



Chapter One

As the doors of the plane opened, Atticus, halfway back in row sixty-something of Economy Class, remembered. He remembered the thrill of clean hot air swirling through a cabin of overheated stale humankind, bringing with it the smell of a foreign country with a very different climate. He remembered what it was like to be Away, Somewhere Else, and he remembered how fabulous it was.

He put his copy of Sir Francis Chichester's autobiography, *The Lonely Sea and the Sky* in the pocket of his linen blazer and waited patiently for everyone else to climb over the seats and shove one another aside. He had picked up *The Lonely Sea* a couple of days ago, in the lovely Stanfords travel bookshop in Covent Garden, thinking he might learn a few tips, but had barely had a chance to look at it on the flight, thanks to the non-stop activity of his fellow travellers.

Despite the inevitable scramble to get off the plane, Atticus allowed himself to experience a moment of pure bliss. It was good to be out of England, with its grey February sky and its air of austerity. Whatever it was Salty Clark wanted, he'd picked a top time to request a reunion.

A change is as good as a rest, as Ma was always saying. But Atticus's life had been a bit short of change recently.

The last couple of years had been pretty stressful. What had come to be known in the family as The Flora Thing, still preyed on his mind, but had

almost been eclipsed by the events of last autumn, when what he had thought would be a delightful affair with a beautiful girl in Venice, had turned into something of a nightmare. But he had come through it, and with the help of Hilly, Hal and the twins, and a Christmas full of domesticity, good cooking and a case or so of excellent Bordeaux, he had been optimistic that the New Year would bring with it a host of new opportunities.

However, the only opportunity which had presented itself up to this point, was a bit of private tutoring which his brother-in-law had found for him. Hal was a counsellor, talking to troubled and under-achieving children, and he usually had a few extremely grateful parents and school heads who were happy to accept a recommendation, when looking for a bit of one-to-one catch-up teaching for their charges. Atticus, with his acceptable History degree from Cambridge, and his distinct lack of any serious career, was perfect for the job.

This time however, he had to admit he had got a bit bogged down with it. The pupils were a small group of sullen teenagers whose parents had clubbed together in a last-ditch attempt to see some return for years of expensive education which had recently been risked on an illicit drug-fuelled weekend in Brighton. The school had threatened expulsion, Hal had recommended keeping them busy, and Atticus had been drafted in to push them through their GCSEs.

On top of that, it had rained for eight weeks non-stop, and as the school was in Islington, and he still lived in Docklands, he had scarcely seen his own apartment in the daylight since his return from Venice. There was no doubt about it, Salty's call had been most welcome.

“Bloody hell it's hot.”

Barry, recently disembarked from row seventy three, barged his way back through the Arrivals Hall with a luggage trolley, against the tide towards his hot sticky family, just as Roger, his scrawny seven-year-old, dragged the first of their gigantic suitcases off the conveyor belt, narrowly avoiding being crushed to death underneath it.

“What did you expect, it's the bloody Canaries! You'd be complaining if it was pigging freezing and pissing down, wouldn't you?” snapped Shell, Barry's wife, who was somehow managing to look sunburnt already, despite not having left the airport. Her face was red, and blotches spread

across her neck and shoulders. Barry told himself that she was tired. She needed this holiday. They both did. Although the cost of it was bothering him. He just hadn't managed to find the right time to tell her about the redundancy.

“Well *help him*, can't you?” shouted Shell, as Roger abandoned the first case and clambered onto the conveyor belt, followed by five year-old Tyne. In the distance, Bex, their ten-year old was leaning against a plate glass window, looking out at the tarmac which stretched across the landscape to the sea, and texting someone she referred to as her ‘Bezzie’.

“What the hell's *in* all these?” said Barry, piling case onto case. “Did we leave *anything* at home?”

“You wouldn't know if we did or we didn't,” said Shell, dragging her sons back from the brink of being sent down the luggage chute back towards the plane and shoving a bag of crisps each into their clammy hands. “Left it all to me as usual. If it was up to you, we'd be here without any stuff at all.”

Barry pushed the trolley toward the passport control line ahead of his family, who left a trail of crushed crisps as they went. He thought they'd manage fine without any stuff at all. After all, what did you need for a week in the sun? T-shirt, swimming cozzie, sandals, beer money, that'd do it. He caught Bex's eye as he turned round to check they were all there, and gave her a wink. She rolled her eyes. She was doing that a lot lately, and he didn't know what it was about. It didn't feel that great though.

“Awww, look at them!” said Liv, from row ninety four, hanging onto her boyfriend and hindering his attempts to walk in a straight line through the terminal. “That'll be us one day, won't it? You, me and a pile of cute kids?”

Rob took her face in his hands and planted a lingering kiss on her neat little lips. Behind them the rest of the crowd was forced to stop, backing up like traffic on a motorway. As he pushed his tongue round her tiny fruit-flavoured mouth, he shut his eyes and tried to blot out the vision of Barry and Shell, worn out by life and childcare, and barely able to speak to one another without a snap or a sigh. ‘That'll be us’ Liv had said. God, he hoped not. He pushed her shoulder strap down and reached a hand almost to her breast before the crowd surged onward. “You,” said Liv fondly, snaking her hand round his back and into the gap between the waistband of his underpants and his belt.

“Disgusting,” said a smart woman in a breton shirt and huge designer sunglasses, while her two matching teenage daughters sniggered and pointed.

Atticus reached the baggage reclaim and stood a little way away, watching the seething mass as he waited for his holdall to appear. It was an ever-present dilemma whether to check in baggage which might reappear in pieces, or worse, not at all, or carry it onto the plane, which wore you out before you even got to your destination. But nothing could upset Atticus this afternoon, as he savoured the sound of foreign words over the airport’s tannoy system, and smelt the myriad scents of a foreign land. Coffee, dry dust, strange food, and beyond, in the hot distance, the smell of the sea.

He retrieved his bag, noting the new scratches and the still-intact padlock, and praised Hilly’s great taste in luggage, She’d given him the bag for his honeymoon, an event which in the end, never took place, and its first outing had been the all-expenses trip to Venice from which it, and he, had been lucky to return. This was an altogether different experience for both of them. “One old chair and half a candle, one old jug without a handle,” he said to himself, as he found the shoulderstrap in the outside pocket and reattached it. Not for him the five-suitcase tower of Barry and Shell, or the matching pink wheelie-cases of Rob and Liv. He was just a free traveller, in a big, sunshiny world.

At the end of the snaking line of British people going on holiday, Atticus raised his panama hat to the sweaty officials, answered the usual questions about knives and farm animals, and then, quite suddenly, he was swept up in the tide of people, and carried out into the car park.

The first impression of any of the Canary Islands via their airports is that of a Middle Eastern war zone. There is invariably a car park filled with battered dusty vehicles, and beyond that, rows of struggling palms, battered by hot winds. Beyond *that*, are a few rows of half-finished buildings, concrete blocks, some optimistic lines of washing and further still, dry red rock, banking up and up towards the solid blue sky.

Atticus smiled the smile of a happy man. This was just the beginning and he was going to enjoy himself. He turned away from the open mouths of twenty or thirty coaches, and headed for the taxi rank, where half a dozen elderly Mercedes waited, engines running, for their drivers to emerge

from the bar. A queue of single travellers like himself, those who were not on a package holiday, or in an excitable group, built up slowly.

Two lightly tanned women in matching navy skirts, white shirts and yellow scarves stood, side-by-side beaming at the soggy white people spilling towards the coaches. Beside them was a gangly, pale-faced man in the masculine equivalent of their uniform, which was different only in as much as the skirt was trousers and the scarf was a cravat.

Jules pulled at the cravat to relieve his itching neck, "Friday again," he said, "Another week in Sodding Paradise."

"Cheer up," said Amy, "You've only been here a couple of months. I've been here four years. Remember you could be working behind the counter at Lloyds somewhere like Huddersfield." She pulled at her nylon skirt which was riding up over her somewhat generous figure and threatened to cut off the circulation round her thighs.

"Then you'd look like that," added Sooze, pointing out a particularly pale pair of women dragging their cases through the doors. "I hope they're here for a fortnight. It'll take at least that long to get those two warmed up."

"Bet they're mine," said Jules, gloomily, "I always get the grey ones."

"Whereas *I*," said Amy, her attention diverted to the next group coming from the Baggage Reclaim

Hall, "Am positive that these are *all mine!*"

The others followed her gaze to where eight extremely good-looking men in surf shorts and tight T-shirts were re-grouping after their flight. There was a great deal of 'high-fiving' and general clowning going on, but that didn't deter Amy, who had undone another button of her shirt to reveal a most welcoming bosom, and was heading towards them, her best smile painted firmly on, and her hand outstretched. "Like bloody Princess Diana," grumbled Sooze behind her. Sooze, at almost five feet ten and lacking any real curves at all, did up *her* top button and fashioned the scarf into more of a Margaret Thatcher bow. "Authority," she said, "that's what we *should* be demonstrating here."

"On behalf of Cupcake Tours, may I say, Welcome to Tenerife?" said Amy, her blue eyes trained directly on the most handsome of them all. "Are you with me?"

Jules and Sooze carried on with their administrative duties, ticking holidaymakers off their lists as they came through the gates and assigning

them to the coaches which would take them to their hotels and villas along the coast, commiserating with the moaners, joking with the jollier ones, and managing the drunks, who had begun with beer at eight in the morning in Manchester and were still hard at it, at three.

“You haven't experienced a Fiesta yet have you?” Sooze asked, as she and Jules hauled overstuffed suitcases into the luggage hold of one of the coaches while the driver leant against the side of his vehicle and watched.

“No,” admitted Jules, “I haven't been here long enough. I *think* I'm looking forward to it. But to be honest it does sound a bit weird.” He dragged the last of the suitcases off a trolley and into the coach. “This is like feeding a whale,” he added, “What the *hell* do they put in these?”

“*Entierro de la Sardina*,” Sooze said, “Funeral of the Sardine. It's one of the islands' more eccentric customs. They build a huge fish out of papier mache, and everyone dresses up as if they're going to a funeral. The men in particular go for the widows' outfits, all black dresses and veils, and a fair bit of stocking and suspender action, and then everyone parades the fish through the streets and down to the sea, where they set fire to it. Why is it, that when women dress up as men, they just go for suits and ties, but when men dress as women they have to go the whole hog with the underwear?”

Jules shrugged. “Don't know. It's a boy thing. Or at least a certain type of boy.” He slammed the hatch of the coach shut and prayed it wouldn't burst open on the motorway, strewing customers' luggage across three carriageways.

“Well you'll certainly enjoy the widows then,” said Sooze, “But I should warn you, things can get a bit hairy.”

“And I'm guessing you don't just mean the stocking-wearing, bearded widows,” said Jules.

The Arrivals Hall was almost clear again, and cleaning staff were sweeping up and replacing trolleys in readiness for the next inbound flight from Stansted in just under an hour. The taxi drivers had already begun to return from their first round trips and the bar was filling up. “Come on,” said Jules, “Let's get a drink before the next rush. I could murder a *cafe cortado*.”

“And talking of murder,” said Sooze suddenly, “Look...”

Jules followed her gaze into the car park. A sleek black limousine drew to a halt by a side entrance. Several men in dark suits and sunglasses came out of the airport and got into the car before it swept away, its blacked-out windows allowing Jules and Sooze no glimpse of who was inside it.

“Who do you think that is?” said Jules.

Sooze looked at him. “There are some things we just don’t ask,” she said. “You’ll pick that up quite quickly too.”

Behind them, Atticus’s driver finally reclaimed his cab and drove him away in a cloud of dust and cheap aftershave, to the tinny beat of Spanish radio.

“El Puerto, por favor,” Atticus said to the driver’s vast damp back. Over his shoulder, Atticus could see the tattered photographs of several gap-toothed children, framed by strings of rosary beads and sprigs of what might once have been rosemary. “El Puerto?” Atticus said again, hopefully.

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