was when she first came to Atlantis, I don't think any of us were looking forward to adding another screaming baby to our family.'

'"Electra"?' Theo recognised the name immediately. 'Not the famous supermodel?'

'They're one and the same, yes,' I replied warily.

Theo turned to me in amazement. I rarely, if ever, mentioned that Electra and I were related, as it engendered

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endless probing to find out who really lay behind one of the most photographed faces in the world.

‘Well, well. And your other sisters?’ he asked, pleasing me by asking nothing further about Electra.

‘Maia is my big sister and the eldest. She’s a translator – she took after Pa in her talent for languages. I’ve lost count of how many she speaks. And if you think Electra is beautiful, then you should see Maia. Whereas I’m all red hair and freckles, she has gorgeous tawny skin and dark hair and looks like an exotic Latin diva. Though in personality, she’s very different. She’s a virtual recluse, still living at home at Atlantis, saying she wants to be there to look after Pa Salt. All the rest of us think she’s hiding . . . from what’ – a sigh escaped me – ‘I couldn’t tell you. I’m sure something happened to her when she went away to university. She changed completely. Anyway, I absolutely adored her when I was a child and I still do now, even though I feel that she’s cut me out over the past few years. To be fair, she’s done that with everyone, but we used to be very close.’

‘When you go within, you tend to go without, if you know what I mean,’ Theo murmured.

‘Very profound.’ I nudged him with a smile. ‘But yes, that’s about the size of it.’

‘And your next sister?’

‘Is called Star and she’s three years younger than me. My two middle sisters really come as a pair. CeCe, my fourth sister, was brought home by Pa only three months after Star, and they’ve been stuck together like glue ever since. They both had a somewhat nomadic existence after leaving university, working their way through Europe and the Far East, although apparently they’re now intending to settle in London

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so CeCe can do an art foundation course. If you're going to ask me who Star actually *is* as a person, or what her talents and ambitions are, I really couldn't tell you, I'm afraid, because CeCe completely dominates her. She doesn't speak much and lets CeCe do the talking for both of them. CeCe's a very strong character, like Electra. As you can imagine, there's some tension between those two. Electra's as high-voltage as her name suggests, but very vulnerable underneath, I've always thought.'

'Your sisters would certainly make a fascinating psychological study, that's for sure,' Theo agreed. 'So, who comes next?'

'Tiggy, who is easy to describe as she's simply a sweetie. She graduated in biological sciences and worked in research at Servion Zoo for a while, before taking off to the highlands of Scotland to work in a deer sanctuary. She's very . . .' – I searched for the word – 'ethereal, with all her strange spiritual beliefs. She literally seems to float somewhere between heaven and earth. I'm afraid all of us have teased her mercilessly over the years when she's announced she's heard voices or seen an angel in the tree in the garden.'

'You don't believe in anything like that then?'

'I'd say my feet were firmly planted on the earth. Or at least, on water,' I corrected myself with a grin. 'I'm very practical by nature, and I suppose that's partly why my sisters have always looked to me as the "leader" of our little band. But that doesn't mean to say I don't have respect for what I don't know or understand. You?'

'Well, even though I've never seen an angel like your sister, I've always felt as though I was protected. Especially when I've been sailing. I've had a number of hairy moments aboard,

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and so far, touch wood, I've managed to come out of them unscathed. Perhaps Poseidon is rooting for me, to use a mythological analogy.'

'And long may that continue,' I muttered fervently.

'So, last but not least, tell me about this incredible father of yours.' Theo began to stroke my hair gently. 'What does he do for a living?'

'To be honest, again, none of us is exactly sure. Whatever it is, he's certainly been successful. His yacht, the *Titan*, is a Benetti,' I said, trying to put Pa's wealth into a language Theo could understand.

'Wow! That makes this look like a child's dinghy. Well, well, with your palaces on land and sea,' Theo teased me, 'I reckon you're a secret princess.'

'We've certainly lived well, yes, but Pa was determined to make sure we all earned our own money. There have never been *carte blanche* handouts to any of us as adults, unless it was, or is, for educational purposes.'

'Sensible man. So, are you close to him?'

'Oh, extremely. He's been . . . everything to me, and to all of us girls. I'm sure we all like to think we have a special relationship with him, but because the two of us shared a love of sailing, I spent a lot of time alone with him when I was growing up. And it's not just sailing he taught me. He's the kindest, wisest human being I've ever met.'

'So, you're a real Daddy's girl. Seems like I have a lot to live up to,' Theo remarked, his hand moving from my hair to caress my neck.

'Enough of me now, I want to know about you,' I said, distracted by his touch.

'Later, Ally, later . . . You should know the effect that

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gorgeous French accent of yours has on me. I could listen to it all night.' Theo propped himself up on his elbow, leant over to kiss me full on the mouth and after that, we spoke no more.

3

The next morning, we'd just decided to sail to Mykonos for supplies when Theo called me down from the upper sun deck to join him on the bridge.

'Guess what?' he said, looking smug.

'What?'

'I was just chatting on the radio to Andy, a sailing friend of mine who's in the area on his catamaran, and he suggested we rendezvous in a bay off Delos for a drink later. He joked that there was a bloody great superyacht called the *Titan* currently moored right by him, so I wouldn't be able to miss him.'

'The *Titan*?!' I exclaimed. 'Are you sure?'

'Andy said it was a Benetti, and I doubt your father's boat has a doppelgänger. He also said there was another floating palace approaching him, and he was starting to feel claustrophobic, so he's moved off a couple of miles to the bay around the corner. So, shall we drop aboard for a cup of tea with your dad on the way to see Andy?' he asked me.

'I'm stunned,' I replied truthfully. 'Pa didn't tell me he was planning a trip down here, although I know that the Aegean is his favourite place to sail.'

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‘To be fair, Ally, he probably wasn’t expecting you to be in such close proximity. You can double-check it’s your father’s boat through the binoculars when we get a little closer and then radio the skipper to let them know we’re coming. It would be pretty embarrassing if it wasn’t your father’s yacht and we interrupted some Russian oligarch with a boat full of vodka and partying prostitutes. Actually, good point.’ Theo turned towards me. ‘Your father never rents out the *Titan*, does he?’

‘Never,’ I replied firmly.

‘Right then, m’lady, take the binoculars and go back to relaxing up top, while your faithful captain takes the wheel. Give me a thumbs up through the window when you see the *Titan* and I’ll put out a message on the radio saying we’re approaching.’

As I climbed back up to the deck and sat tensely waiting for the *Titan* to appear on the horizon, I wondered how I would feel about the man I loved most in the world meeting the man I was growing to love more as each day passed. I thought back to whether Pa had ever met any of my previous boyfriends. Perhaps I’d introduced him once to someone I’d been having a fling with during my time at music school in Geneva, but that was as far as it had gone. To be blunt, so far there’d never been a ‘significant other’ who I’d felt I wanted to introduce to Pa or my family.

Until now . . .

Twenty minutes later, a familiar-shaped vessel came into view, and I trained my binoculars on it. And yes, it was definitely Pa’s boat. I turned over and knocked on the glass window of the bridge behind me and gave Theo a thumbs up. He nodded and picked up the radio receiver.

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Going below to the cabin, I tamed my wind-strewn hair into a neat ponytail and donned a T-shirt and some shorts, suddenly excited to be able to turn the tables on my father and surprise *him* for a change. Back up on the bridge, I asked Theo if Hans, my father's skipper, had radioed back yet.

'No. I just put out another message, but if we don't get a response, it looks like we'll just have to chance it and turn up unannounced. Interesting.' Theo picked up his binoculars and trained them on another boat close to the *Titan*. 'I know the owner of the other superyacht Andy mentioned. The boat's called the *Olympus*, and it belongs to the tycoon Kreeg Eszu. He owns Lightning Communications, a company that's sponsored a couple of the boats I've captained on, so I've met him a few times.'

'Really?' I was fascinated. Kreeg Eszu, in his own way, was as famous as Electra. 'What's he like?'

'Well, put it this way: I couldn't say I warmed to him. I sat next to him at dinner once and he talked about himself and his success all night. And his son, Zed, is even worse – a spoilt rich kid who thinks his father's money means he can get away with anything.' Theo's eyes fill with unusual anger.

My ears had pricked up. It wasn't the first time I'd heard Zed Eszu's name mentioned by someone close to me. 'He's that bad?'

'Yes, *that* bad,' he reiterated. 'A female friend of mine got involved with him and he treated her like dirt. Anyway . . .' Theo lifted the binoculars to his eyes again. 'I think we'd better have another go at radioing the *Titan*. It looks like she's on the move. Why don't you put out the message, Ally? If your father or his skipper is listening, they might recognise your voice.'

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I did so, but there was no reply and I saw the boat continue to pick up speed and sail away from us.

‘Shall we give chase?’ Theo said as the *Titan* continued to head into the distance.

‘I’ll go and get my mobile and call Pa directly,’ I said.

‘And while you do, I’ll ramp up the knots on this. They’re almost certainly too far ahead, but I’ve never tried to catch a superyacht before and it might be fun,’ he quipped.

Leaving Theo to play cat and mouse with Pa’s boat, I went below to the cabin, hanging on to the door frame as he upped the speed. Searching through my rucksack for my mobile and trying to switch it on, I stared impatiently at the lifeless screen. It stared back at me like a neglected pet whom I’d forgotten to feed, and I knew that the battery had run out of charge. Rooting back through my rucksack to find the charger, and then again to find an American adapter suitable for the socket by the bed, I plugged it in and begged it to come back to life swiftly.

By the time I’d gone back up to the bridge, Theo had slowed our speed to a relatively normal pace.

‘There’s no way we’re going to catch up with your father now, even at top speed. The *Titan* is going at full blast. Have you called him?’

‘No, my mobile’s charging at the moment.’

‘Here, use mine.’

Theo handed his mobile to me, and I tapped in Pa Salt’s number. It immediately went to voicemail and I left my father a message explaining the situation and asking him to call me back as soon as possible.

‘Looks like your father’s running away from you,’ Theo teased me. ‘Maybe he doesn’t want to be seen just now.’

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Anyway, I'll radio Andy to find out his exact location and we'll go straight to meet him instead.'

My confusion must have shown on my face, because Theo took me in his arms and gave me a hug.

'Really, darling, I was only joking. Remember it's just an open radio line and the *Titan* may well have missed the messages. I've certainly been known to do that. You should have just called him on his mobile to begin with.'

'Yes.' I agreed. But as we sailed at a far more leisurely pace towards Delos to rendezvous with Theo's friend, I knew from my many hours of sailing with Pa that he insisted on the radio being on at all times, with Hans, his skipper, always alert for any messages for the *Titan*.

And in retrospect, I remember how unsettled I'd felt for the rest of the afternoon. Perhaps it had been a premonition of what was to come.



And so I awoke in Theo's arms the following morning in the beautiful deserted bay of Macheres, my heart heavy at the thought of heading back to Naxos later that afternoon. Theo had already talked about his plans to prepare for the race that would start in a few days and it seemed our halcyon time together was almost over, at least for now.

As I came to from my reverie, lying naked on the sun deck next to him, I had to force my mind to reboot outside the wonderful cocoon that was Theo and me. My phone was still charging from the day before and I made to get up and retrieve it.

'Where are you going?' Theo's hand held me fast.

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‘To get my phone. I really should listen to my messages.’

‘Come straight back, won’t you?’

I did and then he reached for me and ordered me to put the phone down for a little while longer. Suffice to say, it was another hour before I switched it on.

I knew there would probably be some messages from friends and family. But as I manoeuvred Theo’s hand gently from my belly so as not to wake him, I noticed that I had an unusually large number of texts. And a number of voicemail alerts.

All the text messages were from my sisters.

Ally, please call as soon as you can. Love Maia.

Ally, CeCe here. We’re all trying to get hold of you. Can you call Ma or one of us immediately?

Darling Ally, it’s Tiggy. We don’t know where you are, but we must speak to you.

And Electra’s text sent shudders of terror through me: **Ally, oh my God! Isn’t it awful? Can you believe it? Flying home from LA now.**

I stood up and walked to the prow of the yacht. It was obvious that something dreadful had happened. My hands trembled as I dialled my voicemail and waited to hear what it was that had prompted my sisters to contact me with such universal urgency.

And as I listened to the most recent message first, I knew.

‘Hi, this is CeCe again. Everyone else seems to be too scared to tell you, but we need you home urgently. Ally, I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad tidings, but Pa Salt has died. Sorry . . . sorry . . . Please call as soon as you can.’

CeCe had probably thought she’d ended the call before

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she had, as there was a sudden loud sob before the beep of the next message sounded.

I stared unseeingly into the distance, thinking of how I'd seen the *Titan* through the binoculars only yesterday. *There must be some mistake*, I comforted myself, but then I listened to the next voicemail from Marina, my mother in all but blood, asking me to contact her urgently too, and the same again from Maia, Tiggy and Electra . . .

'Oh my God, oh my God . . .'

I held on to the railing for support, my mobile slipping out of my hand and landing with a thump on the deck. I bent my head forwards as all the blood seemed to drain from me and I thought I might faint. Breathing heavily, I collapsed onto the deck and buried my head in my hands.

'It can't be true, it can't be true . . .' I moaned.

'Sweetheart, what on earth is it?' Theo, still naked, appeared beside me, crouching down and tipping my chin up to him. 'What's happened?'

I could only point at my dropped mobile.

'Bad news?' he asked as he picked it up, concern written across his face.

I nodded.

'Ally, you look like you've seen a ghost. Let's get you into the shade and find you a glass of water.'

With my mobile still in his hand, he half-lifted me from the deck and helped me down and onto a leather bench inside. I remember wondering randomly if I was always destined to be seen by him as helpless.

He hastily donned a pair of shorts and fetched me one of his T-shirts, gently helping my unresponsive body into it, then he armed me with a large brandy and a glass of water. My

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hands were shaking so much that I had to ask him to dial my voicemail so I could listen to the rest of my messages. I choked and spluttered as I swallowed the brandy, but it warmed my stomach and helped calm me.

'Here you go.' He handed me my mobile and I numbly re-listened to CeCe's message and all the rest, including three from Maia and one from Marina, then the unfamiliar voice of Georg Hoffman, who I vaguely remembered was Pa's lawyer. And a further five blank voicemails where the caller had obviously not known what to say and had rung off.

Theo's eyes never left my face as I placed my mobile on the seat next to me.

'Pa Salt is dead,' I whispered quietly, and stared into space for a long time after that.

'Oh God! How?'

'I don't know.'

'Are you absolutely sure?'

'Yes! CeCe was the only one brave enough to actually say the words. But I still don't understand how it's possible . . . it was only yesterday when we saw Pa's boat.'

'I'm afraid I can't offer an explanation for that, my darling. Here, the best thing you can do is ring home immediately,' he said, sliding my mobile back to me across the seat.

'I . . . *can't*.'

'I understand. Would you like me to do it? If you give me the number, I—'

'**NO!**' I shouted at him. 'No, I just need to get home. Now!' I stood up then, looking around me helplessly and then up to the skies, as if a helicopter might appear overhead and carry me to the place I so urgently needed to be.

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‘Listen, let me go on the internet and then make a few calls. Back in a bit.’

Theo disappeared up to the bridge as I sat, catatonic with shock.

My father . . . Pa Salt . . . dead?! I let out an outraged laugh at the ridiculousness of the idea. He was indestructible, omnipotent, *alive* . . .

‘Please, no!’ I shivered suddenly and felt my hands and feet tingling as though I was in the snowy Alps, rather than on a boat in the Aegean sun.

‘Okay,’ Theo said as he returned from the bridge. ‘You’ll miss the two forty flight from Naxos to Athens, so we’re going to have to get there by boat. There’s a flight from Athens to Geneva first thing tomorrow morning. I’ve booked you on it as there were only a few seats left.’

‘So I can’t get home today?’

‘Ally, it’s already one thirty, and it’s a long way to Athens by boat, let alone flying to Geneva. I reckon if we do top speed most of the way, with a stop at Naxos for fuel, we can make it into the harbour by sunset tonight. Even I don’t fancy taking this into a port as crowded as Piraeus in the dark.’

‘Of course,’ I replied dully, wondering how on earth I would cope with the endless in-between hours of the journey home.

‘Right, I’ll go and start her up,’ Theo said. ‘Want to come and sit with me?’

‘In a while.’

Five minutes later, as I heard the rhythmic hydraulic clank of the anchor being raised and the soft hum of the engines purring into life, I stood up and walked to the stern, where I leant on the railings. I watched as we began to move away

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from the island, which I'd thought of last night as Nirvana but now would always be the place where I'd heard about my father's death. As the boat began to pick up speed, I felt nauseated with shock and guilt. For the past few days, I'd been totally and utterly selfish. I had thought only of *me*, and my happiness at finding Theo.

And while I had been making love, lying with Theo's arms around me, my father had been lying somewhere dying. How could I *ever* forgive myself for that?



Theo was as good as his word, and we arrived at Piraeus harbour in Athens at sunset. During the agonising journey, I lay across his lap on the bridge, as one of his hands gently stroked my hair and the other steered us safely across a choppy sea. Once in our berth, Theo went down to the galley and prepared some pasta, which he then spoon-fed me as if I was a child.

'Coming down to sleep?' he asked me and I could see he was exhausted from the concentration of the past few hours. 'We have to be up at four tomorrow to make your flight.'

I agreed, knowing he'd insist on staying up with me if I refused to go to bed. Steeling myself for a long, sleepless night, I let Theo lead me below, where he helped me into bed and wrapped his warm arms around me, cradling me to him.

'If it's any consolation, Ally, I love you. I don't just "think" I do any more, I *know*.'

I stared into the darkness and, having not shed a tear since the news, I found my eyes suddenly wet.

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‘And I promise I’m not just saying it to make you feel better. I’d have told you tonight anyway,’ he added.

‘I love you too,’ I whispered.

‘Really?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, if you mean it, I’m more pleased than if I’d won this year’s Fastnet Race. Now, try to sleep.’

And surprisingly, held fast by Theo and his admission of love, I did.



The following morning, as the taxi crawled through the Athens traffic, heavy even at sunrise, I saw Theo surreptitiously checking his watch. It was usually me in control of such things, monitoring the time for others, but at that moment, I was glad he was taking charge.

I checked in with forty minutes to spare, just as the desk was closing.

‘Ally, darling, tell me, are you sure you’re going to be okay?’ Theo frowned. ‘And are you positive you don’t want me to come to Geneva with you?’

‘Really, I’ll be fine,’ I said as I walked towards departures.

‘Listen, if there’s anything I can do, please let me know.’

We’d reached the end of the queue waiting to go through security as it wove snake-like between the barriers. I turned to Theo. ‘Thank you, for everything. You’ve been amazing.’

‘I really haven’t, Ally, and listen’ – he pulled me back towards him urgently – ‘just remember I love you.’

‘I will,’ I whispered, managing a wan smile.

‘And any time you don’t feel brave, just call or text me.’

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‘I promise.’

‘And by the way,’ he said as he released me from his arms, ‘I’ll totally understand if you can’t sail in the regatta, given the circumstances.’

‘I’ll let you know as soon as possible.’

‘We’ll lose without you.’ He grinned suddenly. ‘You’re the best crewman I’ve got. Goodbye, my darling.’

‘Bye.’

I joined the queue and was subsumed into the mass of trudging humanity. As I was about to dump my rucksack in a tray for X-ray, I turned back.

He was still there.

‘I love you,’ he mouthed. And with a kiss and a wave, he left.

As I waited in the departure lounge, and the surreal bubble of love that had encased me for the past few days burst abruptly, my stomach began to churn with dreadful trepidation at what I must face. I pulled out my mobile and called Christian, the young skipper of our family’s speedboat, who would transport me from Geneva and along the lake to my childhood home. I left a message asking him to collect me at ten o’clock from the pontoon. I also asked him to say nothing to Ma or my sisters about my arrival, telling him I would contact them myself.

But as I boarded the plane and willed myself to make the call, I found that I couldn’t do it. The dreadful prospect of another few hours alone, with the truth having been confirmed over the phone by one of my family, prohibited it. The plane began taxiing along the runway, and as we left the ground, flying up into the sunrise over Athens, I leant my hot cheek against the cool window as panic began to assail me.

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To distract myself, I glanced unseeingly at the front page of an *International Herald Tribune* that I'd been handed by the cabin attendant. I was about to put it aside when a headline caught my eye.

'BILLIONAIRE TYCOON'S BODY WASHED UP
ON GREEK ISLAND'

There was a photograph of a vaguely familiar face, with a caption beneath it.

'Kreeg Eszu found dead on Aegean beach.'

I stared at the headline in shock. Theo had told me it was *his* boat, the *Olympus*, which had been so close to Pa Salt's in the bay off Delos . . .

Letting the newspaper slip to the floor, I stared miserably out of the window. I didn't understand. I didn't understand anything anymore . . .

Nearly three hours later, as the plane began its descent into Geneva airport, my heart started beating so fast that I could barely catch my breath. I was going home, which normally engendered a feeling of happiness and excitement because the person I loved most in the world would be there to welcome me with open arms into our own magical world. But this time, I knew he would not be there to greet me. And never would be again.

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‘Would you like to drive, Mademoiselle Ally?’ Christian indicated my usual seat in front of the wheel where I would sit and speed us across the still, calm waters of Lake Geneva.

‘Not today, Christian,’ I said and he nodded at me somberly, his expression confirming that everything I knew already was true. He started the engine, and I slumped onto one of the seats at the back, my head hanging miserably, unable to look anywhere but down as I remembered how Pa Salt had sat me on his knee as a tiny child and let me steer for the first time. Now, just minutes away from not only having to face reality, but also having to acknowledge the fact that I’d failed to pick up my family’s messages or respond to them, I wondered how any god could take me from the heights of joy to the abject despair I felt as we approached Atlantis.

From the lake, everything beyond the immaculate hedges that shielded the house from view looked as it always had. Surely, I prayed as Christian eased us into the jetty and I climbed out and moored the boat securely to the bollard, there’d been some mistake? Pa would be here to greet me any moment, he *had* to be here . . .

Within a few seconds, I saw CeCe and Star approaching

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across the lawns. Then Tiggy appeared, and I heard her shout something through the open front door of the house as she hurried to catch up with her two older sisters. I began to run up the lawn to meet them, but my knees went weak with dread and I drew to a halt as I read their shared expressions.

Ally, I entreated myself, you're the leader here, you have to pull yourself together . . .

'Ally! Oh Ally, we're all so glad you're here!' Tiggy reached me first as I stood immobile on the grass, trying to appear calm. She threw her arms around me and hugged me tightly. 'We've been waiting for you to come for days!'

CeCe was the next to reach me, then Star – her shadow – who remained silent but joined Tiggy in our mutual embrace.

Eventually, I pulled away, noticing the tears in my sisters' eyes, and we walked up to Atlantis together in silence.

Seeing the house, I was struck by another pang of loss. Pa Salt had called this our private kingdom. Dating back to the eighteenth century, it even looked like a fairy-tale castle, with its four turrets and pink-painted exterior. Cocooned on its private peninsula and surrounded by magnificent gardens, I'd always felt safe here – but already it felt empty without Pa Salt.

As we arrived on the terrace, Maia, my eldest sister, emerged from the Pavilion that sat to the side of the main house. I could see her lovely features were marked by pain, but they lightened into relief as she saw me.

'Ally!' she breathed, as she rushed to greet me.

'Maia,' I said as she clasped her arms around me, 'isn't it absolutely awful?'

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‘Yes, just ghastly. But how did you hear? We’ve been trying to contact you for the last two days.’

‘Shall we go inside?’ I asked the assembled company. ‘And then I’ll explain.’

While my other sisters crowded around me as we walked into the house, Maia lagged behind. Even though she was the eldest and the one they looked to individually if they had an emotional problem, as a group, it was me who always took command. And I knew she was letting me do so now.

Ma was already waiting for us in the entrance hall and enveloped me in a warm, silent embrace. I let myself sink into the comfort of her arms and clutched her tightly to me. I was relieved when she suggested we all head into the kitchen – it had been a long journey and I was desperate for some coffee.

As Claudia, our housekeeper, prepared a large cafetière, Electra sidled into the room, her long, dark limbs managing to look effortlessly elegant in shorts and a T-shirt.

‘Ally.’ She greeted me quietly, and close up I could see how weary she looked, as if someone had burst her and drained the fire out of her incredible amber eyes. She gave me a brief hug and squeezed my shoulder.

I looked at each one of my sisters, thinking how rare it was these days that we were all gathered together. And as I thought of the reason, my heart jumped into my throat. Although I must eventually hear what had happened to Pa, I knew I had to tell them first where I’d been, what I’d seen there and why it had taken me so long to come home.

‘Right.’ I took a deep breath as I began. ‘I’m going to tell you what happened, because to be honest, I’m still confused about it.’ As we all sat down around the table, I noticed Ma

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standing to the side and gestured her to a chair. ‘Ma, you should hear this too. Maybe you can help explain.’

As Ma sat down, I tried to gather my thoughts in order to explain the appearance of the *Titan* through my binoculars.

‘So, there I was, down in the Aegean Sea, training for the Cyclades Regatta next week, when a sailing friend of mine asked me if I wanted to join him on his motor yacht for a long weekend. The weather was fantastic and it was great to actually relax on the water for a change.’

‘Whose boat was it?’ Electra asked, as I knew she would.

‘I told you, just a friend,’ I said evasively. As much as I wanted to share Theo with my sisters at some point, this was definitely not the moment for it. ‘Anyway,’ I continued, ‘there we were a couple of afternoons ago, when my friend told me that another sailing mate of his had radioed him to say he’d spotted the *Titan* . . .’

Casting myself back to that moment, I took a sip of my coffee and then did my best to describe how our radio messages had gone unanswered and my sense of confusion as Pa Salt’s boat had kept moving away from us. Everyone listened to my story with rapt attention and I saw a look of sadness pass between Ma and Maia. I then took a deep breath and told them that because of the dreadful mobile phone signal in the region, I hadn’t received any of their messages until yesterday. I hated myself for lying but I couldn’t bear to tell them I had simply switched it off. I also made no mention of the *Olympus* – the other yacht Theo and I had seen in the bay.

‘So please,’ I finally entreated them, ‘can somebody tell me what on earth was going on? And why Pa Salt’s boat was down in Greece when he was already . . . dead?’

We all turned to Maia. I knew she was weighing her

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words before she spoke. ‘Ally, Pa Salt had a heart attack three days ago. There was nothing anyone could do.’

Hearing how he’d died from my eldest sister made it so much more final. As I tried to stop the rising tears, she continued. ‘His body was flown to the *Titan* and then sailed out to sea. He wanted to be laid to rest in the ocean; he didn’t want to distress us.’

I stared at her as the dreadful realisation hit. ‘Oh my God,’ I whispered eventually. ‘So the chances are that I happened upon his private funeral. No wonder the boat sped off as fast as it could away from me. I . . .’

Unable to pretend to be strong or calm any longer, I put my head in my hands and took deep breaths to control the panic I felt, as my sisters gathered around me to try and give me comfort. Not used to showing emotion in front of them, I heard myself apologising as I tried to regain my composure.

‘It must be an awful shock for you to realise what was actually happening. We’re all so sorry for you, Ally,’ Tiggy said gently.

‘Thank you,’ I managed, and then muttered some platitudes about hearing Pa tell me once that he wanted to be buried at sea. It was such a ridiculous coincidence that I had come across the *Titan* on Pa Salt’s final voyage; the thought made my head spin and I needed some air urgently. ‘Listen,’ I said as steadily as I could, ‘would you all mind terribly if I had a little time alone?’

They all agreed I should and I left the kitchen with their warm words of support following after me.

Standing in the hallway, I looked around desperately, trying to navigate my body towards the comfort I craved, but

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knowing that whichever way I turned, he was gone and I would find none.

I stumbled out of the heavy oak front door, wanting nothing more than to be outside so I could release the feeling of panic that was pressing on my chest. My body automatically led me down to the jetty and I was relieved to see the Laser moored there. I climbed aboard, raised the sails and released the lines.

As I steered away from shore, I felt the wind was good, so I hoisted the spinnaker and blasted along the lake as fast as I could go. Eventually, having exhausted myself, I dropped anchor in an inlet shielded by a rocky peninsula.

I waited for my thoughts to flow, to try and make sense of what I'd just learnt. Currently, they were so jumbled that nothing much happened and I simply stared out over the water like an idiot thinking of absolutely nothing. And wishing I could grasp something that would allow me to understand. The tangled threads of my consciousness refused to loop into the devastating facts of what actually *was*. Being present at what had obviously been Pa Salt's funeral . . . why had *I* been there to see it? Was there a reason? Or was it just coincidence?

Gradually, as my heart rate began to slow and my brain eventually started to function again, the stark reality hit me. Pa Salt was gone, and there probably *was* no rhyme or reason. And if I, the eternal optimist, was going to get through this, I simply had to accept the facts for what they were. Yet all the normal touchstones I used when something dreadful happened seemed null and void, empty platitudes that were swept away on the tide of my grief and disbelief. I realised that whichever way my mind led me, the familiar paths of

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comfort had disappeared and nothing would *ever* make me feel better about my father leaving me without saying good-bye.

I sat there in the stern of the boat for a long time, knowing that another day was passing here on earth without him as part of it. And that somehow, I had to reconcile the dreadful guilt I felt for putting my own happiness first, when my sisters – and Pa – had so desperately needed me. I'd let them all down at the most important moment of all. I looked up to the heavens, tears streaming down my cheeks, and asked Pa Salt for his forgiveness.

I gulped down some water, then lay back in the stern to let the warm breeze dance over me. The gentle rocking of the craft soothed me as it always did, and I even dozed a little.

The moment is all we have, Ally. Never forget that, will you?

I came to, thinking that this had been one of Pa's favourite quotes. And even though I continued to blush in embarrassment at what I'd probably been doing with Theo when Pa drew his last breath – that stark juxtaposition of the processes of life beginning and ending – I told myself it wouldn't have mattered to him or the universe if I'd simply been having a cup of tea or been fast asleep. And I knew that, more than anyone, my father would have been very happy that I'd found someone like Theo.

As I set sail back to Atlantis, I felt a little calmer. There was still, however, one piece of information I had left out of the description I'd given my sisters of how I'd come across Pa's boat. I knew I needed to share it with someone to try and make sense of it.

As with all large groups of siblings, there were various

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tribes within the whole; Maia and I were the eldest and it was to her that I decided to confide what I'd seen.

I moored the Laser to the jetty and made my way back up to the house, the weight on my chest at least feeling lighter than it had when I'd left. A breathless Marina caught up with me on the lawn and I greeted her with a forlorn smile.

'Ally, have you been out on the Laser?'

'Yes. I just needed some time to clear my head.'

'Well, you've just missed everyone. They've gone out on the lake.'

'Everyone?'

'Not Maia. She's shut herself away in the Pavilion to do some work.'

We shared a glance, and even though I could see how much Pa's death was weighing on Ma too, I loved her for always putting our worries and cares first. She was obviously very concerned about Maia, who I'd always had an inkling was her favourite.

'I was on my way to see her, so we'll keep each other company,' I said.

'In that case, can you tell her that Georg Hoffman, your father's lawyer, will be here shortly, but he wants a word with me first, for what reason I can't imagine. So she's to come up to the house in an hour's time. And you too, of course.'

'Will do,' I said.

Ma gave my hand a loving squeeze and set off back towards the main house.

When I reached the Pavilion I gave a gentle knock on the door but received no reply. Knowing that Maia always left it unlocked, I let myself in and called her name. Wandering into the sitting room, I saw my sister curled up asleep on the sofa,

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her perfect features relaxed, her glossy dark hair naturally arranged as though she was posing for a photo shoot. She sat up with an embarrassed start as I approached her.

‘I’m sorry, Maia. You were asleep, weren’t you?’

‘I guess I was,’ she said, blushing.

‘Ma says that the other girls have gone out, so I thought I’d come and speak to you. Do you mind?’

‘Not at all.’

She’d obviously been deeply asleep and to give her time to come to, I offered to make us both some tea. When we settled down with our steaming cups, I realised my hands were shaking and I needed something stronger than tea to tell her my story.

‘There’s some white wine in the fridge,’ Maia said with an understanding smile, and went to fetch a glass of wine from the kitchen for me.

Having taken a gulp, I gathered my strength and told her about seeing Kreeg Eszu’s boat near Pa’s two days ago. To my surprise, she turned pale, and even though I had been rattled by the *Olympus* being so close, especially now I knew what had been happening on the *Titan*, Maia seemed far more shocked than I’d expected. I watched her attempt to recover herself, and then, as we chatted, try to make light of it and supply me with some solace.

‘Ally, please, forget about the other boat being there – it’s irrelevant. But the fact you were there to see the place where Pa chose to be buried is actually comforting. Perhaps, as Tiggy suggested, later in the summer we can all take a cruise together and lay a wreath on the water.’

‘The worst thing is, I feel so guilty!’ I said suddenly, unable to hold it in any longer.

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‘Why?’

‘Because . . . those few days on the boat were so beautiful! I was so happy – happier than I’ve ever felt in my life. And the truth is, I didn’t want anyone to contact me, so I turned off my mobile. And while it was off, Pa was dying! Just when he needed me, I wasn’t there!’

‘Ally, Ally . . .’ Maia came to sit next to me, stroking my hair back from my face as she rocked me gently in her arms. ‘None of us were there. And I honestly believe it’s the way Pa wanted it to be. Please remember I live here, and even I had flown the nest when it happened. From what Ma has said, there really was nothing that could have been done. And we must all believe that.’

‘Yes, I know. But it feels as though there are so many things I wanted to ask him, to tell him, and now he’s gone.’

‘I think we all feel that way. But at least we have each other.’

‘Yes, we do. Thank you, Maia,’ I replied. ‘Isn’t it amazing how our lives can turn on their heads in a matter of hours?’

‘Yes, it is, and at some point,’ she said with a smile, ‘I’d like to know the reason for your happiness.’

I thought of Theo and enjoyed the comfort it provided. ‘And at some point, I’ll tell you, I promise. But not just yet. How are you, Maia?’ I asked her, wanting to change the subject.

‘I’m okay,’ she shrugged. ‘Still in shock like everyone.’

‘Yes, of course you are, and telling our sisters can’t have been easy. I’m sorry that I wasn’t here to help you.’

‘Well, at least the fact that you’re here now means we can meet with Georg Hoffman and begin to move on.’

‘Oh yes,’ I said, checking my watch, ‘I forgot to say that

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Ma has asked us to be up at the house in an hour. He's due here any minute, but he wants to have a chat with her first apparently. So,' I sighed, 'can I please have another glass of wine while we wait?'