



Cathy Kelly

The Perfect Holiday

A story
to lift your
heart



Quick Reads

ONLY £1.99

Pick up a book today

The Perfect Holiday

Cathy Kelly

HARPER

Table of Contents

Title Page

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Quick Reads

Other resources

About the Author

Also by Cathy Kelly

Copyright

About the Publisher

Chapter One

On the last day of the holiday, Claire woke early. In the soft bed beside her, Anthony snored quietly. He was a big man and took up most of the bed. One long leg and an arm were totally on Claire's side, but she didn't mind. She watched him for a moment, smiling at the way his dark hair was messily tangled in sleep. His skin was smooth and brown against the cool white of the sheets. Unlike hers, she thought.

Claire was as pale as a milk bottle, no matter how much Greek sun she got. During their two weeks on the beautiful island of Corfu, she'd slowly moved from sunscreen Factor 25 down to Factor 8. She'd sunbathed for four hours one day, nearly falling asleep on the beach as the sea lapped gently against the shore. It had made no difference, except that her freckles had sort of joined up. With his dark brown eyes and rich tan, Anthony could have been a local.

She slipped out from under the sheets, moving quietly so as not to wake her sleeping husband. At home, she never woke until her alarm clock blasted morning radio into her ears. Here in Greece, she woke at six most days. It was the light. On Corfu, the sun was magical. It beamed into the small blue and white hotel bedroom, urging her to wake up and enjoy the day.

In the quiet suburb where she and Anthony lived in Ireland, you could count the days when the sun sneaked in past the heavy brocade curtains and into their bedroom. But here in Greece, sunlight was part of the experience. It made the white walls gleam, made the sea glitter. It made Claire Reynolds feel so very happy.

Still barefoot and in pale blue pyjama shorts and T-shirt, Claire gently opened the pine balcony doors and stepped outside. Hotel Athena was a sprawling, white, two-storey building, a quarter of a mile from the beach. The brochure had said it was a five-minute walk away and for once, the travel brochure hadn't lied.

In fact, the brochure hadn't done Hotel Athena justice:

Simple Greek hotel noted for its hospitality and quietness, with a beautiful garden behind the hotel where guests can sample traditional

Greek cooking.

This hadn't described the pure kindness of Sarah, the lovely English lady who ran the hotel with her Greek husband, Stavros. When their coach dropped off Claire and Anthony and the other Irish guests, Sarah welcomed them all as if they were beloved relatives she hadn't seen for years. If she felt they were the hugging kind, she hugged them.

Sarah was short and round, with long wavy blonde hair that was going grey. She wore a flowing light cotton dress that seemed to be made up of pink and purple flowers. Her many silver bangles jangled as she walked. Smiling and chattering, she led them into the hotel's cool, flower-scented lobby and made them sit down on blue-striped couches. Stavros, who was tall and dark and smiled a lot, offered trays of freshly squeezed orange juice or the local brandy. He didn't speak, just watched his wife fondly.

When everyone was sitting, Sarah organised the rooms according to what she thought they needed.

'You,' she said, standing back and narrowing her eyes at Claire and Anthony, 'need the honeymoon suite.'

Claire had laughed out loud. 'We're not on honeymoon,' she said truthfully, finding Anthony's hand and squeezing it. She'd have loved a honeymoon suite, but it wouldn't have been right to lie about it. At this point in her life, thirty-three last birthday, Claire liked total honesty.

'Oh, I know you're not just married,' Sarah said, smiling, 'but I have a honeymoon feeling about you two. People in love need the honeymoon suite. You agree, Stavros?'

Stavros nodded and began to look for their suitcases. Before Claire and Anthony knew it, they were being led up a winding wooden staircase to a pretty white and blue room with a jug of pink flowers sitting on the pine dressing table. The big double bed was made up with frilled snowy-white pillows and a duvet that looked as soft as a cloud. There were two blue-striped armchairs like the couches in the lobby, and several watercolour paintings on the wall. The paintings were of pink and purple flowers like the ones on Sarah's dress.

Stavros showed them the little bathroom with its gleaming white tiles.

He didn't have to say 'Do you like it?' because Claire's face told him she liked it. There was no television and no minibar stuffed full of tiny bottles of gin or vodka. Just a small kettle on a tray with tea and coffee

things, and a bottle of mineral water. There was also a feeling of utter peace. As if nothing bad could ever happen to anyone in this lovely room. It felt like a sanctuary, which was exactly what Claire and Anthony had come to Greece to find.

‘Thank you,’ Claire said gratefully. ‘It’s lovely. Don’t you think so, darling?’ she asked Anthony.

Anthony, who’d been tense since Stavros had passed him with a tray bearing glasses of brandy earlier, nodded. He sat down on one of the armchairs, stretched out his long legs and breathed deeply, like a man who’d just reached land after being lost in the sea.

‘It’s lovely,’ he said slowly.

His eyes met Claire’s. They understood each other perfectly. It would be easier not to feel tempted to drink in this room. Anthony would not have to sit on the balcony and think of the bottles of vodka calling his name from the minibar. Here, there was hope.

In the warm light of their last full day on the island, Claire remembered how happy she’d felt the first day.

Sarah had been right: it was sort of a honeymoon for them. A new start. A life without Anthony drinking.

From the balcony, Claire could see a few people walking on the beach. The man from the little cafe beside the beach was busily washing down his terrace floor. The lady in the souvenir shop next door was setting up her racks outside: lots of colourful buckets and spades for the children, and huge blow-up things for the swimming pools. There were dinosaurs in acid greens, and squashy Barbie-pink armchairs. Claire loved watching the children on the beach. She adored the way the small ones ran giggling into the waves, then rushed out squealing when the water ‘got’ them.

She’d made friends with another Irish woman on the beach who had two young children. Tricia was a little older than Claire and the two women had bonded as they sat in the sun. Tricia set up camp on the sand every day with a pile of towels, lots of suncream, several baseball hats and a ready supply of hugs. Claire liked sitting beside her and chatting. The two children rushed up every few minutes looking for plasters or an ice cream.

‘Mummy, Fiona says there’s a *huge* shark in the sea!’ the little one, Millie, would scream.

Millie was five. Behind her, seven-year-old Fiona would grin naughtily.

‘Only a small shark, Mum,’ she’d say.

‘Don’t tease her,’ Tricia would reply calmly. Millie would get a kiss, another bit of sunscreen on her neck, and be sent off. Tricia watched them constantly. She had a magazine on her lap, but Claire never saw her read it.

Five minutes later, the two little girls would come back with a supply of shells.

‘I want to build a sandcastle,’ Fiona would announce. ‘Give me my bucket.’

‘*Please* may I have my bucket,’ Tricia would correct.

Fiona, who was blonde, adorable and knew it, would roll her eyes. ‘*Please may I have my bucket, Mummy,*’ she’d groan.

Tricia’s husband, Pat, was like Anthony in that he liked to read in the sun. Between them, they read book after book. They both loved American thrillers and spent ages talking about them. But at lunchtime, Pat liked a beer with his lunch. So Anthony stayed on the beach to read.

‘If you get any browner, they won’t let you leave the country: they’ll think you’re Greek,’ Pat joked one day, when he’d had a few beers and his pleasant face was tinged with red. ‘Are you sure you won’t come up and have a bottle of beer with me?’

Claire held her breath.

‘Ah no, Pat,’ Anthony said, ‘beer in the sun doesn’t agree with me.’

‘You see, Pat, *somebody’s* sensible about not drinking too much in the sun,’ Tricia said to her husband, patting his beer belly.

Claire breathed again. The moment had passed.

At night, Tricia, Pat and the children ate early. This gave Anthony and Claire the perfect excuse not to go to dinner with them. Without ever speaking about it, Claire knew how hard it would be for her husband to watch Pat drink lots of wine with his meal.

One morning, Pat had a terrible hangover after the night before.

‘There’s a brass band in my head,’ he groaned, sinking on to the sun lounger and shading his eyes from the sun. ‘That sun’s very bright, isn’t it?’

‘The sun’s normal. You’ve got a headache because of the five Long Island Iced Tea cocktails you had,’ said Tricia crossly. ‘I told you not to

drink them. You're lucky you're not married to a big idiot,' she added to Claire.

They both looked down to the water where Anthony was playing in the sea with Millie and Fiona. He was pretending to be a shark chasing them out of the shallow waves. Every time he chased them, the two little girls squealed with delight.

He was slim and handsome, with no sign of a beer belly. He'd been going to the gym at home and his stomach was flat and muscled. In his denim-blue swimming shorts, with his dark hair windswept, he could have stepped out of a film.

Claire felt her heart ache watching him play with the girls. Anthony had never played with children much before. At family gatherings, he hadn't wanted to play with her nieces and nephews. Instead, he'd sat with the men and the drinks, talking and smoking. Now she watched his face alight with happiness as he pretended to be a shark for two small girls.

'I'm very lucky,' she said, and it was the truth.

Chapter Two

On the last morning of her holiday, Jessica made herself her cup of coffee with the special little filter-coffee containers she'd brought from home. It was strange how something so small could give a person so much pleasure. She usually didn't buy them because they were expensive. No, she corrected herself. It wasn't the expense. She usually didn't buy them because they were a treat.

The grief counsellor, Diana, had said it was important to be honest. Diana was the one who'd pointed out that the reason Jessica didn't do nice things for herself had nothing to do with money. She had enough money to survive. Jack's life insurance meant she'd never go hungry. She didn't buy magazines or perfume, or go for a facial in the beautician's because they were treats. It was as if Jessica wasn't allowed to do anything nice for herself ever again.

Jack was dead and so was all the happiness in Jessica's life.

'You *can* live your life like that,' Diana had said bluntly during their third session. Blunt speaking seemed to be Diana's speciality. There had been no mention of such bluntness in her advert. The very name 'grief counsellor' had implied a kind person who somehow magically made you feel better. Not someone who forced you to think painful thoughts. 'But there's no *need* to live like that,' Diana said. 'There's no need to keep on punishing yourself because you're alive and Jack's dead. You can have nice meals, buy yourself a magazine every now and then, and enjoy yourself with friends. You're not betraying him. You're simply punishing yourself by not doing those things. You must ask yourself why.'

Jessica was shocked. In the two years since Jack had died a painful death from pancreatic cancer, nobody had spoken to her like that. The death of your beloved husband changed all your relationships. People spoke to you as if *you* were the person who was ill. They spoke in gentle voices and asked if you were '*all right*'. They said things like '*under the circumstances...*'

Under the circumstances, it was perfectly normal not to go to parties or weddings. It was normal not to want to get your hair done, normal not to

buy new clothes. It was normal to buy the cheapest instant coffee in the supermarket because it was only for Jessica herself. Not for anyone else. So why bother?

Diana had changed all that. She spoke to Jessica with kindness but with fierce honesty too.

‘Live your life,’ she’d said on their last session, the one before Jessica had flown out to Corfu.

In her pretty room in Hotel Athena, Jessica took the filter-coffee container from her cup and threw it in the bin. Then she smelled the rich, strong coffee it had left behind in the cup. This coffee, like the whole holiday, was her way of trying to live again. It was an experiment. Every day for the past ten days, she’d had a cup of lovely filter coffee when she woke up. She’d packed enough for the whole holiday.

When Jack was alive, they had both loved decent coffee. She enjoyed finding new brands for them to try. She’d bought coffee on the internet for him and had beamed with delight to see him open the package from the postman.

After twenty-seven years of marriage, it was easy to fall out of love with your spouse. But that had never happened to Jessica and Jack.

Three years ago, they’d been thinking fondly of what they might do for their summer holidays, but then Jack began to feel unwell.

‘A cruise,’ Jack had said bravely, the day when he went into hospital for the tests.

‘A cruise is for old people,’ Jessica had joked back, trying to be just as brave. She laid clean pyjamas on his narrow hospital bed. She’d packed another pair, just in case. ‘We’re not old. Perhaps we should try one of those 18–30 holidays,’ she’d added jokily.

Jack’s laugh had been loud and genuine. ‘And have you in the wet T-shirt contest? Not likely. I’m too old to fight off all the lads who’d want you.’

Jessica loved the idea that Jack still believed anyone would fight over the sight of her in a wet T-shirt contest. With two grown-up sons and the full-figured body of a fifty-three-year-old woman, she was no longer wet T-shirt material. But darling Jack still thought she was. That was love.

There had been no more holidays for them. Jack had died three months later. When Jessica found advertisements for cruises in newspapers now,