

TOURIST TRAP

David Tate

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Title Page & Copyright](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Part One: Selection](#)

[First Day](#)

[Second Day](#)

[Third Day](#)

[Part Two: Activation](#)

[Fourth Day](#)

[Fifth Day](#)

[Part Three: Complication](#)

[Last Day](#)

[Author Note](#)

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Part One: Selection

FIRST DAY

The runway is in sight when the plane appears to stall. They all feel it, the descent interrupted, and the engines if they're still working can't be heard over the whirr of the air circulation and the whine and hiss of pressure in their ears.

Jody Lamb, sitting between her young children in the middle of three seats, gasps as the plane tilts sharply to the right. She can see past her son to the dipped wing, pointing like an accusing finger at the scrubland and glinting blue sea of the bay. A speedboat cuts a white trail across the water. Jody wonders if it will be called back to search for survivors among the wreckage.

She smiles down at Dylan but he is absorbed in the view from the window: the solid earth so close, but probably not survivably so. The wing judders and flexes like a plastic ruler about to snap. Jody feels warmth against her skin; her daughter has clutched her hand and she knows she must play the grown up. Unlike her brother, Grace is waiting for the smile.

Unlike her brother, Grace is scared.

The plane tips again, righting itself. They are level once more, but no less uncomfortable. A ripple of anxiety spreads through the plane, stirring the watery insides of novice and seasoned fliers alike.

"What's happening, Mummy?" A shouted question, because their ears are blocked. Jody makes sure to exaggerate her lip movements when she says, "Nothing, hun. We're just coming in to land."

A glance across the aisle at poor Sam, a first time flyer, and she can read it in his face, the same prayer: *Don't let my children die.*

She feels so guilty, recalling the deal she made with God/fate/whoever during the rush and rattle of take-off: *If we have to crash, let it be on the way home.*

It's their first foreign holiday as a family – the first time ever that Sam or their children have been on a plane. Only Jody has flown before, in her own childhood, and it was Jody who calmed their fears, it was Jody who made light of the dangers, promising them all that it was safer than crossing a road.

*

Until now Sam has been making a pretty fine job of keeping the plane in the air by will power alone. He doesn't think he's relaxed for a second, but he's starting to doubt whether that will be enough.

Perhaps it's normal for it to feel like this as the plane comes down. His gut instinct tells him not, although by leaning slightly he can see one of the cabin crew, strapped into a seat that faces the passengers, and she looks... well, not calm so much as blank faced, like she's put on a mask for their benefit. If she was about to die, wouldn't she tear off the mask and jump up, screaming the name of the person she loved most?

Maybe not, he thinks, given that we're English. But when he looks over his shoulder he sees that in several rows there are people holding hands across the aisle. Families, like his, that have had to be seated in separate groups.

It's tempting, but he's worried it will scare his daughter if he suggests it. Dads aren't supposed to be afraid of anything, are they?

But we're going to die. Two years of scrimping and saving to give our kids a really special holiday, and it's all about to go up in smoke and take us with it.

He presses his palms together between his legs and bows his head, staring at the folding table and the safety card. Before take-off he studied it for so long that the couple next to him began to snigger – he sensed the woman nudging her husband, heard a *Sshh* and a giggle –

and if Sam was his brother or in any way like his brother he might have gone off on one.

But he isn't like Kevin, thank God. So he stays calm and doesn't react when the bloke snorts again, and mutters to his wife. They must think Sam's praying – though maybe that isn't so far from the truth.

The man taps on his window and says something that causes his wife to lean over and look. Sam can't help turning, half expecting to find the ground rising up to smash them to pieces. With barely any of the window in his eyeline Sam glimpses something white, moving past and down, and at the same time the plane gives a shudder and a clunk, and despite all the noise and the muffled painful blockage in his ears he knows that a few people have cried out. That's quickly followed by nervous laughter, because in this part of the plane there are plenty of kids and no one wants panic, no one wants their children to know what's coming...

"Another plane," the man says loudly, so perhaps it's for Sam's benefit as well. "Gulfstream G650. Sublime!"

"Is it meant to be that close to us?" his wife shouts.

Confident nodding. "Been given priority to land. I suspect the VIP on board doesn't want to wait behind a cheap package tour!" Then a sniff, as if the man – in his own head – has far more in common with whoever's on the other plane.

Maybe he does. The couple are a lot older than Sam – about the same age as his aunt and uncle – and they're more smartly dressed than practically everyone else on board. To Sam they look sort of well-fed and pleased with themselves, as though they've found a secret supply of cake in a world where everyone else lives on porridge.

"See, it's landing now."

"Wish *we* were."

The man grunts, as if it hardly matters whether they get down safely or not. "That's one hell of a jet. If our premium bonds come up..."

"Chance'd be a fine thing." The woman turns slightly to Sam, giving him the sort of smile Jody uses on the kids when they graze their knees.

The plane tips over to the left, revealing the runway off in the distance, the private jet making for a long low building with a tower at one end. Meanwhile their own plane is still parallel to the runway, and it doesn't look as though they're very high up. Sam wonders if the pilot has enough room to turn before he runs out of air, or space – or whatever it is you call the bit between them and the ground.

Someone taps him on the arm. It's Grace, with a question. Even though he doesn't hear it properly, Sam makes an effort to nod and smile: lots of confidence. Then he gestures at her to straighten up, to make sure her belt is tight across her lap. He turns away, and now he *is* praying. Praying she didn't pick up on his fear. Praying that, if it does happen, it's quick and painless, and none of them suffer too much.

*

A sharp pain in Jody's ears is followed by a pop, and her hearing is restored. She focuses on the sound of the engines – thank God they're still functioning – but as she does the pitch changes and she knows this is it. A plane can't just float in mid-air: it has to keep moving. And it can't do that unless it's propelled by something.

Other passengers are thinking the same, she can tell by the murmur of worried voices. She and Sam aren't the only ones struggling to put on a brave face for their children.

The aircraft tilts sharply to the left and there are a couple of screams from the rows behind. Both Grace and Dylan turn to her for reassurance. Jody does her best to smile, but it's with her teeth clenched.

She looks out of her window, expecting to see that the wing has sheared off. But, no, it

remains intact, shuddering against a backdrop of pure blue sky. On Sam's side there is land in sight. A slow crawl of trees is proof they're still moving, although it feels like little more than walking pace. Dylan goes quicker than this on the way to school.

The runway is nowhere in sight but the middle-aged man in Sam's row is talking in a confident voice. He becomes aware of Jody's scrutiny and for a second his gaze switches to her, his eyes widening a fraction the way that often happens when men of his age look at women a generation younger.

Sam leans across and gratefully relays the news: "Says we're coming around, landing from the other end of the runway."

And so it proves. The plane banks and descends, and from the windows on each side they see rows of trees, a villa or two with bright orange tiles on the roof, a scattering of goats grazing in a field; all of it as close as if they were observing it from the upper floor of a building.

Grace's hand tightens on Jody's in the final seconds. The plane is rattling and shaking but it doesn't seem particularly untoward. She hopes it's not a false sense of security, knowing they're this close to the ground.

Dylan is joyfully oblivious to their feelings. How wonderful, Jody thinks, to be five and fearless, savouring every moment of what she has come to regard as his second life.

"We're landing?" Grace asks.

"Yes, hun. Any second now."

*

Sam's ears are still blocked. He's opening and closing his mouth the way he was told to do; lots of swallowing hard, but it doesn't seem to be helping. He stops abruptly when he realises the smug couple have noticed: he must look a right idiot.

For most of the flight they've been acting as if he didn't exist, though he caught a few disapproving glances when he ate the food Jody passed to him – it was his idea to bring sandwiches from home rather than pay the rip-off prices on the plane. The Smugs, on the other hand, ordered the full in-flight breakfasts, a couple of brandies and even a small bottle of champagne. They'd given him a bit of a look at that point, too, and he wonders now if they took offence when he didn't ask what they were celebrating.

One of the reasons he hadn't was the fear they'd laugh and say, "What on earth do you mean? We always have champagne when we fly!" For all Sam knows, it might be normal. Certainly his mates like to boast about knocking back the pints at six in the morning before their flights to Kavos or Magaluf. It makes him almost glad his kids give him the excuse not to go on holidays like that.

Now he can feel the plane coming down, moving faster than before. He tenses up but the landing when it happens isn't much more than the jolt you get from driving over a pothole. An anti-climax, in a way – a bloody good one!

But just as he lets out a breath there's a ferocious roar from the engines and the plane seems to lurch as if caught on something – Sam pictures a tripwire stretched across the runway, snagging on the wheels. He grabs the arms of his seat and for a second goes rigid with terror. Talk about bad luck, to crash now—

"Don't panic!" says Mr Smug with a loud mocking laugh. "It's only the reverse thrust."

"To slow us down," his wife explains. "But I'm sure it would give you a fright, if you're not used to it."

"It's certainly done that. He looks petrified." Gripping his seat, he mimics a terror-stricken face, his mouth gaping open like that *Scream* mask. Sam offers a weak smile, pretending to find it funny, but he doubts if they're fooled.

He turns to Jody: she's holding hands with the kids, all three of them pressed back in their seats like they're on a fairground ride. The deceleration is pushing against Sam's chest, too, but he can feel it easing now.

They're down. They're safe. *Oh thank Christ for that...*

"Textbook landing, that," says Smug. "Couldn't have done it better myself."

"Oh, please, Trevor. You had one lesson, for your fiftieth, and that was in a light aircraft a fraction of the size."

Sam tunes them out and tries to relax. From now on, he tells himself, the holiday can only get better.

The plane has slowed to what feels like regular driving speed. It turns in a large circle, treating them to a distant flash of sea, just visible beyond a few acres of scrubland and low trees. The seatbelt sign is still lit but all through the cabin there's the rustle of movement, people gathering up their bags and phones and books. The buzz of conversation seems to rise – though maybe it's just his hearing returning to normal – and the atmosphere seems a lot more cheerful than it was a few minutes ago. Sam guesses they'll never know how close they came to disaster.

Once they're at a stop it's suddenly manic. Overhead lockers pop open and people are jumping up, leaning and stretching and jostling for their luggage, out of their seats and queuing for the exit before the doors have even opened. The cabin crew look on in amusement, like they're overseeing a bunch of chimps at feeding time.

Sam meets Jody's eye and smiles with gratitude and relief. He's been trying so hard to feel good about this holiday, because he knows all too well how much it cost and what it means to her. And he *is* excited about it, of course he is. But the scare they've just had is another reminder of how the love he feels for his kids, which he always assumed would be a light and giddy sensation, so often takes second place to *anxiety* about them, which has the exact opposite effect – it makes him feel heavy, weighed down and almost crushed by the knowledge that he can't protect them from all the dangers in the world. Sometimes he finds it impossible to crawl out from under that weight and appreciate the good things while they're happening, even though he knows he'll almost certainly look back one day and regret what he missed.

He has to move out of his seat because Trevor is impatient to reach the locker. Standing in the row behind Jody and the kids, Sam watches one of the stewards finally wrestle open the door, and with the first dazzling flash of sunlight comes a sudden premonition, a strange and terrible instinct that this holiday could turn out to be the worst mistake they've ever made.

*

They're on their feet, ready to go. The first lucky passengers file out, vanishing into the glare of the Adriatic afternoon. Jody has checked for the fourth or fifth time that they have everything when Dylan abruptly slumps back in his seat and bursts into tears.

"Darling, what's wrong?"

"I don... don wanna go out there."

"What?" A spluttering question, but she thinks of that image; how it appears the passengers are lining up to be swallowed by this furnace-bright sunshine. She crouches, caresses his head in soothing strokes and says, "Why not?"

"I-I-I don't knowww." He sounds so confused, so bewildered, that it makes her shiver. He's sobbing now, tears of real heartbreak that draw (mostly) sympathetic attention from the passengers around them.

Sam squeezes in beside her to offer encouragement; as a result they lose their place in

the queue. The older couple in Sam's row push past without a backwards glance.

"Come on, Dillo. This isn't like you. We're here now."

"And we're going to have a fantastic time, I promise." Jody looks to Sam for confirmation. Although he nods and smiles, she can't help wondering if his true feelings are more in line with his son's.

She takes Dylan by the hand and gently hauls him up. Sam backs out, inadvertently forcing a break in the stream of disembarking passengers. Before it can cause a ruckus Jody hustles the kids towards the exit, where the cabin crew are doling out good wishes. One ruffles Dylan's hair and says, "Cheer up, buster, you're on holiday now!"

Then they're out of the plane, squinting in the sudden brightness, and it's like they've stepped into a steam room.

"Now, can you feel that heat?" Jody asks. "Isn't it lovely?"

"Oh my God, it's boiling!" says Grace, who at eight is sounding more and more like a Kardashian. "I am going to get *such* a good tan!"

"Breathe the air, too. It's so different from home. What does it taste like to you?"

Dylan sniffs. "Petrol," he says, and there is laughter.

They descend the metal steps, parallel to another stream of passengers emerging from the rear of the plane. Three coaches are lined up at the bottom, waiting to ferry them to the terminal building. On the nearest one the couple from Sam's row have found seats and are staring triumphantly in their direction.

The coach doors shut just as they reach the bottom of the steps. Dylan sags, and Jody quickly points to the next coach in line. "We'll get that one, look. There's plenty of room."

"But I wanted this one..."

"They're all the same," Grace snaps, and Jody is determined not to get cross because she knows how weary they all are, dragged up at four in the morning so her dad could drive them to Gatwick for the seven o'clock flight. And now it's twenty past eleven, UK time – twelve-twenty, local time – and there's maybe another hour or two before they reach the hotel.

So it's with well-meant dishonesty that she says, "Not long to go," as they climb aboard the coach. "Think how nice it'll be, our first swim in the pool."

Dylan is willing to be convinced but Grace only shrugs. Sam seems lost in thought, casting fretful glances at the plane as if he's already worrying about the journey home.

Jody sighs. This is only the third time they've gone away as a family, and the last occasion – an ultra cheap voucher holiday at a caravan park – was not an experience she wishes to repeat. Five days on the Suffolk coast with torrential rain and winds that could strip the flesh from your bones. Both kids caught a vomiting bug, and because Sam vetoed paying for an upgrade they were stuck in a static home with all the comfort and appeal of an old sardine tin. Afterwards she vowed that the next break they took would be a proper holiday, even if that meant saving up for years.

And here we are, she thinks. *So could we all be a bit bloody happier?*

The coach fills to bursting point, then trundles across the apron to the terminal building, pulling up beside a covered walkway leading to a set of wide glass doors. A line of passengers from the previous coach are still waiting to go inside.

Reluctant to corral the children into yet another queue, they mill around for a few seconds while everyone else streams past. Jody fights off the usual irrational fear that you're missing out on something if you don't hurry. When her son yelps, she can't hide her exasperation.

"Dylan, *what?*" she says, but his hand has slipped from hers and he's running.

Neither of them has done anything to encourage it, but from somewhere their son, at the age of five, has developed a worrying interest in guns and weaponry. At first what he's racing towards looks to Sam like a shop dummy. Then he sees it's a soldier in uniform, standing completely still beneath a small awning that protects him from the sun. There's some sort of heavy-duty automatic rifle slung across his chest, as well as a pistol in a holster on his hip.

"Machine gun!" Dylan cries, and does a convincing impression of automatic fire: *czhczhczhczhczh*. The soldier twitches at the noise, his right hand seeming to creep towards the holster.

Sam quickly grabs his son, heaving him up to shoulder height. "Come on, buster."

"Daddy let me go wanna see the gun!"

"Nope. We've gotta go inside." He swings Dylan round and down, aware that the soldier is still tracking their movement. Now he notices several more troops dotted around the vast open space where theirs and two other jets are sitting. All the men are heavily armed.

Hurrying Dylan back towards his mother, Sam takes out his phone and brings up the camera function. His plan is to head off a tantrum with a couple of photos, but as he raises the phone there's a shout from behind him.

"Wouldn't do that, mate."

It's a young man in the queue, with the carefree look of a student about him: long hair and a scruffy beard, lots of beads and leather bracelets. His girlfriend has braids in her hair, and her arms and legs are already deeply tanned. They're probably only three or four years younger than Sam and Jody, and yet he's struck by the gulf that separates them: a whole great ocean of experience, hardship, responsibility.

"Won't hurt, will it?" Sam says, wondering if this skinny young man is trying to pick a fight with him.

"It's prohibited to photograph anything military," the girl explains. "They get really, like, uptight about it."

Jody and Grace are now in the queue behind the students. Sam joins them, Dylan whining in a half-hearted way beside him.

"It's a police state, is what it is," the student says. "One wrong move and you'll wake up in a cell with electrodes strapped to your b—"

"Ssh!" the girl hisses. "Not in front of their kids!"

She laughs apologetically. Sam realises he is still glaring at the couple, and Jody gives him a warning glance before she too breaks out a smile.

Sam relaxes. Or makes it look like he has, anyway.

"Cheers," he says.

*

It is the small boy he sees first. Borko has been in the control room for less than two minutes and already the airport director's grievances have bored him. Leaving his aide, Naji, to absorb the complaints he drifts to the vast bank of glass that encloses the control tower. The view from up here pleases him. He wishes sometimes he could banish the staff and enjoy it for a while, in tranquillity, alone.

Alas, the air traffic controllers are necessary for the smooth functioning of the airport, and the view would be nowhere near as rewarding if there were not planes to be observed, arriving and departing, with their human cargo.

His own beloved G650 is parked close to the terminal's VIP entrance, guarded by four officers from his elite unit. There are two large passenger aircraft on the apron, one British, one German. Another UK plane, from Manchester, is due to land within the next ten minutes.

Borko doesn't think he'll stick around to see it arrive.

The boy has run free of his parents, apparently drawn by the presence of an armed guard. Of course, firearms will seem unusual, exotic, to a British child. After watching for a moment, Borko snaps his fingers to signal that Naji's presence is required.

"Is the car ready?"

"You wish to leave now?"

"Imminently."

They take the stairs to the floor below, which is home to the airport's security centre. Naji relays the director's protest about the unscheduled landing, which occurred as a result of Borko's violent argument with one of his girlfriends, culminating in a departure from the capital more than an hour ahead of schedule.

"There could be implications, if the UK airline files a complaint—"

"We'll charm them, pay them off, something." Borko's attention is focused elsewhere, and Naji knows better than to persist.

There are four men sitting before the bank of monitors in the ops room. When Borko steps into view the men leap to their feet so rapidly that one of them tips his chair over. Nobody reacts to the noise it makes.

"Leave us," Naji barks in the guttural tones of his own language.

The senior man looks aghast. "But, sir..."

"Go on." Borko keeps his own voice gentle. "There will be no terrorist atrocity in the next two minutes, I guarantee it."

The room empties. Naji takes a seat at the nearest console. The airport boasts a state-of-the-art surveillance system supplied by a Texan company, Supercircuits. Extensive upgrades were installed at all four of the country's airports two years ago, prompted by rumours of a plot to fire a rocket propelled grenade at his father's jet. In the crackdown that followed almost a hundred suspected rebels were dealt with, effectively neutralising any threat to the regime. But the additional security apparatus has, of course, remained in place.

It takes less than twenty seconds for Borko to grow tired of his aide's clumsy attempts to operate the controls. He seizes Naji's chair and whisks it away from the desk, laughing as Naji cries out, limbs floundering. The aide is in his early fifties but sometimes seems like an old man, especially where technology is concerned. At thirty-one Borko, a seasoned player of games, has far more affinity with the buttons and wheels that manipulate the modern world.

He finds the cameras which cover passport control, scrolls through various images of the queuing passengers, zooming in on the stragglers from the Gatwick flight as they enter the building.

"There," he says in English, tapping the screen with a fingernail. "The boy, with his father." Tap tap. "This must be the mother – and a girl with them, too. What perfect symmetry."

"A family?" The question comes out as a gasp.

"They intrigue me. You see how young the parents look?" Borko chuckles. "Life has hit them at top speed, but has it taught them to cope? That is what we shall find out."

"Sir, if I may remind you of the risks. A family brings all manner of complications. And after the last time—"

"Naji, relax. You give me the same advice *every* year. 'Pushing my luck', that's how the English would describe it. But I listen to my instincts, which say that my luck isn't going to run out yet." Borko returns to gaze at the milling figures on screen. "Not this year. Not with them."

Sam finds it odd to greet the chill of an air-conditioned building with pleasure. For most of his life he's associated cold rooms with draughty single glazed windows, poor insulation and a lack of money for proper heating. Even in their current home, which has double glazing and a modern boiler (and costs them nine hundred quid a month in rent) the heating has to be rationed in winter: an hour in the morning, two hours at night.

"It's not too cold for Dylan?" he asks Sam.

She meets his eye. "Dylan is absolutely fine. Aren't you kiddo?"

The boy shrugs. "I'm hungry."

"We'll get something soon, once we're through this bit. We have to show the men our passports, first. Look."

They do look, which is probably a mistake. The queue is long and messy, splitting competitively into three channels at the security kiosks, where grim-faced men inspect the faces of the incoming tourists the same way Sam's brother eyes up strangers who stray into his local pub. Some travellers are waved through almost immediately; others are kept for two or three long minutes, causing the queue to grind to a halt. Trevor Smug and his wife are way ahead: their line seems to be racing towards the kiosk.

As they shuffle forward, struggling to keep the kids occupied, a rattle of applause catches Sam's attention. It's coming from a small crowd clustered round a doorway at the far side of the hall, far beyond the queues and the security desks. He glimpses two figures striding through the crowd like movie stars on a red carpet. He goes on tiptoe to get a better view, then realises he's drawn the attention of one of the men in the kiosks. A frown; almost anger. Sam quickly turns away. They remind him of cops, and he knows that the last thing you want is to catch their eye.

It occurs to him that all the staff are men, and many of them are vaguely similar in appearance: short and stocky, with black hair and dark stubble; lots of moustaches but no beards. It's a look that reminds him of TV clips from the olden days – dodgy adverts for aftershave and cigars. What's odd is how he can tell they're foreign. He's sure that somehow he would know straight away if an English bloke put on a uniform and stood in one of the kiosks. But how?

Further down the room there's a glass partition, and beyond that another sprawling queue of arrivals. Again he's pretty sure they're not British. Probably German or maybe Swedish, something like that: from one of those cold countries that make the crime shows Jody watches; all those bloody subtitles.

He wonders if it works the same in reverse. Do the staff here know he's English just from something in his face, or the way he moves?

He thinks they probably do. And will they also get a feel for his background, what social class he's from? Can they tell from a glance that he's from somewhere near the bottom?

In his view he's someone who has crawled on to the first rung of the ladder and now has the second rung in sight. But how far he moves on from there is anyone's guess. He and Jody are both twenty-six. After nearly ten years together they've got two kids, the eldest already at junior school, and yet they don't own a home and they have no chance of getting a mortgage or saving up for a deposit – not when there's the crippling rent to find every month.

So a holiday like this one – high season, all-inclusive – it feels like they're broadcasting to the world that there's loads of cash kicking about. And there isn't.

I virtually gave up smoking for this, he reminds himself. No new trainers for over a year. One Friday in three he didn't go to the pub after work (pissing off the other lads if they were owed a pint from last time) and Jody gave up even more than that, as well as working all the extra hours she could at the building society. No new clothes, cheap make-up rather than the nice stuff from Boots, walking instead of taking the bus. Even cutting back on food

in the weeks leading up to the final payment: bread and butter or cereal for Sam and Jody while the kids had their usual tea.

All that sacrifice, all that scrimping and saving (he's used the phrase many times but still has no idea what 'scrimping' means) and this time next week it'll be over, just like that. Two thousand, three hundred and fifty-eight pounds: gone.

It scares him, if he's honest. He doesn't see how this holiday can ever live up to their expectations, or justify all the money they've spent. Jody disagrees. She says it's about giving the kids an experience they'll be able to treasure for the rest of their lives. And as she keeps reminding him, Dylan, after what he's been through, needs this holiday more than any of them.

*

It takes another hour to clear passport control and retrieve their luggage from the baggage area, which by now has become a bear pit containing over a thousand weary, bad-tempered holidaymakers from four different flights: Gatwick, Manchester, Frankfurt and Moscow. At Jody's urging, Sam fights his way through the crush and returns with both of their cases, hard-shelled and brightly-coloured Samsonites borrowed from Jody's parents. They load them on to a trolley, endure a mini-tantrum from Dylan when he's prevented from clambering on top, and make their way through the customs area and into the arrivals hall.

Jody spots a couple of English girls in the pale blue colours of their tour operator, Bankes Travel. After a clipboard consultation they're directed to the main car park: coach number nine.

Outside, it's even hotter than it felt when they got off the plane. They stop on a wide marble concourse and Jody shields her eyes with her hand, surveying what seems to be row after row of buses. Her sunglasses are in her rucksack but she can't be bothered to retrieve them.

"There's Five," Sam murmurs, and then Grace yells, "Nine! Over there, look!"

This lifts their spirits until Dylan starts crying again. "Mummy, *I* wanted to find it!"

"You did, in a way. And you're helping now, by being such a good boy."

That doesn't work as well as Jody hopes, so she rummages in Sam's rucksack for the emergency stash of Haribo. Delight on the kids' faces at last.

"Let's get on the coach, then we'll have these."

Crossing one of the access roads, there's a bus swinging round towards them but they're looking right instead of left. Sam has stepped off the kerb when Grace grabs his arm and yells, "*Dad!*"

He jumps back, stands completely still until the bus has thundered past. There's a familiar blankness to his gaze: Sam's way of coping with stress is to withdraw into himself, and although he doesn't intend for his reaction to make everyone else miserable, it nearly always has that effect.

"All right?" she asks, while the look in her eyes is pleading with him not to give in to it.

Sam draws in a breath and lets it out slowly. Then he nods. Manages a grin for the kids. "You two had better teach me how to cross the road."

*

They trundle along to their coach. The driver, standing by the luggage bay, is short and stout, with grey hair and a moustache. He wants the name of their hotel but Sam's mind has gone blank. He has to call Jody back just as she's trying to herd the kids aboard.

"The Adriana Palace," she says, a bit tetchily.

“Sorry.” Sam starts to repeat it but the driver has already snatched up a case, which he slings on to the coach with an impatient sigh. Sam turns away, not so fussed now about giving him a tip. They brought fifty pounds in euros, rather than the country’s own currency, but it’s all in notes. *And no way is this bloke getting ten euros...*

He hurries the trolley back to the terminal building, this time taking excessive care when crossing the road. He feels disorientated, not just because the traffic’s on the wrong side, or because of the heat, or the unfamiliarity of his surroundings. It’s more to do with a suspicion that everyone else knows the rules – what to do, where to go, how to behave – as though there’s a set of instructions that was handed out to them but withheld from him.

The signs don’t help. He knew the country had its own language, of course, but he hadn’t imagined that the writing would look so different. It’s not even the same characters as in English; just a lot of meaningless squiggles. It brings back painful memories of all the years he struggled with reading, feeling like he was shut out of the world. There was talk of dyslexia but for some reason he wasn’t properly tested – he’d guess it was because his mum never got round to making the arrangements.

He still burns at the memory of the humiliation, having to attend remedial classes in the first year of secondary school. That’s when the truancy got out of hand and his life so nearly went off the rails, just as it had done with his brother a few years before. Whereas Kevin had been beyond help from the start, in Sam’s case his uncle had stepped in to save him. *Get yourself through school and you’ll have a chance to work for me. Bunk off and you’re on your own.* A stubborn little twat he might have been at eleven or twelve, but even he had recognised it was too good an opportunity to miss.

Now, as he jogs back to the coach, the air hot as popcorn in his lungs, he can’t help grinning at the thought that he could have been squashed flat by a bus before they’d even left the airport. Imagine *that* story doing the rounds in his local pub.

Jody and the children are at the back of the coach, close to the rear exit and what turns out to be a toilet – though there’s a crude sign on the door, written in English – NO USE PLEASE. That’s when Sam realises he’s dying for a piss. Knowing their luck, the kids will want to go soon, too.

He settles down next to Dylan and takes a fistful of Haribo to share, enjoying a good-natured argument about whether the milk bottles are nicer than the fat squashy ones. The driver’s got the engine running, thank God, so the air con is working.

Dylan is chewing on the gooey sweets while chattering away, thrilled to be on yet another form of transport. Sam feels guilty when his eyes keep drifting shut. Each time it’s a tougher challenge to open them again, and suddenly he’s in the middle of a weird kind of waking dream. They’re on the plane as it falls into the sea, but it doesn’t break apart. People gather at the windows, pointing at the brightly coloured fish as they sink slowly towards the bottom. Sam is sure they’ll all die once the oxygen runs out but no one else seems the slightest bit worried. *Must be cos they all got the instructions—*

Then Jody says, “Isn’t that your friends?”

Sam rubs his eyes, leans across to see where she’s looking and spots Trevor Smug and his wife wheeling a trolley in their direction.

“Oh, ff—”

“Ssh. They weren’t that bad, were they?”

Sam pulls a face. “Really up ’emselves.”

“Did they say where they’re staying?”

“I didn’t ask. Won’t be at ours, though. We’re only three star.”

Jody looks hurt. “Don’t say ‘only’. On TripAdvisor it’s voted the number three hotel in our resort.”

“I know. But a bloke like that’ll want number one.”

*

The smartly dressed couple climb aboard with a lot of huffing and puffing, making it plain to everyone within earshot that they're furious about the 'disgraceful inefficiency' of the airport. Both of them notice Sam and his family but pretend they haven't, dropping their gaze and shuffling into the nearest available seats. Jody wonders if they resent the fact that she and Sam made it on to the coach ahead of them, despite being a long way back in the passport queue.

Thankfully a Bankes rep turns up and announces, to a few sarcastic cheers, that their departure is imminent. She has a nice voice, friendly and enthusiastic, with a warm Brummie accent. She runs through a quick headcount, ticking names off her list, then gives the driver a thumbs up through the window. He slams the luggage doors, settles himself behind the wheel and eases the coach on to the access road.

Before settling back, Jody conducts a quick 'family assessment'. Grace has her head against the window and is almost dozing. Sam, bless him, has come back to life and is earnestly discussing tanks with Dylan. Now Jody can stare straight ahead and focus on nothing...

Except the rep is coming along the aisle, summoned by the middle-aged grumps. She's about twenty, pretty in an over-made-up way (which is probably a requirement of the job). Long blonde hair in a side parting, which swirls as she turns her head, resting in a spray on her shoulder. She's wearing the Bankes uniform of a garish patterned shirt (red, white and blue anchors) and a plain blue pencil skirt; nothing particularly fashionable, but close-fitting enough to see that she has a *very* good body.

It can't have escaped Sam's attention, either, and yet he doesn't seem to give the woman more than the briefest of glances.

The middle-aged couple start to protest about the time it took to retrieve their luggage. The man appears to be talking directly to the rep's chest. She seems well aware of this, leaning closer as if to make it easier for him to perv. Within seconds he's nodding and smiling, apologies accepted, thank you for listening, not your fault at all, blah blah blah...

Jody sighs, hoping Sam is right about their choice of hotel.

*

Sam has a feeling he's tempted fate. The five star hotel is their first stop, about fifteen minutes in, and the only people to disembark are two elderly women in large sunhats. The Smugs' well-padded arses stay firmly on their seats.

"Is this ours, Dad?" Dylan asks as they pull up.

"Not yet."

"Ohhh. I wanna get off."

"I know. So do I."

Another ten minutes till the next stop, then two more in quick succession, by which time there are only three groups left on the coach, including the Smugs and Sam and Jody.

"Okay," says the rep, "Adriana Palace is next, and then the Sunrise is our last drop-off today."

Jody beams at him. "Us next, thank God."

The pain in Sam's bladder has eased, to the point where he wonders if the urine has gone somewhere else. Didn't someone once tell him your body can sweat it out through your pores if you hold it in for too long? He's tempted to sniff his armpits to check, but knows Jody will give him hell if she catches him at it.

Anyway, he's thankful for the silence while they're driving, other than some ropey dance music tape on the driver's sound system. The rep's introduction on the first part of the journey went on a bit, and it was a struggle to stop Dylan from talking over her.

They've seen a fair amount of the island en route to the hotel, and if he's honest he isn't sure what to think. It's sixty kilometres end to end and fifteen kilometres at the widest point, apparently, the second largest of some twenty odd islands in a – here the rep used a word that sounded like 'archie-pele-go', then giggled and admitted that she could never pronounce it properly.

The part they're in is the south-west corner, which has some of the best beaches and the larger resorts. The island is famous for its limestone, as well as olive and fig trees. Other than that it's mostly the scrubland he noticed as the plane came down. Small trees and rocks, a lot of mud and dust: nothing like the rich greens and rolling hills of Sussex.

Still, it's the beaches that matter. And the climate. Gabby jokingly agreed to guarantee them temperatures of 25 to 30 degrees over the next week, no rain unless they're really unlucky – “Even then it's likely to be a quick thunderstorm at night; the lightning's *incredible* here sometimes!”

There's a bit of history, stuff like when the island was first settled, a couple of ancient buildings that they might be interested in visiting – *not us, thanks* – and then he has to focus on keeping Dylan distracted, pointing out of the window at the rocky landscape and wondering if there could be any soldiers hiding out there.

“Are there, Dad?”

“Might be. This is the kind of place they use for training.”

“Oh, wow!” Dylan gets up on his knees, nose pressed against the glass. Jody goes to say something but Sam shakes his head. He's just bought them some peace and quiet – not to be sniffed at, now the Haribos have gone.

*

Jody's first impression of the hotel is far from encouraging. After driving through an orchard of sickly-looking trees, they see a sign for the Adriana Palace and take a sharp right turn into the approach road. The grounds are fenced off with barbed wire, enclosing yet more scrubland. They pass a small dilapidated building that resembles a lock-up garage. The area around it is strewn with discarded equipment: rusting patio umbrellas and broken sun loungers; something that looks like a generator; a coil of red hose pipe like a sleeping snake.

They climb over a slight ridge and the main building comes into sight. Five storeys high, dull grey in colour, at first it reminds Jody of a block of council flats. Her whole body seems to crumple with disappointment, not just for herself but because she's anticipating how Sam will react, and picturing the kids in tears, heartbroken at enduring such a long journey, only to end up with... this. The caravan park all over again.

The rep, who urged them to call her 'Gabby', is leaning forward in her seat, murmuring to the driver. Jody wonders how the woman will react if they refuse to get off the coach. *No, this isn't good enough. We paid a lot of money and we deserve something better.*

Jody tries to imagine saying the words and then standing by them, no matter what. If a complaint is needed, she knows she will be the one to make it. Sam has no stomach for dealing with authority, even in the form of a holiday rep barely out of her teens.

Earlier, when Gabby invited questions at the end of her introduction, there was some general grumbling about the chaos in baggage reclaim. Then someone asked about the landing. Gabby didn't seem to understand the question. While she was frowning another passenger, with a strong Lancashire accent, chipped in: “No problems with our flight.”

“This was from Gatwick,” the first man said. “Third year running we've come here, and

today we're all set to land when the plane suddenly swerves and goes round to the far end of the runway. I think it was because a private jet had come past and got permission to land before us."

"Overtook you, like?" the Lancastrian joked, and someone else muttered, "Boy racers!"

Gabby continued to look baffled. "I'm sure there was never any danger, but I'll see if I can find out any more about it..." The way she trailed off made Jody think she wouldn't be trying too hard.

Now, sitting up straight and breathing deeply, Jody summons the strength for what might be a heated dispute. Then a gasp from her daughter: "I saw the pool!"

"What?"

"Between the buildings. It looks really nice!"

The coach slows to a crawl for the last few metres. There's a layby directly outside the entrance, next to a wide pavement. Hanging baskets offer a splash of colour, and there are potted palm trees spaced at intervals like a guard of honour, leading to a set of double glass doors. Jody can see movement within the lobby: a waiter carrying drinks on a tray. She spots a long bar glinting with optics, comfortable sofas and attractive lighting, and decides not to say anything, at least until they've had a look around.

As the coach draws up with a wheezy sigh, the middle aged couple are already on their feet, their flight cases blocking the aisle. The rep ticks them off the list, then beams at Jody as she leads Grace forward.

"Happy holidays! Don't forget there'll be a welcome meeting this evening."

"Okay. Thanks." Jody feels she should ask what the procedure is, if they should decide the hotel's not up to standard, but she's so grateful just to be here that the words don't come.

Once they've assembled on the pavement, Sam heads round to fetch the cases. Dylan wants to go with him and has to be restrained, whereupon he begins to cry. The middle-aged woman gives him a wincing smile. Her husband appears, wheeling his cases, and sneaks a glance at Jody's body. Sam comes up behind them, wearing a sheepish grin meant only for her: *Look who we've been lumbered with.*

As the coach moves away, the woman looks from her husband to Jody as she says, "All set? Got all your stuff?"

It's an odd question, as if they're together in a single group and the woman is treating her like a child, even though Jody has children herself. But she makes the effort to nod, and says cheerily, "Yes, thank you!" After all, it's not this woman's fault that she and Sam had kids too young, or that they still react badly to any suggestion that they can't cope. Jody is well aware that they're both far too prickly about it, the result of feeling for years that they have been unfairly judged, looked down on, for the bad luck and mistakes of their youth.

*

Right this second Sam doesn't care what the hotel's like – he just wants to get to their room and crash out for a while – but first there's the check-in to survive.

Trevor nods in the direction of the departing coach. "Didn't tip him, I hope?" Sam shakes his head but Trevor carries on complaining: "Outrageous, the way everyone expects something for nothing these days."

Sam hesitates at the entrance, only to have Trevor wave him through. Straight away he sees that the reception desk is busy, with only one of the three members of staff free to deal with them. Ironically, this is one occasion when Sam would have preferred to let Trevor go first and watch what he does; now he has no choice but to approach the desk and introduce himself.

He's dreading the thought that the staff will speak no English, or that their accents will

be too strong for Sam to understand. But as it turns out, the young man who greets him has very good English. He's young, dark-haired, and looks like he might well be a different nationality: Italian, perhaps.

There's a form to fill in. Sam fights off his usual panic, thankful that it's all pretty simple stuff: name, address, nationality. He puts 'English', then adds 'British' as well. He can never remember which one you're supposed to use.

There's a bit of confusion when the man gestures to Jody and refers to her as "Mrs Berry." Sam has to explain that she's Jody *Lamb*, not Berry, and the man turns away to check the booking details on a computer. Feeling vaguely ashamed, as if he's been caught trying to deceive them, Sam wants to explain why they're still not married. It's partly the expense of a wedding when there are so many other priorities, partly a ridiculous problem over surnames. She doesn't like how 'Jody Berry' sounds, and 'Jody Lamb-Berry' is even worse: *A very peculiar flavour of jam*, as she's often joked.

He decides that the hotel guy won't care about the reason, then notices that the female receptionist is wearing a headscarf. He has no idea what the religion is here. Will they be told they can't share a room because they're not married?

The man doesn't say anything about that, but there's another worry when he asks to take their passports. Luckily they're in Jody's handbag, meaning Sam has to ask for them. Trevor's within earshot and doesn't react, so Sam has to assume it's not some kind of scam. He hands them over and is told they'll be kept safe until they check out.

A couple more minutes and it's done. Each of them has a white plastic wristband fitted: proof that they're entitled to the all-inclusive package. Then Sam is given tokens to exchange for beach towels, as well as two plastic key cards which not only open the door but also operate the electricity in the room. Refusing an offer of assistance – thinking of the lack of change for tips – he listens to the brief directions and is confident he can find his way unaided.

A quick nod at Trevor, who by now looks impatient because the other reception staff are still busy, then Sam and Jody take a case each, and a child each, and head across the lobby and through another set of double doors which take them outside. Another blast of that stunning heat, like someone's turned a blowtorch in their direction. Feels good, though, now he's adjusted to it.

This side of the hotel is like another world; everything nicely laid out, lots of well-watered grass and flowers. A network of pale stone paths run through the gardens, leading to a pool and a large patio area filled with sun loungers, paired off beneath huge white umbrellas. There's a pool bar with a thatched bamboo roof, half a dozen people sitting on stools and sipping drinks. It's surprisingly quiet, except for the distant thump of disco music from somewhere else in the complex.

As they trundle the cases along the path, Sam feels the hairs prickling on the back of his neck. Several people have glanced up from their sun loungers; one or two in the pool are turning in their direction, as well.

"We're getting eyeballed," he says, feeling sweat pour from his face; he's never liked being centre of attention. In his experience, coming to someone's notice usually means trouble.

But Jody only laughs. "Because we're the newbies, all pale and sickly. A few days and we'll be doing it too, checking out the latest arrivals. Staring in pity at the leavers, too. That's a *real* walk of shame!"

Dylan can hardly contain his eagerness to explore, so they end up making all sorts of promises just to hurry him past the pool and into a separate building, Block B. Their room is on the ground floor, along a wide corridor with tiled floors and unglazed windows. The air feels amazingly cool in here, the walls throwing clever shadows that must prevent the heat

from building up.

They file past four or five identical solid doors, then stop outside room 109. They're here at last, at the end of a long, hard journey – planning it, saving for it, then the travelling itself – and Sam is nervous. This is make-or-break time. *Two-and-a-half grand.*

He fumbles with the card but finally has it; the door opens with a click. It's heavy, a fire door. He pushes it open, grunting with the effort. The room is dark inside, warm and stuffy. Sam leaves the cases outside and walks in, as if he needs to make sure it's safe for his family.

Shadows loom. There's a man in the corner, completely still—

What the fuck?

"Here," Jody calls. He missed the slot by the door. She places her own card into it and a couple of lights come on. The man who just scared the shit out of him turns out to be an old-fashioned standing lamp. Sam laughs, feeling like a fool.

The room is gloomy because the blinds are shut. There's a low grinding noise and he feels the air shift and stir as the aircon gets to work. Now he can see the room clearly, his first thought is that it's a mistake: this can't be theirs.

It's larger than some of the flats they rented in the early days, as teenage parents, and the furniture and decoration are a hell of a lot nicer. Tiled floors, and deep maroon walls with a kind of gold flecked pattern where a dado rail would be. Pale oak effect furniture, but solid looking: not self-assembled.

There's a big double bed with a silky cream-coloured bedspread, and some kind of fancy arrangement of towels lying on it, shaped to look like a swan. A couple of chairs and a table, a low unit with a small TV, then a wide open space and a sort of alcove off to the side, with two single beds for the kids. There's even curtains to pull across for some privacy.

He glances at Jody, who pinches her nostrils together. For a second she won't look in his direction. Holding back tears, he realises.

"So, kids," he says, "what do you reckon?"

"It's amazing!" Grace inspects the alcove and points to the right hand bed. "I'll have that one."

Dylan immediately flings himself on that bed. "I want it!"

"Oh, okay. I'll have this one, then." Grace turns and sneaks a sly look at her parents: *Outwitted!*

Jody chuckles. Her hand goes out to Sam, her fingers curling between his. He's still struggling to find the word that describes how he feels, but settles on *delight*. It's a sensation like being wrapped in a thick, warm towel. He's giddy, a bit drunk, and his feet might be floating a few centimetres above the floor. But his thinking, all of a sudden, is clear and straightforward.

They worked bloody hard to save for this holiday. It cost them a shedload of money; more than they could afford, to be honest. But now it's done, it's paid for, and they're here. Whether they enjoy it or not is pretty much in their own hands – so either he goes on fretting, ruining it for himself and probably for his family as well. Or else he puts all the worries aside and focuses on having a good time.

He turns towards Jody and pulls her tightly into his arms. When they're squashed up together he murmurs into her ear: "Sorry I've been such a dick. You were right."

"Was I?"

"Yeah. We need this, don't we? A proper break."

He kisses her on the cheek, moves back a little and kisses her on the lips. The kids are peeking out of the alcove; for a moment he sees this embrace through their eyes and is aware that he doesn't have one single memory of his own mum and dad like this: cuddling, laughing, showing affection for each other. It's a nice reminder that, when it comes to

personal responsibility, Sam is far ahead of them, right up near the top of the ladder.

*

There's a ton of stuff to do – unpacking and sorting things out – but when Dylan insists they should go straight to the pool, Jody can't find it in her heart to disagree.

The blinds have been opened, revealing a wide glass door that slides open on to a small patio area, divided from its neighbours by a low wall on each side. There's a table and two chairs, and a stunning view across the manicured gardens to the nearest of the three pools, less than fifty metres away.

After Sam's had a pee, Jody investigates the en suite bathroom. It doesn't actually have a bath; just a complicated-looking shower. But the room is large and clean, with big white towels for them all, and plenty of space in the cabinet for their toiletries.

Jody changes into her new bikini, excited but also apprehensive about how she'll compare to everyone else around the pool. At least they all have plenty of new clothes, courtesy of her mum. A few weeks ago she announced that she'd been saving up, secretly, on Jody's behalf. Two hundred pounds, which she, her mum and Grace had blown in Primark, New Look and TK Maxx during a fantastic girls' day out in Crawley, complete with lunch at Pizza Express.

She hadn't told Sam about the windfall until afterwards. He'd been oddly subdued by the news, not ungrateful or angry, not going on about all the practical things they could have bought with the money. Instead he'd just sunk into one of his silences for a couple of days.

But he wolf whistles when she emerges from the bathroom, which almost makes her blush.

“Don't. Is it all right?”

“You look great.”

“You really do, Mum,” Grace adds, as if she already knows that a partner's verdict can't be taken at face value.

“My thighs, though...”

Sam shakes his head. “Don't be silly.”

His turn in the bathroom. He changes into a pair of swimming shorts and a Brighton and Hove Albion shirt. She'd prefer him to wear one of his new tops but it's not something to make a fuss about: he'll be removing it soon enough, she hopes. At twenty-six Sam still has quite a narrow, boyish frame, but his job as a painter and decorator has given him good muscle tone. The sight of his pale spindly legs makes her smile, though – as does the fact that he's left his socks on.

He bends over and hooks a sock with his thumb, flicking it off in her direction while giving her a knowing look. *Later*, he's saying, and the thought makes her stomach muscles clench for a second.

I'll ask him tonight, when we're in bed.

Before they head out, she insists on slathering them with sun cream. “Got to get into the habit,” she tells them. “No one's going home burnt, and that's a promise.”

It's nearly three o'clock when they lock up the room and step outside. They collect swimming towels from a cabin by the pool, then find a group of unclaimed sun loungers and make camp beneath a couple of umbrellas. Sam accompanies the kids to the pool while Jody adjusts the lounge to sit up and watch them.

She lets out a brisk sigh, as if to say, *Right, what's next?* And realises the answer is: *Nothing*. After all the packing and preparing, it's a difficult transition to make. For weeks she's been carrying a mental checklist inside her head, and now it's complete. There is literally nothing she has to do. Nothing but relax.

That thought brings a silly tremor of panic. Can she still remember how?

*

Sam's never been one for swimming, although he and Jody regularly take the kids to the local pool. Grace is already a confident swimmer, and Dylan is fearless even when he's floundering. To stay afloat he kicks and thrashes, never minding if his head goes under and he catches a mouthful of water. He just spits it out, laughs, and starts again.

From the safety of the pool, with only his head exposed, Sam is able to take a look at his surroundings. He's keen to study his fellow holidaymakers, hoping for pointers as to how he and Jody can blend in. There seems to be quite a mixed bag: young couples and family groups and a few older people – fifties or sixties, maybe, but none older than that. No one's wearing much, which adds to the challenge of guessing nationalities. What he takes to be the Germans (maybe Danish or Swedish as well) seem more evenly tanned, with better skin. The men have longer hair and wear rings and necklaces and dodgy sandals, while the women are more likely to be fit – *elegant*, perhaps, is a better word, even when they're only wearing a few scraps of fabric.

The Brits, on the whole, are paler, flabbier, and have far more tattoos – his own are pretty understated compared to some – although there's one guy with a massive white gut, a shaved head and ink all over his arms and chest who, when he calls to his wife at the bar, turns out to be Russian or something. Sam had him down as a solid Essex geezer.

Lots of people are smoking, and the drifting aroma of tobacco makes him dizzy with longing. He set out to kick the habit more than two years ago, and since then he's only lapsed on a handful of occasions, but it's going to be much harder to resist temptation in a country where smoking isn't banned – or even disapproved of, by the look of it.

The good thing is that there's no reason to think he or his family will stand out from the crowd. All they need is a little time to find their way around, learn how things are done, and they'll be fine.

On that score, once he's got out and towelled off, and the kids have announced that they're starving, it's Sam who volunteers to investigate what's on offer at the pool bar. He's happy to go alone but they all tag along, curious to experience what all-inclusive really means.

The bar is staffed by two young guys, maybe Arabic or something. There are half a dozen stools, only a couple of them occupied, one by a man who's ordered a load of complicated looking cocktails and is knocking back a beer while he waits.

At one end there's a glass cabinet with fresh fruit, pastries and various rolls, ham and cheese and the like, wrapped in cellophane. There's also a big chest freezer with three different flavours of ice cream. And it's self-service, which first Grace and then Dylan cotton on to with broad smiles.

“So we can get ice cream whenever we want?”

Jody shakes her head. “Only when Dad or I agree. Otherwise you'll burst.” She blows out her cheeks to show them what she means, then negotiates a deal where they can have ice cream now, as long as they choose a roll and some fruit to eat afterwards. “Back to front, but what the hell?” she says to Sam.

While they're sorting the food, he orders drinks. Out of habit he reaches into his pocket, then remembers and lifts his wristband into view, although the barman seems uninterested. Even so, Sam can't help patting the empty pocket of his swimming shorts, still a bit doubtful that he'll be given the drinks and not asked for money in return.

But that's what happens, and it's weird in a nice way. Sam notices a dish on the bar, full of coins, and makes a note to change some of those euros so they can tip these guys in

future. He's given a tray for the drinks – Coke and Fanta, beer and a white wine, plus a couple of bottles of water – and they return to their sunbeds and enjoy a happy little picnic.

Afterwards Jody makes them sit and play games for ten minutes, then she agrees to take them in the pool. Sam stays where he is, feeling nicely full and lazy. He admires Jody's body as she walks across the paved area around the pool. Not a bad figure at all for a mother of two.

That thought causes a stirring, so he switches his attention to a large group of people wandering back from the direction of the restaurant. They settle down on the far side of the pool, chatting and laughing. He counts four couples and eight or nine kids. It makes him think of his own extended family, and how they'd never come away together like this – not even if someone won big on the lottery.

Sam is one of seven kids, including three half-siblings, ranging in age from nineteen to nearly forty. He's uncle to five more kids, and there are various step-parents and cousins, though the only ones he feels close to are his Uncle Paul and Aunt Steph, and their girls, Sarah and Joanna. That's who he'd bring with him, if they wanted to come, and with his eyes shut and the sun warming his body he drifts into a pleasant daydream where his sudden good fortune puts him in a position to repay the generosity Paul and Steph showed to him. He pictures their faces when he announces the win, says he's treating them all to a holiday: anywhere they want to go, money no object.

Trouble is, Sarah's just taken herself off for a gap year in Africa and plans to start a law degree next year, while Joanna is in the army, not long returned from Cyprus, and probably wouldn't want to soak up any more sun for a while. That causes his daydream to stutter a little, but he can't take it personally: when kids nowadays get such amazing opportunities, it would be crazy not to take them...

Kids nowadays, he thinks ruefully. As though he's forty years old rather than twenty-six.

*

Almost without noticing, Jody rediscovers her ability to relax. Suddenly two hours have passed, and she decides that this is enough exposure to the sun for the first day. Back to the room for a nap, she tells them all, and no one protests – although that sly chancer Dylan wangles another ice cream out of them first.

Her gut reaction is to refuse, but when she opens her mouth she hears herself saying, "Go on, then." Because that's the point of holidays, isn't it? That's what she hopes to lay down in their memories to treasure for years to come. The treats. The not saying no.

In the room, she persuades the kids to sit on their beds, where they can eat their ice cream and read the comics they were allowed to buy at Gatwick. She makes a start on the unpacking, kneeling beside the open cases on the cool tiled floor. Sam helps, obediently placing clothes and toiletries in the homes she allocates for them.

It takes a while to register how quiet the kids have become. They exchange a glance, both incredulous, then Sam tiptoes to the alcove and has a look round. He waves her over. Judy slips her arm round his waist as they stand for a moment in silence, cherishing the sight of the children zonked out on their beds, limbs sprawling, mouths open, Dylan snoring gently, Grace faintly smiling in her sleep.

"Beautiful," Jody whispers, and Sam nods and whispers back: "Thank you."

"What for?"

"This," he says, and kisses her, and carefully they draw the curtain across the alcove and close the blinds before creeping between the half-empty cases, discarding their clothes as they go, and slip into the spacious double bed.

“We can’t,” Jody hisses. “Can we?”

Sam shrugs. “Just a cuddle.”

Jody’s full-throated laugh nearly ruins it. She has to clamp a hand over her mouth. They push off the top covers, leaving only a sheet, wriggle down beneath it and embrace. The mattress feels cool for a few blissful seconds; their bodies are warm and quickly grow warmer, their touch soft then softer – the sun has already heightened the sensitivity of their skin, so all that’s needed now is the lightest of caresses. They make love with hands and mouths, fingers and lips, with slow and slippery teasing, tasting salt and sun cream, alcohol and chlorine, and the feel beneath their fingertips is of silk, the wetness silky and hot, their movements slow and smooth, gliding, gripping, unbearable, unstoppable, gazes locked in silence, fingers pressing hot and harder, fierce and fast, faster; gasping: finished.

They sleep.

*

Until Sam jerks awake. The room is unfamiliar, dark but with the threat of a ferocious brightness straining to reach them. He senses a presence close by, a man watching from the corner. Then remembers the floor lamp and with that he knows exactly where he is and how he came to fall asleep. It probably isn’t very late, hence the sunlight beyond the—

“Shit.”

Jody stirs. A sleepy smile, before she blinks rapidly a few times and says, “The welcome meeting!”

“Yeah.” He finds his phone and checks the display. “It’s ten to six.”

“The meeting’s at six.” She sits up too quickly, then sinks back, moaning. He nestles against her.

“Do we really have to go?”

“We ought to, if we’re going to make the most of this holiday.”

Sam says nothing. He feels wrecked, and would dearly love just to lie here and drift for a while. But he can’t later complain that he’s missing out on information if he doesn’t bother to turn up for the meeting.

They dress quickly. Sam feels guilty about waking the kids, until he pulls back the curtain and finds Grace sitting up, reading a *Rainbow Fairies* book, while Dylan is lying on his back, staring at the ceiling as if he’s busy thinking deep thoughts about life and the universe.

When told that they have to go somewhere, there’s far less complaining than there would be at home. Five minutes of musical chairs in the bathroom and they’re ready to leave.

The heat and brightness are dazzling after the cool dim cave of their bedroom, but it helps to rouse them. Walking briskly, they retrace their route to reception, and this time no one around the pool gives them a second glance.

Outside the main building, on a patch of shaded grass, a small group of children are learning to juggle with beanbags. They’re in the care of two young women in bright red t-shirts – part of the holiday company’s “animation” team.

“Something else we’ve got to find out about,” Jody says.

They hurry through the glass doors and into the main lounge. The welcome meeting is underway in the far corner. A dozen or so people sit at a cluster of tables, listening to a rep who’s standing side-on from them, holding up a plastic folder bearing the Bankes logo. She turns slightly and they see that it’s Gabby, from the coach.

Jody lets out a tiny snort. Sam knows the sound means something but he isn’t sure what.

A second later the rep sees them and breaks into a smile, meeting Sam’s gaze for a long

second. She looks ridiculously pleased to see him, and he can't help but experience a little thrill. He has to remind himself that her wages probably depend on how many people show up for these talks. Jody has already warned him that the reps push you to sign up for their expensive trips, from which the holiday company stands to make a lot of money.

Well, not from us, they won't. Sorry, Gabby.

*

To Jody, the look on the rep's face seems to be one of relief. Which is odd, given that there's already a respectable turn-out. The middle-aged couple from the plane are among the group, but keep their gazes fixed on their laps.

Gabby, however, interrupts her spiel to say hello, then checks her folder. "What name is it again?"

"Sam Berry and Jody Lamb," Sam tells her. Gabby ticks their names off a list, then invites them to have a drink and get comfortable. She hugs the folder to her chest, which to Jody seems like poor body language for a rep – until she realises it's to prevent people from staring at her chest.

Instinctively Sam selects a table at the back of the gathering. It's also close to the tray of drinks: either white wine or orange juice. He picks up juices for the kids, nothing for himself. Jody considers the wine, then she too opts for juice.

She feels oddly ill at ease as she sits down; grimy from the heat and disorientated from sleeping so unexpectedly. They also had sex – of a sort – and she wonders suddenly if they might smell. She put on clean underwear and a simple blue t-shirt dress, but Sam is wearing the same baggy shorts and Albion shirt from earlier.

With a clutch of panic she glances at the middle-aged couple just as the man looks up and stares straight at her. Jody feels her face burning, and turns to focus with exaggerated concentration on whatever it is that Gabby's telling them.

Ironically, it's advice on how to avoid a burnt face – and a burnt everything else. From the dangers of too much sun she moves on to describe the risks and remedies of mosquito bites, jellyfish stings and what she refers to as "gippy tummies". The tap water here is perfectly fine, but she recommends sticking to bottled water, to avoid the unfamiliar minerals that might trouble a delicate stomach.

"So, welcome, once again, to the beautiful island of Sekliw." She pronounces it 'Sekley'. "In a minute I'll tell you about some of the brilliant places you can visit, but first a bit more about the island itself. There are six main settlements, all on the coast, two each on the east, the west and here, near to where we are, on the south."

From a group of two couples with several children between them, a bald man with a Yorkshire accent says, "What about the north?" The other man in their group, pretending to sound aggrieved, says, "Yeah. Don't forget the north!"

Gabby gives them an indulgent smile. "I'd never do that, guys! No, the north of the island is much less developed than the rest. Apart from one or two private estates, there's a nature reserve that might one day be turned in to a major tourist attraction."

More than half of the island, they're told, is covered in forests of oak and pine, as well as olive groves and vineyards. You can hire jeeps or mountain bikes to explore the interior, but most leisure activity takes place on the coast. She runs through the official excursions, which include jet skiing, scuba diving, island tours, dolphin hunting – "so amazing to photograph" – and some speedboat rides.

"And they're all safe, are they?" someone asks.

"Absolutely, they are. Bankes Travel take health and safety very seriously."

"But wasn't there a crash last year? Quite a nasty one."

Gabby seems irritated but hides it quickly. “I know the incident you’re talking about – a tragic collision between a speedboat and a fishing vessel. But on that occasion the boat was a private charter, and the people on board had been drinking and taking, uh, illegal substances. All our trips are run by qualified crew.” She gives them a sombre look. “That’s one of the reasons why I’d recommend you arrange your excursions through Bankes. Some of the local operators don’t always maintain the same standards of safety.”

“A damn sight cheaper, though,” a woman mutters. Gabby pretends not to hear.

A hand goes up. “What about terrorism? Haven’t there been lots of protests against the government?”

Again the rep looks uneasy. “On the mainland, yes. There have been a few... incidents, but I’m afraid that’s the same almost anywhere nowadays. Here on the islands it’s a very different way of life. Very peaceful. In fact, Sekliw is a particular favourite of the president’s son. You can’t get a better recommendation than that, now can you?” She giggles, switching it off when no one else looks amused.

“But seriously, guys, the worst things you have to worry about are, like I say, self-inflicted: too long in the sun, overdoing the food and drink, etcetera.”

She raises the folder again. “So, in here I have the brochures for all our excursions. If you want you can book them up right now – which I’d actually recommend because some of them fill up very quickly – and now, there’s one more thing...” She surveys the group and smiles widely, as if about to unveil a wonderful surprise. “I don’t know how many of you have had a chance to look at the information pack in your room, but this week there’s a very special prize draw to attend a VIP champagne reception at the hotel Conchis.”

Another pause. She’s clearly expecting a reaction, and in fact there are a few *oohs* and *aahs* at the mention of the Conchis. For those who don’t know, Gabby explains that this is the most exclusive hotel on the island, a favourite with the jetset, including movie stars, music icons and royalty. The reception takes place on Thursday afternoon and offers the winners a chance to sample the delights that the hotel has to offer.

“Just by attending the welcome meeting and taking time to learn more about what’s on offer, Bankes Travel and the Ariana Palace thank you by entering your names into the draw, which takes place tomorrow—”

“What if we’re in a group?” asks the bald Yorkshireman. “We’re here with my brother and his wife.”

Gabby looks regretful. “It’s limited to the one family only. But don’t forget that your party has several rooms, so you get more than one entry into the draw.”

“Guess we’ll have to scrap over who goes, then,” his brother says, to general laughter.

*

Gabby runs through a few more details, including when and how she’ll contact them about their return journey. This causes some good-natured groans. She hands out the brochures – booking form included – and thanks them for listening. A couple of people clap, just the once, and stop. Gabby gives an embarrassed smile. For a second she’s staring at Sam again, but her gaze is strangely unreadable. Conscious of Jody turning in his direction, he quickly looks away.

She shows him the brochure. “I know I said these are usually overpriced, but the boat trip sounds nice.”

Sam pulls a face. His only experience of boats was a day-trip to Dieppe when he was fourteen. He was violently sick on the ferry – though, to be fair, cider played a part in that.

Grace is leaning in to look. “I’d *love* to see dolphins. Can we do it? *Please?*”

“On a boat? Yeah!” Dylan’s got a look in his eyes that guarantees tears and trouble if

they don't agree.

"How much?" Sam says, wishing that just once this wasn't the question he had to ask before any other.

"Twenty euros a head." And as he's whistling, quietly, Jody adds, "But I think it's less for the kids."

They stare at each other for a second: their telepathy is pretty finely tuned when it comes to money. Sam's problem is that he'd rather die than look poor in front of other people – not to mention in front of the kids. If he's put on the spot in any way regarding the price he'll sign up just to avoid the embarrassment.

He can sense Gabby monitoring them, probably hungry for her commission. Sure enough, she pounces a moment later. "Hi, there, guys. So glad you made it to the meeting. Anything you fancy?"

To Sam's ears it isn't said with any sense of double meaning, but Jody's expression goes cold.

"Yeah, the boat trip, maybe." With Jody bristling, Sam is reluctant to meet Gabby's eye, but equally worried about looking at her body. He ends up addressing the floor. "With the dolphins?"

"It says there's a reduced price for children," Jody cuts in.

"Half-price, although for this handsome feller," – a cheeky wink at Dylan – "there won't be any charge."

"Oh, right. So, fifty quid – sorry, euros – in all?" Sam says. Before Jody can interrupt he nods decisively and says, "Yeah, we'll do that one, then."

"Brilliant. That's for Friday, yeah?" For a second it's as though a shadow's crossed her face; then the smile returns. A pen is magicked up. "Best do the form now. How are you paying?"

"Credit card," Jody says.

Now it's Sam's turn to look unhappy. They've only had the card a couple of years, and it's rarely used. Unless it's a life or death emergency, Sam would prefer to go without until they've saved the money. One of his cousins owed more than thirty grand by the time he went to prison, and he'd never borrowed more than a couple of thousand to begin with.

But on this occasion he can see her point. It would be silly to wipe out all the cash they've brought with them. And it's not a huge amount, in the scheme of things. Just means no pub on Fridays for another month or so.

Jody has the card in her bag. While she finds it, Sam checks that the form isn't too scary and starts filling it in. To make conversation, he says, "Did you find out what happened with that other plane?"

No answer. He glances up, assuming he'll have to remind her what was said on the coach, but it's clear from the rep's face that she remembers. She blinks a few times before nodding.

"Oh, I did ask the airport staff but they said it was a completely normal landing. Sometimes they change the direction you come in, because of the wind."

Sam nods. Even to a first-time flyer, this makes perfect sense.

Several more guests are waiting to speak to the rep, but Jody gets in a question about the kids' club. Then Sam becomes aware of Grace, laughing and saying something behind him. The thought that's come to his mind slowly dissolves as he turns and discovers that one of the waiters is crouched down, chatting with Dylan and Grace.

It's a nice gesture, even though Sam's first reaction is that someone's moving in on his family. He thinks of all the times he and Jody have tried to warn them about 'stranger danger', and hopes they'll understand that it's slightly different here, inside the hotel: a one-off.

“I’m getting a drink,” Dylan says proudly. “From the man.”

The waiter glances at Sam, then straightens up and says to Dylan, “One Coke with ice, no lemon!” He gives a sharp salute. “Yes, sir!”

Dylan runs after him as the man returns to the bar. Grace follows, then Sam, and it’s too late to change direction when he sees who else is there.

*

Gabby answers her questions about the kids’ club; she’s perfectly friendly and helpful, so Jody can’t work out what it is about the rep that makes her uneasy.

It’s not her body. Jody doesn’t want to believe she could be that shallow. But if isn’t that, then what?

During the talk, there were a couple of times when Jody caught the rep looking at Sam a bit too intently. On the other hand, there were times when she was doing the same to Jody. It weirded her out, frankly. Now it comes as something of a relief to see, at close range, that Gabby isn’t quite as perfect as she had imagined. There are pimples on her cheeks, covered in foundation, and a couple of her teeth are slightly crooked.

Other holidaymakers are competing for the woman’s attention, so Jody thanks her and turns away. The rest of the family are at the bar, and she watches them for a second. She’s pleased to note that Sam seems to be getting used to the routine here. Earlier she found it quite touching to see how apprehensive he was. She has to keep reminding herself that he’s totally new to this – not only has he never been abroad before, but to her knowledge he’s never stayed in a proper hotel in the UK either. As a couple they did a B&B occasionally, and in his childhood he sometimes went camping with his aunt and uncle, so this is like another world for him.

She joins them as the waiter is handing a Coke to Dylan, who’s clambered on to a stool. The snobbish couple are standing less than a metre away, but they and Sam seem to be engaged in a determined ignoring competition. Jody decides she must play the grown-up, clearing her throat so that the woman glances round, then smiling and saying hello.

Introductions are made, with only the two women talking at first. Sam has the excuse of organising the kids so that they don’t spill their drinks. But the man – “This is Trevor, and I’m Kay, Kay Baxter,” – just stares gloomily at his glass, which contains only the dregs of what might be a dark rum. Jody is about to prompt Sam to buy him a refill, then remembers they’re all inclusive. You can’t treat someone to a drink.

She falls back on an easy question: are they going to book any of the trips?

Kay shakes her head in a sort of pitying way, as if it was a silly thing to ask. “No,” is her response, short and sweet. She takes a sip of her drink, which is clear and in a long glass. Vodka and something? Gin?

Trevor chips in: “Much of a muchness, after a while.”

He’s spoken with such authority that the conversation threatens to cease again. After an agonising silence, Kay says, “We try to find new experiences, where we can. We might rent a jeep and go off to explore. The north of the island is said to be quite wild and undeveloped.”

With obvious reluctance, Sam turns to face them. Trevor’s face lights up. “Look, who’s this?” he says, and rears back, opening his mouth wide in a silent, terrified scream, holding it in place until he registers the disapproval on his wife’s face. “All right, sorry. That reverse thrust can really catch you out, though, eh?”

Jody freezes inside, while Sam manages a pretend chuckle. “I hadn’t flown before,” he says.

His tone isn’t just defensive; Jody picks up a tiny hint of aggression.

“Honestly?” Kay couldn’t sound more shocked if Sam had just announced that he used

to be a woman.

Trevor, too, is gaping at him. “You seriously haven’t been on a plane until today?”

“Not everyone has,” Jody says, trying to challenge Trevor while also taking the heat out of the conversation. Fortunately Dylan has decided to contribute, using a forearm to wipe off his Coke moustache before announcing: “We-we’re gonna see doll-things!”

“Dolphins,” Grace corrects him.

“Oh, how lovely for you!” Kay cries.

“Yes, we’re looking forward to it,” Jody says. Change of subject achieved: *phew*.

“Just remember they can’t guarantee the creatures will make an appearance,” Trevor cautions. “If they don’t, all you’ve paid to look at is miles and miles of water.”

And he laughs, seemingly unaware that Dylan, if he understood a little better, would be broken hearted by the comment.

His wife, slightly more perceptive, leans in and says, “Oh, but I’m sure you will see some.”

“You’ve been here before?” Jody asks.

“No, but we visited another of the other islands, Efru, earlier this year. Yes, it was nice,” she adds, in a tone that suggests it’s not an entirely happy memory.

“So, this prize draw...” Jody begins, feeling she’s already running out of things to say.

“That’s a new one on us,” Kay says. “There wasn’t anything like that on Efru.”

“We’d hardly know, would we?” Trevor says. To Jody, he explains: “We were staying in the Atlantis, the best hotel on the island. So if there was a competition like this one, it’s our hotel they’d be visiting!”

Nodding, Jody asks, in her best innocent voice, “Five star, was it?”

Somehow she manages to keep a straight face, though she makes the mistake of glancing at Sam and has to fight off the urge to giggle when she sees him smirking.

“It was, yes.” Trevor’s eyes narrow slightly. “Though I can’t say it deserved that rating. I’ve give it four, at best.”

Sam says, “Dunno why they think we’d want to go off to some other hotel, when this one’s got all we need.”

The Baxsters look at him as though he has duly met their low expectations. After a moment, Kay coughs politely.

“Actually, that’s the only reason we came to the welcome meeting.”

“I’d read about it in the information pack,” Trevor tells them, as if they could never have done anything so forward-thinking. “The Conchis has an extraordinary reputation. Though,” he adds with a certain deliberate lightness of tone, “I agree that it’s not for everyone. Horses for courses and all that.”

By now Sam’s got a scowl so fierce you could toast bread from it. Jody knows she has to get him away from here before he says something they’ll all regret. So she turns on a big fake smile and says, “It’s lovely to meet you. We need to go now, and feed these two hungry kids.”

“Three,” says Sam, and unexpectedly gets a laugh. “I’m starving.”

*

“What a couple of total—“

“Mm. No need to say it.”

“I wasn’t going to. But...” Hurrying along the corridor, Sam checks the kids aren’t listening too closely before imitating Trevor’s deep and plegmy voice: “‘I agree that it’s not for everyone.’ What a cock.”

“Sam.”

“Well.” He breathes out so viciously it’s like a growl. “Not for the chavs, that’s what he means.”

She glares at him: a serious warning. In their house there are two forbidden c-words.

He sighs again, this time like a release of pressure. “Yeah, yeah, I know. Don’t let it spoil the holiday.”

“Exactly.” She darts towards him, kisses his cheek. “Thank you.”

The sight of the main restaurant quickly distracts him. It’s a huge room with dozens of tables and a serving area roughly in the middle. There are several long counters, some of them manned by staff carving meat and dishing up the food they’re cooking on the spot. Then half a dozen little islands: a couple with different types of salad, one with breads and rolls, another with desserts and so on.

While they’re taking it in, a senior-looking man in a grey waistcoat approaches and gives them quick once-over. “Your first night?”

Jody nods. “Yes.”

The head waiter, or whatever he is, goes on staring at Sam, as though Jody hasn’t spoken. “For the evening our dress code is for trousers. Smart clothes. But as it is your first night…” He winks at Grace. “Come, I find you a table.”

Sam feels about six years old as he’s led across the room and shown to a table for four, next to a pillar that hides them from most of the people nearby. The head waiter takes their order for drinks, then explains that they can simply help themselves to whatever they like, whenever they like and as much as they like.

“Enjoy,” he commands, and Sam isn’t sure whether he detects a certain bitterness. *We will*, he thinks. *We’ve paid for it, same as everyone else.*

They decide to go in pairs. It’s probably not necessary, but now they’ve been allocated a table Sam doesn’t like the idea of leaving it unattended. He and Grace wait while Jody and Dylan go off.

“You’ve been really good today,” he tells Grace. “Thanks.”

She shrugs. Pushes a hand through her long hair. Although pale and tired, she still looks extraordinarily pretty and grown-up. Sam can’t quite believe that he can take any credit for how she’s turned out.

“It seems really nice here, Dad. But I don’t feel… I dunno… I’m not as excited as I thought I’d be.”

“That’s just ’cause we were up at four. A good night’s sleep will help, I bet. Tomorrow we’ll have loads more energy.”

Jody and Dylan are back much sooner than he expected. He peers at Jody’s plate. A bit of salad, a bread roll, something that might be fish.

“That’s hardly anything.”

“It’s my starter. I’m going back for more, and so are you.”

He’d forgotten about having different courses. On the rare occasion that they eat out, it’s usually a pizza, a burger, a curry. But she’s right – even if he’s not feeling particularly hungry, he ought to make the most of it.

He and Grace find where the plates are stacked, then begin to choose some food. Out in the centre of the room it’s very noisy, with the constant sharp clatter of crockery and steel echoing off the tiled floor. He discovers that you have to be on your toes, dodging through a busy stream of kitchen staff collecting empty trays and bringing fresh ones. And some of the other diners are a pain: it isn’t all good manners and “After you, my dear chap” in the way he’d expected – it’s sharp elbows and an urgent, every-man-for-himself attitude, as though they’re competing for the food instead of sharing far more than they could ever eat.

In fact, both the choice of food and the sheer amount of it is staggering. Sam imagines emptying all their kitchen cupboards, and the fridge freezer, cooking everything and laying it

out... and it still wouldn't come close to matching the range available now, for just this one meal.

Crazy, he thinks, and wonders how much is wasted. It must be a lot, because how could the hotel possibly predict what everyone will want to eat? Do the staff get to take the food home to their families? And how would that feel, eating the lukewarm leftovers of the rich, night after night?

The rich. It shocks Sam to include himself in such a description, but it's true. He's sensed it already in some of the looks he's had from the waiters – a mix of fear and respect, envy and contempt that he knows all too well. *My job depends on you, but don't think I'm gonna thank you for it.*

*

They manage to eat two courses – starters and mains for Jody and Sam; an unusual mix of savoury stuff for the kids, mainly pasta and chips, followed by ice cream and chocolate treats.

The food tastes wonderful. Jody had feared it would be overcooked, given the challenge of catering on such an enormous scale, but it's actually delicious. And the beauty of this system is that you can sample several dishes, then go back for more of what you like best.

Not tonight, though. They're simply too tired to over-indulge. Jody even decides against a second glass of wine, afraid that she'll doze off at the table.

Outside, they get lost on the way back to the room, but it turns into a lovely experience, wandering around the main part of the hotel complex. It's dark now, and the buildings and even many of the flower beds are floodlit in warm colours. The air is rich with fruity, unfamiliar blossoms and the heat, which is still noticeable but no longer oppressive, adds to it a taste like burnt sugar. The only disappointment is a sign forbidding use of the pools at night. In Jody's view this would be the perfect time for a swim.

By the main pool they discover a thriving bar area with twenty-five or thirty tables, nearly all of them occupied. The focus is on a makeshift auditorium at one end, where a young man is playing what sounds like traditional music on a violin. Not the sort of thing they'd normally go for – the kids especially – but in this setting it's an enchanting sound.

They all stop to listen, and Sam gestures at the bar. "We could get a drink."

She looks at the children, who actually seem to have revived a bit. It's Jody who is dead on her feet. "Do you mind if we don't?"

There's no argument from him, though the kids put up a bit of resistance.

"We've got a whole week here," Jody reminds them. "We don't have to do everything straight away."

Back in the room, they take it in turns to use the bathroom. The kids settle for brushing their teeth, but Jody and Sam both want to take a shower. They investigate the TV, the kids hopeful of cartoons, but all they find is an ancient episode of *The Simpsons*, dubbed into some incomprehensible Eastern European language. There's Sky News ("sod that," Sam mutters to her) and a couple of ropey looking soap operas: one German, one Italian.

Grace reads for a while, and Dylan is allowed to play games on Jody's phone. At nine o'clock it's lights out for that end of the room, and within minutes they're both sparko.

Thirty seconds later Jody and Sam are in bed, too. Naked, of course, with a sheet and one thin blanket over them. The air-conditioning's up high and it's cooled the room enough for them to snuggle together without discomfort. They laugh about how early it is, bemoaning their own lack of energy. Sam says he's as tired as if he'd spent the day painting ceilings.

"This has been more fun, though, hasn't it?" she asks.

"Yeahhh." He sounds doubtful. "Can't beat the excitement of hanging a nice bit of designer paper."

“What?”

“Or matching the joins on an uneven wall. I had one where the pattern was squares, and the wall was bowed about a hundred mil – that really took some skill, I tell you!”

“I remember you saying. But you don’t really—?”

“I’m winding you up, Jode. Of course it’s better here than work. Way better.”

“Is it? Only... at times today I felt you were regretting it.”

He shrugs, his smile slowly fading to something more complicated. “Yeah, well... that’s just me, I suppose.”

“All right.” He’s been stroking her stomach for a minute or two. Now he moves upwards, tracing a soft line over her breasts, teasingly close to her nipples. She yawns. Fortunately he doesn’t take offence. He’s yawning himself.

Then silence. But neither of them is quite ready for sleep yet.

He says, “That Trevor and Kay.”

“I know.”

“They sniff a lot, don’t they?”

“Yeah. As if nothing’s ever quite good enough for them.”

“Yeah.” A pause. “Or maybe they’re coke heads.”

It’s such an unlikely image that she splutters with laughter, and he has to shush her, for fear of waking the children. He’s still caressing her, and she reaches for him, too, casually holding his cock while they talk. An odd kind of foreplay, maybe, but she likes it. Friendly rather than sexy, which is surely the best you can hope for after nearly ten years and two kids?

Or so *she* believes. But is it enough for Sam?

“What do you think of Gabby?”

He makes a face. “Do we have to talk about her?”

“Thought it’d get you in the mood.” She squeezes him, playfully, but he flinches.

“Why?”

“Oh, come on. You must have checked her out.”

“Not really.”

Her snort of disbelief resembles a whale expelling water from its blowhole. And now she can’t decide whether to laugh or cry.

Oh, Jody, only you would choose a moment like this to liken yourself to a bloody whale.

*

Slowly, over the course of several weeks, Sam has come to understand that there’s something bothering Jody. At times he’s wondered if she knows – or at least suspects – what it is he’s hiding from her. He prays she doesn’t.

No, he thinks. She’d confront him straight away. She’s a lot braver than he is.

They make love again. They’re pretty sure the kids won’t wake up but still it affects them. They move together and find a rhythm that’s slow and intense but makes absolutely no sound. The silence adds something to the experience, makes it seem *holy*, almost, though Sam has no idea why he thinks that. He’s not religious; never goes to church, apart from weddings and christenings; a couple of funerals.

Maybe it’s because their best chance of sex is usually on the day of rest. Sundays are when Jody’s mum and dad regularly agree to babysit for a few hours. He wonders, do her parents know that the second we drop the kids off, we race back home and go at it like rabbits? He doesn’t like the idea that they’re well aware of it, but they probably are.

Beside him, Jody issues a tiny snort in her sleep. He smiles, realising that they’ve already had a fortnight’s worth of sex in one day. He takes this as a good sign. Holidays are

about packing in as much fun as possible in a short time, aren't they?

It's gonna be all right, he tells himself. Better than all right. And it's only when he's drifting off to sleep, slipping too far down the well to even think of climbing back out, that he recalls what it was he wanted to query with Gabby at the welcome meeting.

When they got off the plane it had been hot and calm, barely a breeze. So how come the plane had to land differently because of the wind?

*

Gabrielle Marchant is a two-faced bitch.

That was the verdict of her best friend, overheard by accident (or was it an accident?) when they were at sixth form together. To this day Gabby suffers a little punch to the heart when she recalls that moment, even though she has good reason to be grateful for Marianne's assessment.

It could have destroyed their friendship, but Gabby decided instead to embrace the accusation. She gave no sign that she'd heard anything, and continued to act the part of soul mate for another fourteen months, until the optimum moment arrived – the night of Marianne's vicious break-up with her first really serious boyfriend, after finding out he'd been cheating on her with a woman of *twenty-nine*.

"Why would I care?" was Gabby's cool retort when Marianne rang her in tears. "I'm a two-faced bitch, remember?"

Gabby is from a well-off but not filthy rich family in the Midlands, and was fortunate enough to get into a grammar school of such quality that it rendered private education unnecessary. She was an above-average student, and excelled at drama (wearing a whole lot more than two faces) so it seemed inevitable that good A levels would lead to a top university and then, perhaps, to a well-paid and fulfilling career.

It started off that way, but after a term-and-a-half of an English degree at Southampton, Gabby's vague plans and her family's far more concrete expectations were blasted off course by a combination of boys, debts, drugs, an unwanted pregnancy (terminated) and a brush or two with the law. Bailing out, she fled to her sympathetic grandmother in West London and staved off boredom with a part-time job at a travel agent's. Within weeks she was sleeping with her boss, a lively, good-looking man in his mid-thirties, married with kids, who often reminisced about the fun he'd had repping at the start of his career and thought she should try it.

"With your wild side, you'd love it. And I mean, jeez, you've got all the assets." *Snicker snicker*. It was a suggestion that owed more to a fear that his wife was going to discover their affair, but Gabby soon realised it might be exactly what she needed. The fact that her family would be horrified only added to its appeal.

From the start she was Gabby, not Gabrielle. *Hi guys, I'm Gabby the rep!* It means a conscious change to her voice, roughening the accent and injecting a cheery, upbeat tone. *Bubbly* is what she aims for, because bubbly girls – especially if they're also pretty and not intimidatingly bright – don't get as much grief from the customers. *Gabby's doing her best for us*, she wants them saying to themselves. *It's not her fault the hotel/food/resort/weather isn't up to standard*.

The dumbing down has proved to be a smart move, earning her a sky high rating in her performance reviews. The face she presents to the clients and her colleagues is well-received and almost always taken as genuine. Very few of the people she interacts with would guess at her middle-class origins – the fat cat property mogul father and brittle gym-and-shopping mother – but if there's one exception, one person who suspects that she belongs a little higher on the social scale than she lets on, it is Borko Radić.

She has only twenty minutes' notice of his visit. A curse of the job is that she has to be easily contactable, and of course he has obtained both her private mobile number and that of the phone she uses for work.

For this season Gabby is sharing an apartment on the edge of the largest town on Sekliw's south coast. The town is a shithole, in her opinion, but it's conveniently placed midway between the seven or eight hotels that she services on behalf of Bankes Travel.

She shares the apartment with two other reps, one of whom works for their German sister company. The conditions are basic, to say the least, but it's a place to crash. Most of the time they're either working or partying – and of course they're able to make full use of the hotel facilities as they do their rounds. Each of them has a favourite place to eat, and swim – and sometimes even grab a nap in a spare room – and when they're not on duty they'll invariably be on the beach or in a club.

It's a full-on lifestyle, exhausting but exhilarating; not something she can imagine doing past the age of twenty five. This is her third year as a rep, and her second season on Sekliw. She has only five weeks left to run, and she's already decided that next year – if she remains in the job at all – she'll go somewhere else for the summer.

One of the principle reasons for that decision turns up in a Lexus 4x4 with blacked out windows. There are people with him – assistants, bodyguards – but he enters the apartment building alone. He feels safer here than on the mainland, he once told her, dramatically (and drunkenly) beating a fist against his heart. "This island is mine," he declared, and he wasn't exaggerating.

Her flatmates will be out all evening. Their absence right now is both a relief and a concern. Gabby has spent most of the past twenty minutes scooping up abandoned underwear, wet towels and mouldy fast food cartons. She's also taken a shower, though she's isn't sure why – it's not as though she wants to look her best for him. In fact, she's careful to dress in dreary, baggy clothes: grey joggers, a t-shirt and one of Luke's thick hoodies. Underneath there's her sports bra: forty quid of heavy-duty lycra.

When she opens the door Borko greets her with a sultry smile. The scan of her body is so thorough it's like walking through one of those machines at the airport. During a brief exchange of pleasantries his gaze switches to the apartment behind her, trying to gauge whether she's alone.

"It's good to see you, Gabrielle. I'd begun to think you were avoiding me."

"Just busy, that's all. Height of the season, it's non-stop, you know?"

"I'm sure. And how wonderful for Bankes: all that delightful revenue."

He winks. His English is every bit as good as hers, and it's spoken in the kind of smooth, confident tone that she associates with politicians, business leaders and lawyers. Hardly surprising, given that he spent much of his childhood in England and was educated at some of the country's most exclusive private schools – hence his expertise on matters of social class.

Back then his father was regarded as nothing more than a warlord, a wealthy thug. Gabby has come to suspect that, beneath the surface charm, Borko is every bit his father's son.

"You will invite me in, I hope?"

She attempts a troubled smile. "I've gotta go out in ten minutes."

"Dressed like this?"

She's trapped. If she says anything about getting changed he'll want to stay and watch. She settles for a smile, moving back to let him past.

"You met them?" he asks as he strolls into the living room, carefully inspecting the

tatty couch before sitting down. He's wearing a pale blue silk suit, and won't want to get it dirty.

Gabby starts to say, "I told y—" – referring to their earlier phone call, but realises this might be a bit too disrespectful. He tends to give her some leeway, but she wouldn't want to push it.

"Tell me more," he says, with a cold smile. "I value your impression of them."

This might be bullshit on his part but she knows it's not a casual request. It's an order.

She recounts what was discussed at the welcome meeting, omitting the fact that the family's late arrival nearly gave her a heart attack. Borko wants to know more about their characters. Are they meek, retiring, or do they possess a spark of life? Are they happy? Are the children loved?

Gabby, frankly, hasn't got a clue. It wasn't like she spent a lot of time with them, and she meets so many people in her job that she's learned to actively *avoid* knowing too much. As she and the other reps often joke, this would be a lovely job if it weren't for the tourists.

She understands that she has to take a similar approach to Borko's strange hobby. Even the little she knows is probably too much for comfort.

It was at a party a couple of months ago that he'd taken her into his confidence, hinting at some unorthodox entertainment put on each summer for the delight of a hand-picked group of VIP guests. He might want her help, he said, but first he needed to know that she was capable of complete and utter discretion.

Totally, she'd promised him. Because by now her curiosity was aroused. And so he told her a little more, and Gabby was duly confused, stunned, sceptical, horrified, amazed and all the rest of it – as anyone would be, in the circumstances. But then, with characteristic boldness, she set aside the many more diplomatic questions and instead went for the jugular: "Why do you do it?"

Borko had been genuinely taken aback. She guessed that no one had ever asked him this question – perhaps, she realised later, because no one dared.

His explanation, such as it was, drew on a number of comparisons. He spoke enviously of an Indian businessman whose purpose built home in Mumbai was a *twenty-seven* storey building – his very own tower block, for Christ's sake – which cost at least a billion dollars to construct and offered nearly forty thousand square metres of living space. When he summoned up a picture on his phone, it looked to Gabby like a tall, unevenly piled stack of shipping containers. And she said as much.

"That's your opinion, truly?" Borko said, with spluttering laughter. "What about all that marble? All that glass?"

"Yeah, okay. A stack of *vajazzled* shipping containers, then."

She had to explain the term to Borko, though she suspected he knew it all along and was getting a thrill from nudging the conversation on to more flirtatious territory.

Then came other comparisons: the super-rich moguls, Richard Branson among them, who were pouring a fortune into space exploration, often with the aim of getting into space themselves. And he spoke of an Australian who'd flirted with the possibility of bringing real dinosaurs back to life before settling for a vast theme park full of animatronic creatures. The same man was ploughing money into building an exact replica of the Titanic, while an American oil billionaire had recreated an entire Wild West town on his Colorado ranch, solely for his private entertainment.

By this point he was rambling somewhat, and his eyes kept flicking towards her chest, distracting them both, but Gabby felt she had got the gist. She could sum it up in three words, in fact. *Because I can.*

Why do you go to all this time and trouble? Why do you spend all this money? Why do you treat other human beings as your personal playthings?

Because I can.

The temperature in the room is steadily rising. The hoodie is much too hot but Gabby doesn't dare take it off. Undressing in front of Borko... she might just as well lie on the floor and open her legs.

It's a relief to fetch the paperwork he'd asked for. A few seconds in the kitchen, where she flaps a hand against her face and takes a couple of deep breaths, still tense because she half expects him to follow.

She knows only too well how Borko feels about her. He's been pursuing her, when the mood takes him, for the past two seasons. He's a frequent visitor to the island, but fortunately always has plenty of other distractions on hand. The problem is that, by resisting, Gabby has presented him with a challenge. And Borko is a man who feasts on challenges.

She returns to the living room and hands him the envelope. It's information he could easily obtain by other methods, but this way is safer for him. He's holding her to that promise of absolute discretion.

She remains standing, knowing he'll get the message: there's nothing more on offer; not tonight. To her surprise (or is it disappointment?) he doesn't seem to mind.

The trouble is, leaving aside what she knows about him – the facts and rumours both – she can't deny that she finds him attractive. *Very* attractive.

Borko wants her body, and pragmatic, single-minded Gabrielle fears very much that, if she doesn't leave the country soon, her alter ego – that weak-willed, impulsive tart Gabby – will give it to him.

In the meantime, though she isn't terribly proud to admit it, she seems to have given him a family of four.