

The Little Blue Door

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Chapter 1

The sound shook through me – the thrust of air then the anxiety. It made me feel claustrophobic. I'd been all right up until that point. Then the wind decided to blow my hair across my face, leaving some in my mouth. Hair muddled with the taste of jet fuel. I remember instantly wanting to gag.

My heels wobbled underneath me as I did my best to walk steadily. I wasn't a nervous flyer or anything like that. I'd just never flown alone before. I must have been mad to be strolling along in my white heels. I had always liked the old-fashioned idea of dressing up to travel. Bit of a joke, really. I was likely the only person wearing stilettos across the runway to climb up into a plane that day.

The clamber to find the right seat hadn't changed much at the tail end of a pandemic. Social distancing was almost a thing of the past, but many were still wearing morbid-looking

face masks, as though half the passengers were off to perform surgeries. The masks were still on. After removing the hair from my mouth, mine was back on too. It was black with a small butterfly motif, my small ray of hope.

I sat down. I don't remember the seat number, only it was on the right. I hadn't even been on public transport for well over a year. I could feel myself twitch and hold my breath with each person who brushed my skin. Unfortunately, I'd been placed between the cliché crying baby and the guy with long legs and pointy elbows. My usual level of luck. In one sly move, I managed to grab the inflight magazine for distraction. I was pretending to flick through it when I noticed her stare. I felt the warm points of someone's eyes lingering far too long on my skin. It made me uncomfortable before I truly knew why, before I knew she was watching me. Then I could see her above the seats, two rows ahead, across to the left. She was shifting about, sometimes eyes between the seats then looking right over the top of them. She didn't look away from me. Even children normally have the common decency to look away when you look back at them, and she wasn't a small child. She must have been around twelve. She was beautifully tanned, with bright green eyes and long dark hair. I sent her a quick smile with the corners of my eyes as she bobbed above her seat, then returned my focus blankly to the magazine.

The girl only stopped observing me when the seat belt sign came on and we all mindlessly watched the flight attendants point to the exits. She unnerved me, the girl. I don't know why, but she did. She felt too young to be so calm and too old not to know better than to stare. Luckily the rest of the flight came and went pretty uneventfully, other than my being dribbled on by the sleeping baby.

My shoes were squeaking during the short walk from passport control to baggage claim. Perhaps it was because my feet had swollen a little on the aeroplane, or maybe it was the silky flooring. Either way, I was a walking music box that had gone out of tune. All I needed was someone to tell me my skirt was tucked into my knickers and I'd tick all the boxes of embarrassing. At least I could blame my flushed cheeks on the heat. In the small airport on Corfu there wasn't the mixture of attire found at Stansted, where people were going to various types of destinations. I really was the only person not in flip-flops, sliders or sandals. Each step seemed to result in yet another head snapping around to see what the problem was: only me.

I lugged my case off the belt and marched in a bid to escape from my own noise. One hand was tugging at the bag while the other thumbed through my emails to dissolve myself into my phone. I turned sharp right out of baggage claim, and then it hit me. Or rather, he hit me. Like whack-a-mole gone wrong, popping up at the hammer. There was no way I could anticipate that someone would rear up in front of me just as I turned that corner. I let out a little involuntary screech. After a year of social distancing, his touch hit me like a cold shower. It sent a wave of goosebumps from the epicentre of his thwack. I nearly lost my phone in the process. Okay, it's perfectly plausible that he may have been adjusting a shoe or picking up something he'd dropped, and I may have been too distracted by my phone. It still seems rather ludicrous to me – what a stupid place to stop. Either which way, he must have been the only person who hadn't heard my squeak coming from a distance. This slightly painful encounter left a hot patch on my arm from his hard head. Then I noticed her, again.

‘*Yassas.*’ She looked right at me and spoke her Greek greeting in my direction, as though she knew me.

‘Hi...and ouch.’ That’s when I really looked at him. He was tall, maybe six foot four, with a tan to match the girl’s, and eyes just as green. Like dark seaweed washed up on golden sands. ‘I’m so sorry. I didn’t see you there!’ He started brushing me down as though I were a child, big hands sweeping my sore, naked arm.

‘My name’s Gaia.’ She spoke coolly, smiling, ignoring the man, ignoring the situation, just looking around him at me.

‘The Greek mother of all life?’ I retorted, and couldn’t help my tone, or my face. The tone and my expression just slipped out of me and I couldn’t catch them. A broad smile spread across her mask-free lips.

‘Something like that,’ she said. I was still being patted down, but I didn’t notice much.

‘I’m so sorry,’ the man kept mumbling over and over again. ‘That’s okay. Don’t worry about it!’

I did my best to hurry away from the beautiful pair, yanking my case around a flimsy barrier, nearly taking it with me. Only a few steps to the exit. I didn’t need confusing thoughts in my mind, so my squeak and I left the man and the girl with little more than a polite nod and a panicked look, hopefully well hidden behind my cotton face mask. I decided to take one last glance back as I left the airport. The girl was watching me with a smile. He looked as bewildered as me, as a sea of people from our plane was managing to do what I had not: navigate around them seamlessly.

The transfer driver had spelt my name quite wrong. How many Ls did Melodie Pelletier really need? Surely three was plenty?

Apparently not. But I didn't care and I didn't correct the name scrawled on the sign. I was just happy to be away from the airport, away from England, and away from the strange encounter.

I was desperately trying to hold onto the driver's words while he chatted about practising his English. I think he said his name was Spiros. For the most part, the words were rushing past me with the people and the trees. He was a squat little man with one chubby hand on the steering wheel and the other waving around as he spoke. He looked as though he had somehow been condensing over time. I managed to absorb that his livelihood, like that of many others, had been hit by the recent pandemic and so now he was perfecting his English, and had taken on a second job as a driver. He was sweet, and reminded me why I love Greek people so much: they are totally welcoming and totally free from the nonsense of the world. Perhaps those worry beads jangling from the mirror really did help. Maybe I should have got some.

We pulled up at my destination in a place called Astrakeri. As he took my bag from the boot of his well-kept Mercedes, the driver turned to me and gave me his card, sincerely reassuring me that if I needed anything to just call. He'd be happy to help. His kindness wasn't refreshing, not here in Corfu. It was the beautiful norm. Then he was gone, and I was alone.

Chapter 2

Weather-beaten. Yep, weather-beaten would definitely be the polite way to describe my home for the month. A very reasonably priced Airbnb for the size and location on the beach. Away from the world with a sea view. To me it was heaven. It didn't matter that the blue window frames hadn't been freshened up in quite some time and the classic whitewashed exterior needed some love.

Stepping into the manufactured chill gave me a deep sense of relief. I scanned the open-plan expanse of white walls and knick-knacks to find the key, a welcome pack, a set of instructions, and a forlorn cardboard box, all perched on the oddly modern breakfast bar. The lines of the room were very different to the unkempt exterior, clearly refurbished within the past few years. I picked up the key and ignored the papers. The owner had been very helpful and accepted extra payment to stock the fridge and leave a box of provisions before I arrived.

I slipped off my squeakers to feel the cool tiles beneath my puffy toes and wandered around upstairs to discover which of the three bedrooms was to be mine for the month. Each room was spacious but not ridiculously so. I couldn't pick between them so I dropped my bag in the last one I looked in. It had pale, sage- green linens with walls to match and a print of The Birth of Venus above the bed. She was proud yet coy about her nudity as she stood in her shell. For a moment I stood mindlessly looking at her, wondering if I'd chosen the right room. Turning my back on Venus and her friends, I placed my face mask away in a drawer. Time to be brave. One month. One month of further solitude. I'd made it out of my hole and into a fresh space. I had been frightened to leave my home, only removing myself for essentials, isolating for much longer than most. I needed this push.

Luckily for me, I could work from anywhere with Wi-Fi, giving me no attachments to worry about, so, when I decided to leave the house, I could go almost anywhere. I helped to craft other people's social media profiles. It paid well because I was good at it. I would create or encourage the creation of engaging content for various platforms, alongside knowing what posts to boost and when. It was flexible but painfully ironic work, given how antisocial I'd become.

After unpacking my things and exploring my new home, I sat outside on the step sipping some of the ouzo the owner had left me. Ouzo is a very important life essential in my opinion. A single dogwalker strolled along the seafront; the beach was almost entirely lifeless as darkness began to reflect back at itself in the water.

In a week I'd be thirty-one and I had no one to call, no one who cared if I'd arrived safely, no one to worry about me. I let the ouzo rush through me quicker than I should have. The

liquorice taste, strong and clear, brought forward past holidays with my grandparents. I missed them terribly. I had lost them in the pandemic. My grandmama went first, after catching the horrific virus. It broke my grandpapa's heart; he just broke. He had a heart attack days later, unable to live without the love of his life. I hadn't seen either of them for a month at that point and it hurt my soul. It would always hurt my soul. They were the only parents I'd ever known. Their ghosts weighed heavily on my mind, as they so often did. The world was full of fresh sorrow with the loss of millions. I was but a drop in the ocean. People were starting to feel safe again. Most had for quite some time. I was the exception, not the rule. Not that feeling safe consoled me. How could it? It was hope for the future and regret for the past.

I inhaled the warm evening air, and it muddled itself with the ouzo fumes. During the heat of the day, it had been thirty-five degrees Celsius. After spending most of it in air-conditioned boxes, the thick sea air playing with the waves of my hair was like having a comforting hand on my neck. Reluctantly, after only a little more ouzo, I said goodnight to the comforting drone of the sea. I retreated to my new bedroom for a deep, exhaustion-induced sleep.

I felt around for my phone in the dark: 3:33am. I looked at all of those threes in a daze. The air con had turned itself off and my sheets made me feel like the filling of a toasted sandwich. Placing my feet lightly on the tiles, still half asleep, and creeping pointlessly but habitually on tiptoe, I wandered along the landing and down the concrete staircase to find where to turn the air con back on. I stood still in my cotton nightshirt facing a little window. The moonlight was reflecting on the sea like shards of crystals sprawled on navy silk. It was too appealing.

I stepped out of the front door, creaking through the shadows as I went. My toes felt their way, following the sandy dirt path towards the beach. The sand still held a comforting touch from the sun of the day, while the sea breeze soothed my skin. I kept walking, with the stars and the moon as my guide, down the beach and straight into the sea. My pale pink cotton nightshirt clung to me as the sea hit my thighs. I could see everything in a beautiful silver silhouette. I went under. For the longest second, I considered staying there. Suspended with the salt and the algae, the locks of my hazel hair stretching out, elegantly exploring like jellyfish tentacles.

Would anyone truly miss me? A few colleagues and one or two friends would cry but move on quickly, I was sure. My chest was slowly tightening. My mind lapsed into colours, green and turquoise, vivid cartoon memories of swimming in these very waters. Then there they were, in front of my eyes, part of the underwater world: my mama's laugh, the smell of mint from my papa all balled-up with the tension of my lungs. My tummy tightened yet my limbs were free. A sizeable fish brushed my leg and I instinctively shot out of the water. My lungs refilled with one sharp breath. The moment was gone. They were gone.

Refreshed to the point of freezing, I started walking back towards the beach, the see-through cotton of my nightshirt clinging to my body. I shivered in the night air, skin confused by the warmth and the night breeze. I stood outside the front door and slipped off my nightshirt, carefully placing it on the back of a chair on the porch. I didn't lock the door. I was more afraid of microbiology than anyone on the island. I quietly tiptoed back to bed, salty, damp and naked. It didn't matter – there was no one to worry about or to impress.

I woke up feeling gritty and disgusting. It was a good thing really; it meant I couldn't just lie there. I couldn't bear it. I got up, stripped the bed and jumped into the shower. Before I had sunk into the depths of my loneliness, I used to spring out of bed every day. Shower, makeup, hair, call Grandmama, make contact with clients, catch up with my personal socials...my own nine-to-five routine. Maybe not exactly like everyone else's Monday to Friday, as I'd worked from home for a long time, but pretty similar. Once Mama and Papa had gone, I had no one I wanted to call. I didn't want to get out of bed most days. I had got into the habit of reaching straight for my laptop, doing my work, making my calls, all in my bed, and only washing my hair and getting dressed if a video conference was on the cards. Other than that, I'd spent months in bed or on the sofa. Once, maybe twice, a week I'd force myself to run on the treadmill in my garage to stop my body turning completely to mush. I suppose even that was because I could hear my grandparents in the back of my mind. If I let myself go completely, and didn't look after myself, I'd be doing them a disservice. Even in death I didn't want to let them down.

I had intended to sunbathe and swim all day but a storm was rolling around on the sea. I sat on the porch as rain swept inwards. Patters spat up from the floor keeping my feet nicely wet. There was a flash of pink lightning, something I'd never seen before. Had I seen it at all? A magic firework across a gloomy grey? It made me feel too alone, mocked by the lightning forks, with their seemingly endless family members. I wanted to say, Did you see that? But who would answer? No one. I hadn't even spoken all morning. I often went for days without hearing my own voice.

The storm started to pull away from me, back out to sea. It was all distant now, like my life. Everything I once had, now so out of reach. Not just unattainable, impossible. Don't get me wrong, I do love the drama of Corfu even the atmosphere holds entertainment. It doesn't matter if the sun's out or it's stormy. That's why it's so green and lush compared to other Greek islands. Even the pain of the storm gives hope for life. Then a purple flash, I remembered it all so vividly, like a dream that feels real and haunts you. But this was the opposite: real life that feels like a dream and stops you from sleeping.

After the storm, the weather picked up again, and I spent a few days swimming in the mostly deserted sea, drinking too much ouzo on ice and generally wandering around aimlessly. Then it was time. Time to go to the familiar old family haunt: Agios Stefanos.

Chapter 3

Even part way through the pandemic, tourists still went back to the beautiful, homely resort. Agios Stefanos had always had a chilled-out charisma that was hard to resist. I couldn't bring myself to stay there full-time though. Greeks always make you feel like a long-lost family member. The thing was, being welcomed like family when you have none of your own left was bound to be really hard. I had to psych myself up for it. Psych myself up for their full hearts and sad faces. Who really enjoys pity being projected onto them? I got into the taxi with only anxiety and ouzo in my belly. Not a good combination at eleven in the morning.

I wore flip-flops here. No squeaks, just flops. I slid my sunglasses over my eyes to shield them from the midday sun. Or that's what I told myself. The taxi dropped me off to stand with the cats. There have always been dozens of them at one particular

spot. Tourists put food out, and a kind local takes donations to make sure the cats are cared for all year round. I just stood amongst them for a moment, amongst the curdled smell of sun-toasted cat food and the spit-roasted lamb from across the street. The cats didn't overly acknowledge me, being overfed by tourists in the summer months. I was staring at one little black kitten expertly cleaning its claws when my feet decided it was time to move. I walked towards Vicky's, the apartment blocks where we would so often stay. Maybe I'd just say hello there first and grab a drink at the pool bar. It seemed like the logical start point. Luckily Jenny, the receptionist, was there and she already knew my situation. No explanation necessary. Thank you, Facebook. She jumped up from behind her desk and came out from her glass bubble to greet me. Her pretty little face pulled into a tight frown as she held my hands and then embraced me with impressive might.

'I'm so sorry, Melodie.'

We'd never hugged in all the years we'd known each other. She was much shorter than me, almost a foot shorter in fact. She was perhaps four foot nine, with pale blue eyes and dirty-blond hair. English by birth but Greek at heart. The resort wouldn't be the same without her. If you needed to know anything, you'd go straight to Jenny, no question. We'd only ever smiled and laughed together in the past. I could feel my eyes burning under my glasses.

'Come and have a drink. What would you like?' She led me like I was a child round the side of the reception to the bar.

'*Yassou*, Stavros.' I managed to lift my cheeks into a kind of smile.

'*Yassou*. How are you? I'm sorry for your grandparents.' Stavros held my hands across the solid wooden bar with no

thought, only care. It was always going to be a long and painful day. He was Jenny's husband, a stocky man who stood eye level with me but was twice as broad. His soft brown eyes were warm and comforting. Tentatively I let go of his hands and pushed my hair behind my ears as some kind of emotional distraction. I went for an orange juice; my stomach was still churning from the days of ouzo, and it wasn't best pleased.

Almost forty minutes went by filled with moaning about the pandemic, chatting about the economy, the "new world" which mostly seemed pretty old, and generally putting it all to rights. I had managed to remove my sunglasses and I appreciated the smell of gyros meat and cooking chips. Jenny had to go back to her receptionist duties and I stayed for a salad. When it came, I had to smile. Placed down on the glass table top with a clang, it was huge: peppers, feta, olives, onions, cucumber – everything. Mama and I would always say we could split one at lunch, but we never did. We'd have both wanted all the feta and olives to ourselves. I was almost full at the halfway point, but I had to keep going; I'd got to be a little scrawny during the pandemic and had to buy new summer clothes, all size eight to ten. That's a little thin when you're five foot eight, or at least it was in my opinion. Not enough to make me shapeless, just thinner than I'd once been by a good ten pounds.

After the delicious delights of my salad, me and my food-baby belly made our way precariously to the beach. I wondered how my grandparents had made it down there in their early eighties. It was steep and narrow, a concrete slide with grit and sand that occasionally liked to act as little roller skates for your flip-flops. In quite recent times part of the walk down to the beach had been decked, but to be honest I sometimes found that

portion even more dicey. My eyes were firmly on my feet until I made it to the bottom, the whole time trying not to gain speed for fear of never stopping. I knew that when I was eventually able to look up, it'd be there: the glistening Mediterranean Sea, and the sound of lapping water across the soft yet coarse golden sand. It must have been some time around two o'clock because the sand was scorching. Luckily, my body had already started to adjust over the past few days, including my skin, which was turning a nice golden brown. I started walking across the almost flaming sand down towards the relief of the sea. I hadn't brought any swimwear that day, just lotion, sunglasses, a shawl and a smattering of random makeup items, all in my petite beach bag. I put my feet in the water and watched the tourists. They were mostly middle-aged couples reading books or taking a refreshing dip in the turquoise water. There were a couple of young families interspersed with children giggling and running through the puddles left by the sea. A slice of Greek heaven. I decided to walk along, feet in the water, holding my flip-flops in one hand and the bottom of my dress in the other. Occasionally the breeze would brush locks of my shoulder-length hair across my face. It looked like an idyllic moment. The fact was, this image was completely scuppered each time I had to remove my hair from my face. It was not an elegant sight, trying to use either my flip-flop hand, which felt like someone was trying to kick me in the face, or trying to use my dress hand without showing the world my knickers. I felt my cheeks burn, and told myself it was the sun. I made a sharp dash left, off the beach, past a restaurant called Waves and up onto the road. At least then I could put my shoes back on and feel less on show.

Ambling upwards along the road didn't cause too much interruption from cars. It left space for my mind to wander too. During the previous days my brain had mostly gone between three things: work, my grandparents and the pair from the airport. His sharp jawline and muscular build. Her inquisitive but knowing looks, and their matching deep green eyes. They made me feel rather bland. My hair and eyes were both naturally pale hazel-brown; nothing as striking as a deep emerald shade. That's not to say I hadn't had my fair share of compliments over the years. My doll eyes were usually the subject of compliments. I liked to emphasise their bushbaby look with layers of mascara even on the lower lashes.

Then, he appeared – as though I'd called upon him and he had manifested. I stopped in the dust at the side of the road among insects and discarded cigarette butts. He was much more impressive than I had remembered. Exceptionally tall with a rugged refinement, hair softly set in place but a face ready for action, fierce striking bones. Suddenly his working frown erupted into a laugh with an exchange from a passer-by. In essence though, he was just there, just unloading something from a van at one of my favourite restaurants, Fantasea. Skin glistening, presumably sweat from his labours, to me he just looked perfectly, almost intentionally, oiled. I'd never seen anyone quite like him and I was in awe. The restaurant name felt painfully and ridiculously apt in that moment.

His black-brown hair was being ruffled by the breeze and his tan was deeper than before. My heart was pounding in my throat as I spun around on my heels. I didn't want to be noticed so I just stood looking over towards the sea. I'd made the walk high enough up the road that the view looking down at

the bay was incredible. So, fortunately for me, staring across was completely credible. I was clutching my bag tightly, so tightly that it dug in and hurt a little. My mind was racing: What do I do? Do I say something? Do I carry on walking? Likely he wouldn't recognise me anyway. I'd been wearing a mask when he saw me last and although I like my doe eyes, I doubt them to be as memorable as his.

I started to grope aggressively in my bag for my compact. Found! Then a quick sneaky glance to check my mascara hadn't migrated away from where I put it, and that my pale coral lipstick had made it through lunch. Check! Then to carefully use said mirror to look behind me. There was nothing. I spun around to see the little van making its way down the hill. All I could think was: how is any of this possible? Firstly, that he was here in the first place – there were dozens of beautiful beach resorts in Corfu. It wasn't the biggest Greek island, but it was nowhere near the smallest. Did I just imagine him? Perhaps the months and months of being alone, combined with the heat, had made me hallucinate. Maybe I'd been too hopelessly focused on them and now my brain was adding him into random places when it was bored.

Then I was walking, fast. Likely too fast. My feet were rushing down the slope, so much so that I was running the risk of losing one of my tatty little flip-flops. The van was there, stopped outside one of the little supermarkets helping Demetris with some oranges. What was I doing? Why was I stalking him? I couldn't sensibly answer that, not even now. At least he hadn't been some strange manifestation, he was real after all. Thankfully he didn't have the girl with him to give me another soul inspection. No, I was wrong again. That's when I saw her

reflection in the wing mirror of his van. Sitting in the passenger seat singing along to whatever was playing. I spun around again to face the other way. I frantically fanned my face as the sweat clung to my skin. Had I travelled through time to be a fourteen-year-old girl again? Staying away from people for such an expanse of time, I had forgotten how to behave. I could hear footsteps rushing towards me, slapping against the pavement. Was it her? Had she seen me? What should I do?