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The Black Life

Written by Paul Johnston

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THE BLACK LIFE

Paul Johnston



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Author's Note

How I handle aspects of Modern Greek in English:

- 1) Masculine names ending in -os and -is lose the final -s in the vocative case: 'Yiorgos and Makis are having an argument'; but 'Yiorgo and Maki, stop fighting!' Mavros becomes Mavro when he is spoken to in Greek. Some names (e.g. Apostolos) retain the older form -e (Apostole) in the vocative.
- 2) The consonant transliterated as 'dh' (e.g. Ayia Triadha) is pronounced 'th' as in English 'these'.
- 3) Feminine surnames differ from their male equivalents – Christos Papakis, but Marika Papaki.

Prologue

Wittersdorf, north-west of Munich, September 30th 1946

They waited until the woman and children had gone inside. A solitary light shone from the upper floor of the wood-built house. A few minutes later the man came out and walked with long strides to the shed. Every evening he chopped logs for half an hour, adding to the tiers of winter fuel against the wall.

The leader nodded to the others. They moved out from the line of conifers, Zvi to the left and Shlomo to the right, as usual. All three were carrying Walther PPK pistols that had been bought from the Americans, as had the list of names they were working their way down.

The door to the shed was half-open. There were regular thwacks as the heavily built man split logs with pinpoint accuracy.

‘Drop the axe,’ the leader said, in coarsely accented German. ‘Now.’

The man looked at the three men and their weapons, then let the heavy implement fall to the sawdust-strewn floor.

‘Who the fuck—’

‘You are SS-Unterscharführer Ernst Mossfeld, with three years’ service in Auschwitz-Birkenau.’ The leader smiled humourlessly. ‘Or rather, you were.’

The German blanched. ‘No . . . I . . .’

‘No, you are not Klaus Weiss. That identity is false. Your papers were obtained from a supposedly secret old comrades’ organisation in Munich after you were detained for a paltry six months.’

Mossfeld’s eyes bulged. ‘Please, my wife . . . my children . . .’

‘Ah, you are sensible to mention them. Their fate is in your hands. If you do as I say, they will be unharmed. Otherwise . . .’ The tone of the leader’s voice came from the realm of dust and ashes that all four men had inhabited.

‘How . . . how can I trust you?’

Zvi laughed quietly. ‘The same way the thousands you drove

to the gas chambers trusted you. “Hang your clothes and shoes on the peg and make sure you remember the number. When you’ve had your shower you will reclaim them.”

Mossfeld was staring at the leader. ‘I know you. You were in the Sonderkommando.’

‘Yes, I was. You hit me hard and regularly.’

‘I . . . there were orders . . .’

The three armed men exchanged glances.

‘And where would the Nazis have been without people who obeyed their orders?’ said Shlomo. ‘But now you’re going to follow ours.’

The German took a step back as a coiled rope was thrown in front of him.

‘Unfortunately,’ the leader said, ‘the fact that you don’t have a car means that we can’t gas you. And shooting is too quick, though you shot many of our brothers and sisters. So, slow strangulation at the end of that rope is what you get.’ He pointed his pistol at Mossfeld’s groin. ‘Unless you want to be strung up with your cock and balls removed.’

‘Put the noose round your neck, you subhuman piece of shit,’ said Zvi.

After a time the German complied.

Shlomo stepped forward and tightened the knot. ‘Now, on the chopping block.’ He helped the big man up, his lips twisted in distaste.

Zvi had thrown the other end of the rope over the crossbeam above and was securing it to a post.

‘Ernst Mossfeld,’ the leader said, ‘you are guilty of crimes against innocent men, women and children. May the devil take whatever soul you possess.’

Zvi and Shlomo wrestled the chopping block away and ducked the SS man’s desperate kicks. He started to scrabble at the noose.

The three men watched him die. It took twenty-one minutes.

ONE

Mavros woke to the smell of freshly brewed coffee. 'I thought that a *sketo* would pull you out of whatever filthy dream you were having. That or grabbing your flagstaff and I haven't time for that.' Niki Glezou handed him the small cup of unsweetened coffee and ran her fingers through her tousled, highlighted hair.

'What time is . . .' Mavros looked at the clock. 'For the love of God.'

'Who you don't believe in. Normal people in Athens get up before seven, Alex. Normal people go to work.' Niki's tone was sharp, but she was smiling.

'What do you mean? I've got an appointment today.'

'Oh yes? What time?'

'Eleven.'

'I rest my case.'

Mavros downed his coffee, hiding that it wasn't strong enough. Still, maybe he'd be able to get another hour's sleep after she'd gone.

Niki's expression turned sombre. 'Remember we have the fertility specialist this evening.'

Mavros nodded. 'Seven-thirty. I'll be back long before that.'

'You'd better be.' Niki took his cup and saucer from the duvet and twisted his nose. 'We're getting to the bottom of why I can't conceive if it costs all my salary.' She lowered her head and kissed him on the lips. 'It isn't as if we don't try often enough.'

He watched as she walked to the door, swaying her hips seductively. The old Niki wouldn't have done that except in self-mockery. It seemed that a year of on-off living with Mavros had changed her priorities.

'Oh, and if you see the Fat Man,' she called from the hall, 'tell him that last *baklavas* was solid enough to build a bridge on.'

She still had her abrasive edge though. Then again, Niki was under a lot of pressure. She was a social worker specialising in immigration issues and her workload had increased hugely. In her

late thirties, she was also obsessed with getting pregnant. In the past they had split up because she didn't think Mavros was committed to them having a child. Over the last year he had done his best to show that he was. They had been brought close again partly because of the threat they were under. An ice-veined killer known as the Son was on the loose and had nearly done for Mavros the previous year. To throw him off their trail, Niki had sold her flat in the southern suburbs of Athens and they had moved to the top floor of a modern block halfway up Mount Lykavittos. A politician lived two floors below, so there was additional security. The rent was ridiculous, but Mavros's ageing mother helped. He didn't feel good about that. At least he was within close range of her place round the hill, as well as his friend the Fat Man's in Neapolis below.

He tried to go back to sleep without success. After a work-out on his exercise bike and rowing machine, he took a shower and investigated the contents of the fridge. Niki was only barely house-trained and all he found was a pot of her low-fat yoghurt. That did it. Breakfast at the Fat Man's was unavoidable.

'You're lucky. I just pulled a *galaktoboureko* out of the oven. Give it a quarter of an hour and we'll be in paradise.'

Mavros took in Yiorgos Pandazopoulos's sweat-dripping features and rounded belly. 'Ever thought of changing that apron?'

'Ever thought of kissing my arse?' The Fat Man dropped his bulk into a battered armchair. 'Thought not. So, how's the lovely Niki?'

Yiorgos was banned from the flat on Lykavittos in case the Son followed him there. Mavros took circuitous routes to and from the place, but he couldn't expect the Fat Man to do the same. It was just as well. He and Niki got on like a volcano on fire.

'Worried about not getting pregnant,' Mavros said.

'I'd have thought another generation of—' The Fat Man broke off. 'Sorry, I know you want to make her happy.'

'And make you the atheist father of a bouncing mini-Mavros.'

'I bet Niki would be keen on that. What's going on workwise?'

Yiorgos had been involved in several of Mavros's missing-persons cases and acted as his sidekick and record-keeper.

'Not a lot. Cutting ties with Kriaras maybe wasn't such a good idea.'

‘He’s an arsehole and a lackey of the rich. Plus he almost got you killed. What else could you do?’

Nikos Kriaras was head of the organised crime squad, a fixer with connections to many of the super-rich who pulled the politicians’ strings. He used to put clients – especially foreign ones with problems the police didn’t want to deal with – Mavros’s way.

‘Well, I could have killed him,’ Mavros said, scratching his stubble.

‘I’d have helped.’

‘No doubt. But I’m not a murderer, remember?’

‘You’ve come pretty close.’

‘But never crossed the line.’ Mavros gave him a meaningful look. ‘Which is important.’

Yiorgos shrugged. ‘Depends who the target is.’ He went into mockery mode. ‘At heart you’re just a screwed-up foreigner with different-coloured eyes who doesn’t really fit in Greece.’

Mavros laughed, as much at the truth of the statement as the tone. His father, Spyros, long dead, had been a senior member of the Greek Communist Party, while his mother came from a bourgeois Scottish family. There were brown flecks in his left eye, while the right one was pure dark blue. For some reason women found that attractive, though maybe his shoulder-length black hair helped. Or his innate charm. Or his imagination.

‘Nothing from the Son?’ the Fat Man asked. He was a long-standing communist too and had been close to Spyros, though his allegiance to the party had faded in recent years.

‘You mean any special-delivery packages full of heads or spleens? No. Maybe he’s busy killing people in another country.’

Yiorgos heaved himself up and headed for the kitchen. ‘Which doesn’t mean he won’t be back.’

‘You are using the alarm system I got for you?’

The Fat Man reappeared, carrying an oven tray of perfectly browned custard-filled pastry. ‘Of course. And there are sharpened knives all over the house.’

Mavros knew those wouldn’t be enough to keep the assassin and torturer at bay for more than a few seconds.

‘I’ve also invested in a shotgun and an old but serviceable Makarov. One of the comrades helped me.’

‘Did he also teach you how to use them?’ Mavros asked acidly. He could handle firearms, but hated the sight of them.

‘I did a bit of target shooting with the pistol, yes.’ Yiorgos grinned as he cut a large slice of the pastry and dumped it on a plate. ‘Hardly seemed necessary with the shotgun. Aim in general direction and pull trigger.’

Mavros took his portion, shaking his head. Then he bit into the *galaktoboureko* and was transported to a simpler, sweeter world.

After taking the trolley-bus to Omonia Square and losing – he hoped – any potential tail in the backstreets, Mavros headed for the Grand Bretagne Hotel on Syndagma Square. Although it was early November, the sun was shining strongly and his leather jacket was almost too much. The yellow parliament building – the former royal palace – stood on the rise to his right. It was filled with wheelers, dealers and thieves, with a few, very few, notable exceptions. There were tourists about though the season had ended; the buzz from the Olympics the year before still made Athens an attractive destination, even for people who only went through the motions with the Acropolis and the museums. The uniformed men on the door gave Mavros suspicious looks, but he didn’t care. His jeans were clean and his T-shirt had no logo. Not many pairs of biker boots entered the city’s premier hotel and that made him proud. Whether it would impress his potential client was another matter.

He walked across the wide space of marble. ‘I have a meeting with Mr Eliezer Samuel,’ he said, in English, partly because he was unsure how to pronounce the names and partly because he liked to play with his dual nationalities.

The receptionist, an attractive woman with what looked like genuine blonde hair, pulled tightly back, tapped on a keyboard.

‘Your name, please?’

‘Mavros.’

‘Alexander?’

‘Alex.’

She smiled primly. ‘Yes, Mr Samuel is waiting for you, sir. Suite 542.’

He used the stairs and was pleased to find that his breathing was relatively unaffected by the five flights. He found the door and knocked.

It was opened by a tall young woman with a stern face and gleaming back hair that reached her shoulders.

‘Mr Mavros?’ she asked, the ‘r’ coming from the back of her throat in the French way.

‘That’s me. Obviously you aren’t Mr Samuel.’

‘No,’ came a male voice from further inside. ‘I am.’

‘It’s Sam-oo-eel,’ the woman said softly, as she stepped aside.

Mavros moved into the sumptuously appointed suite and was confronted by a well-built man with white hair, whose unwrinkled face suggested he wasn’t as old as he might have been. He wore an expensive-looking dark blue suit, white shirt and red silk tie.

‘Mr Mavros,’ he said, extending a hand and squeezing his visitor’s tightly.

‘The same. That’s quite a grip.’

‘I play squash three times a week.’ Although the man’s English had French notes, it was fluent. ‘Please sit down. Rachel will bring us coffee.’

Mavros was about to object, having sunk another *sketo* at the Fat Man’s, but decided against it. Negativity was never a good idea at the beginning of meetings, especially when you needed the work.

Samuel picked up a file from the glass-topped table. ‘I have a collection of your press cuttings here, Mr Mavros.’

‘Alex, please.’

‘Very well, Alex. Your career has been most impressive.’

‘I’ve had my moments.’

‘Modest, too. I like that in a man. The French ambassador tells me that some of your biggest cases have not been reported in the media.’

He knows the French ambassador, Mavros thought. How much does the French ambassador know about me?

‘That’s true.’

‘Good, because what I’m going to ask you to do must remain confidential.’

Mavros sipped the coffee, which was nothing like as good as the Fat Man’s. ‘I’m always strict about client confidentiality, but I can’t guarantee that the people I have to deal with will keep their mouths shut. Inducements can be applied, of course.’

Samuel looked at Rachel, who had joined him on the sofa. ‘You mean money?’

‘Not necessarily. Everyone has a weak point.’

‘Ah!’ The Frenchman smiled. ‘I like your style. Let us begin. First, tell us what you know about me.’

The initial contact had been by email. Mavros had checked Eliezer Samuel’s background as a matter of course. Apart from professional thoroughness, he had to be careful – the Son could be lurking.

‘You own and run Samuel and Samuel S.A.,’ – he got the pronunciation right – ‘one of the largest jewellers in France. Based in Paris, but with retail branches across the country. Last year the company made a net profit of over 60 million euros. You are sixty-three years old and are married to Nicole Pintor, your first wife Naomi having died in 1967. My commiserations.’

‘Thank you. It was . . . a terrible blow. She was hit by a car.’ Samuel looked at Rachel. ‘But Nicole has brought me great joy, as well as Rachel and her brother.’

‘David, born 1972, who is your partner in the business.’

‘What year was I born, Mr Mavros?’ the young woman asked.

‘January 14th 1977.’

‘Touché.’ She smiled briefly.

‘I’m impressed, Alex,’ Samuel said, lighting a medium-sized cigar. ‘Anything else?’

‘You have an apartment in the seventh arrondissement, a country house near Tours and a villa in Antibes.’

Samuel puffed out smoke. ‘Very good. More?’

‘Are you sure?’

He nodded, though his expression was grim.

‘All right. Your parents were Sephardic Jews from Thessaloniki. They, your elder brother and sister, your grandparents and the rest of your extended family were killed in Auschwitz-Birkenau after being transported in 1943.’

Eliezer Samuel had put down the cigar and was looking straight at Mavros. Rachel took his hand.

‘You have done your homework, Alex,’ the jeweller said.

‘If I may, how did you escape?’

‘My parents smuggled me out of Thessaloniki not long after my birth. I was fortunate enough to end up with a Jewish family in Canada.’

Mavros looked at the daughter. In profile, her eyes on her father, she was very striking, her cheeks high, her nose straight and her unpainted lips full.

'I'm sorry,' Mavros said lamely. 'That must have been very difficult for your parents.'

'I imagine so, though they didn't have long to live with it.' Samuel picked up his cigar again. 'I grew up in Montreal, but moved back to Europe in the late 60s. With the passage of time and the growth of the family business, I found ways of living with the facts you stated.'

Mavros noticed the tense. 'Found ways? And now?'

The Frenchman looked at his daughter, whose hand was still over his. 'And now our world has been turned upside down.'

Mavros waited, aware that questions were unnecessary. Samuel hadn't told him what the job was when he phoned to confirm their meeting. Now he would do so unprompted.

'I need some more coffee.'

Rachel refilled her father's cup from the cafetière. Mavros shook his head.

'This is what happened. I never returned to Thessalonique, as the French call it. That would have been too painful and I preferred to remain in a state of ignorance about the place where my family lived. But I provide funds for several Jewish organisations and have contacts there.' Samuel emptied his cup. 'Ten days ago I was contacted by Rabbi Savvas Rousso. One of the elderly women in a home I partly finance – her name is Ester Broudo – saw my Uncle Aron in the street.'

'Your Uncle Aron? I thought all your Thessaloniki relatives perished in Poland.'

'We did too.'

Mavros looked from Eliezer Samuel to Rachel and back again. 'So you want me to look for a dead man?'

Samuel nodded. 'Or that even rarer thing – a man who has come back from the dead.'

'That's ridiculous,' Niki said, as she and Mavros left for the fertility clinic. 'How can you find a dead man?'

'Presumably he wasn't really dead. Or the old woman who saw him is dotty.'

'Those poor parents, giving their baby away. Or rather, those unbelievably harsh parents.'

Mavros tightened his grip on her hand as they passed the police guard outside the apartment block. Predictably, she had zeroed in

on that part of the story. He shouldn't really have shared it with her, but client confidentiality didn't include Niki and the Fat Man. Someone had to sound the alarm if he disappeared on a job.

'It was good that they did, considering what happened to the family.'

'Yes, but how could a mother separate herself from her child – how old was he?'

'Six months.'

'My God,' she said, in anguish. 'I can't even begin to imagine what that must have been like.'

Shivering in the unexpected cold, Mavros stopped a taxi on the Lykavittos ring road and directed the driver to the clinic behind the Hilton. They could have walked, but the lurking threat of the Son meant they rationed that activity. They still didn't use a car, though. Mavros had never had one because he'd always lived in the centre of the city. Niki's Citroën was under a tarpaulin in the parking area on the ground floor of their apartment building. He didn't want the Son tailing her when she was on her own.

He squeezed her arm. 'They correctly guessed what was going to happen to the Jews of Thessaloniki. Besides they had two other children.'

Niki turned on him. 'That's supposed to excuse them, is it? They already had kids, so they could dispense with the third one?'

Mavros knew she was at high tension over the doctor's appointment. 'Look, Eliezer Samuel survived. He's got two kids of his own. That was what his parents would have wanted.'

Niki flopped against him. 'Yes, I suppose so.' She took his hand. 'Alex, if I get pregnant and it's a choice between me and the baby, you will take our child, won't you?'

'There's a couple of pretty major "ifs" there.'

'Answer,' she said, her fingers digging into his skin.

'It's totally hypothetical,' he objected. 'Besides, there would be medical advice to follow.'

'Coward,' she muttered, turning away.

Mavros kept hold of her hand but it was limp now, the attack of nerves having passed. That was just as well. He still hadn't worked out how he was going to tell her about the arrangements he'd agreed with the Frenchman.

TWO

My life wasn't always black. I still remember the blinding blue skies over the Thessaloniki I grew up in; the glinting waves in the bay and the green fields at the edge of the built-up areas. But things were already changing for the Jewish community. When the city was liberated from the Ottoman Empire by the Greeks in 1912, Sephardic Jews descended from those expelled from the Iberian peninsula in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries made up the largest population group. That changed in 1922, when the exchange of populations meant that the Muslims left and Greeks from Asia Minor flooded into Macedonia and its capital. They resented the wealth of the Jews, though many of our people were poor dock workers and carters.

'My son, why do you care for those unfortunates?' my father would ask. 'I donate money to their representatives. You have no need to feel guilty.'

So he thought. The family had been jewellers for centuries and he had four shops in the wealthier parts of the city. My elder brother Isaak had started working at weekends when he was still at school, but I refused. I was always contrary. I got that from my mother. Despite the restrictions of bourgeois Sephardic culture, she ran our home like an empress – a short one, like the English Victoria, but much louder, I would guess.

'I don't care if you don't want to work in the shops,' she would say, 'but at least get out of that room. It isn't as if you're studying for school.'

That was true. My parents didn't approve of what I was taking in. They were comfortably off, but they never read anything but the Torah and the local newspapers. From an early age Shabbat was torture for me, though the Greeks forced all shops to open on Saturdays, so it was possible to escape. I don't know why I never believed. Like many young Jews at the time I saw myself as Greek first and Jewish second, but that didn't restrict my reading.

'Who is this Marx, this Engels?' my mother screamed, when

she and my father decided to investigate my books. One of the maids must have put them up to it. We had a house on the shore beyond the White Tower and it was too large for my mother to look after without help. 'Lenin? He was a monster!'

'Marx was a Jew,' I replied.

'You're so clever you'll lose your nose,' she said, seizing the said organ with short but strong fingers.

'Communism,' my father said, as if his burgeoning belly had been punctured by a pin. 'Never had any time for . . .'

'I'm educating myself,' I said piously.

'You're fourteen years old,' Father said. 'You go to school for education.'

'As if they teach anything useful there.'

Mother twisted my nose. 'They teach scripture and obedience.'

'And arithmetic,' Father added. 'Essential for business.'

'I don't care about business,' I shouted back. 'I don't want to sell overpriced trinkets to the wives of men who exploit the workers.'

That stymied even my mother, who thankfully let go of my nose.

'Overpriced . . . trinkets,' repeated Father, as if I'd slapped him in the face with a particularly rank herring.

At this point my brother Isaak stepped in. He was five years older than I was and had an enviable serenity about him.

'Leave the boy,' he said, with a soft smile. 'It is good that he reads without supervision. Soon he will understand there is no future in communism.'

I would understand no such thing – not for several years – though I did know that being a communist was dangerous. There had been a dictatorship in Greece since 1935 and, although there were no particular policies against the Jews, anti-Semitism had been building up in Thessaloniki. Jewish Communists had been arrested and sent to prison or remote islands.

Dinner that evening was an unusually silent affair. My sister Miriam, twenty-one and newly married, was across the table with her skinny husband Albertos. They made a strange couple as Miriam was a similar shape to our mother, though less bulky.

'What's happened?' she asked, looking around the table.

'Your fool of a brother thinks Lenin is a god,' Mother said.

Miriam stared at Isaak, then realised I was the one in question.

She laughed. 'Come, everyone knows he killed the Tsar and his family.'

'Good for him,' I said.

'His policies also led to the deaths of millions of the Russian poor,' Albertos said. He had been to university in Paris and was a lawyer.

'They're not called Russians any more,' I pointed out. 'Besides, Comrade Stalin isn't a dictator, unlike Hitler and Mussolini. Or Metaxas.'

People glanced around anxiously, as if agents of our own fascist leader were under the table or behind the curtains.

'That's enough of such talk,' Father said. 'I have made a decision. The boy may keep his books, but he must lock them in the cupboard. We can't have the servants looking at them again.' He turned to me. 'My boy, you know that Communists are atheists.'

I nodded enthusiastically.

'But you had your bar-mitzvah last year,' said Mother indignantly.

I shrugged. 'Did you give me any choice?' I moved my gaze round the table. 'Any of you?'

Isaak laughed. 'Our little revolutionary. Every family needs one.'

He was right about that.

THREE

The fertility clinic appointment was a disaster. Mavros had provided a sperm sample earlier – having declined Niki's offer of assistance – and the results were back: there was no shortage of little swimmers. That put the onus on Niki. The doctor had found nothing obviously amiss, but she had to do more tests. Apart from that, it was a question of ensuring they made love on fertile days and various strange postures that she should adopt immediately afterwards. They went home feeling less like messing around than a pair of eunuchs.

'Next Thursday's the beginning of my fertile time,' Niki said, coming out of the shower with a towel covering not much of her.

‘Ah,’ Mavros said.

Niki was immediately on the alert. ‘What does that mean?’

‘I’m going to Thessaloniki on Monday,’ he mumbled.

‘What?’

He repeated the words more clearly.

‘That’s just great, Alex,’ she said, eyes blazing. ‘How long for?’

‘Em, I don’t know.’

‘Of course you don’t.’ She sat down beside him on the bed.

‘Look, do you really want us to have a baby?’

Mavros sighed. ‘Yes, I do. I’ve said so often enough.’

She looked at him sceptically. ‘You can never say it enough.’

‘I just did – again.’

Niki put the towel over her head. Mavros wasn’t sure if the display of her very attractive body was deliberate. Given that she wasn’t fertile, he suspected not – then berated himself for the disloyal thought.

‘So you’re going to look for a long-dead Jew?’ she said from behind the curtain of cotton.

‘The money’s good and we need it, especially with these medical bills.’

There was a muffled ‘hmpf’.

‘Besides, I might track him down quickly – or rule out the sighting as a mistake – and be back in time.’

Niki’s face reappeared. ‘Well, that would be uncommonly decent of your majesty.’ She smiled emollently. ‘Sorry, I’m being a bitch.’

Mavros pulled her towards him. ‘No, you aren’t. I understand.’

‘Do you?’ she asked, then stopped resisting.

She may not have been fertile, but they had an unexpectedly good time.

The next morning Niki let Mavros sleep. He woke up around ten. There was a text message on his phone: ‘Confirm funds sent 2 yr a/c. Rachel S.’

That cheered him up. Still, the truth was he didn’t particularly fancy going to Thessaloniki on a wild ghost chase. He liked the city well enough, though it held some painful memories, but it was a long way just to talk to an elderly woman. That reminded him. He wanted to pick his mother’s brains.

As he took the long way round Lykavittos, slipping down

narrow streets and looking out for a tail, Mavros considered the condition of the job that was likely to cause him the most grief. Eliezer Samuel was already back in Paris, but his daughter had remained in Athens. She was following up leads to her great-uncle via the Jewish Museum. The plan was that she and Mavros fly to Thessaloniki together. He was on the horns of a particularly buttock-piercing dilemma. Should he tell Niki about that? If so, would it be better if he described Rachel as a dowdy woman in her forties? One thing was certain: Niki had a track record of extreme jealousy. As he approached his mother's apartment block, he put the decision off. Procrastination was the mother of lies.

Mavros nodded to the private guard that his mother had agreed to pay for after the Son's threat to the family over a year ago, then pressed the buttons on the entry pad. They were changed every week, much to the other residents' irritation, even though the increased security was appreciated by some of them. Kolonaki was central Athens' wealthiest area and burglaries were common. He ran up to the sixth floor, as usual the last flight of stairs making his lungs burn.

The outer door to his mother's apartment had been replaced with a heavy steel panel. He had keys but he preferred to keep her on her toes, so he pressed the buzzer and mugged to the camera on the ceiling.

The door opened.

'Alex. How nice of you not to call in advance.' Dorothy Cochrane-Mavrou's voice was only slightly sharp. She knew her son was testing her. 'Hold on while I get this stupid chain off.'

Mavros embraced his mother when the door was closed again, feeling how frail she was. She'd had a stroke a few years before and, although she was back living on her own and running her small publishing company, she had aged rapidly. Then again, they had celebrated her eightieth birthday earlier in the year so she was doing well enough.

'Don't listen to me. It's always a joy to see you, dear.' Dorothy kissed him on both cheeks. 'Come and have some tea.'

Mavros followed her into the kitchen and opened the box of shortbread. His Scottish genes had donated him a sweet tooth or thirty (he had two caps). His mother smacked him lightly on the hand.

‘You’ll end up like your overweight friend.’ Dorothy would never use as vulgar a nickname as the Fat Man.

Mavros carried a tray into the spacious living area. The French windows gave a view to the Acropolis and the sea beyond the southern suburbs. The water was grey-blue in the autumn wind and the jagged lines of the mountains in the distance were blurred.

‘So, how are you and Niki?’ Dorothy knew about the fertility clinic appointment.

Mavros filled her in.

‘Poor girl. I feel for her. I was so lucky with you three.’ Her brown eyes took on an extra lustre. ‘Spyros and I never had to worry about fertile days.’

Mavros couldn’t help glancing at the photos on the dresser – his father with his powerful gaze and clipped moustache, his sister Anna with husband Nondas and their two kids, and, at the rear, partly obscured, his brother Andonis, caught in time with an eternal smile.

‘Let them rest in peace,’ Dorothy said, smiling sadly.

‘I know.’ Mavros looked away. Spyros had died when he was five and he had few memories of him, but Andonis was another matter. His handsome, outgoing brother had been eleven years older and was his childhood hero. Andonis had got involved in the student opposition to the Colonels’ dictatorship and had disappeared when Mavros was ten. For years he had tried to find him, but had finally accepted that there was no hope, despite the fact that the main reason he’d got interested in missing persons was to locate his brother. Then the bastard Son had told him that Andonis was still alive. He’d been on tenterhooks for months, hoping that the killer would get back in touch despite the danger that would entail. But he hadn’t and Mavros had decided that it had been a cruel joke.

‘Besides, as long as we remember them they’re still here, aren’t they?’

Mavros was surprised by his mother’s words. She had spent years talking him out of continuing the search. Now it seemed she’d never stopped thinking about her lost husband and son.

‘I know, I know,’ Dorothy said. ‘But you must understand, Alex. I had to make you get on with your own life. Living in the past is for old people, not young tearabouts like you.’

Mavros laughed at that characterisation. He was forty-three and, despite the leather jacket, boots, jeans, long hair and stubble, his

tearabout days – such as they were – would soon be over. Eating three pieces of shortbread wasn't exactly starting a revolution.

'I wanted to ask you something, Mother,' he said, wiping his mouth.

'Anything, dear.'

'That book *Years in Hell*.'

'Oh yes.' Her curiosity was piqued.

'Can I have a copy?'

'Of course. I'm sure there are some left. It didn't sell well. I should have done a translation into English. Not many Greeks wanted to read about the fate of the Thessaloniki Jews.' She got up stiffly and went over to the bookcase that filled one long wall. 'Here you are.'

Mavros took the volume from her. He remembered flicking through it when it came out in the mid-90s, but the truth was he hadn't been very interested either. Now he was and he ran his finger down the index.

'Looking for something in particular?'

Mavros raised his eyes. 'A family called Samuel.' He used the pronunciation that his client's daughter had whispered.

'I can't say I remember them. Common name, I should think.'

He found an entry and went to the page. "'Samuel, Yosif, jeweller and owner of several shops, known for his generosity to less fortunate Jews. Transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau with all his close family in 1943. None returned to Thessaloniki.'" Hm.'

'Helpful?'

'Sort of.' He told Dorothy about his new case.

'How extraordinary, especially if the witness turns out to have been correct. You should read the whole book. There were several cases of people coming back years after the end of the war. In fact, you should talk to the author, Allegra Harari. I'm sure she's still active. A very forceful woman.'

Mavros looked at the back of the book. A plump-faced, middle-aged woman with piercing eyes stared out at him, her expression suggesting strong will.

'She was an independent researcher back then, though she may have got a university job. I must have her number and address somewhere.'

'It's all right. I'll find her on the Internet.'

'Go on then.'

Mavros stared at his mother. She used a computer for editing texts, but had always sworn that the Internet was the work of the devil – a very haphazard devil at that.

‘I’ve been converted. Anna finally made me see the benefits.’

‘Uh-huh.’ That didn’t surprise him. His sister was a fashion and gossip columnist, though she preferred the term ‘lifestyle’. She’d been an early champion of new technology and could bore for Greece on the latest mobile phones.

He logged on and quickly discovered that Allegra Harari had her own website, which had a contact email address including the letters ‘th’, showing that she was in Thessaloniki. He noted it down. A quick viewing of the site suggested she knew a huge amount about the city’s Jews and their history.

‘See?’ Dorothy said. ‘Wonderful thing, the Internet.’

‘I have actually been using it for some time, Mother,’ he said, with mild irritation.

‘I know, dear.’ Dorothy’s eyes twinkled. ‘Sometimes you take yourself a bit seriously.’

Mavros took a deep breath. His mother didn’t witness the perma-clowning that took place between him and the Fat Man, but maybe she was right. Since the reappearance of the Son and the concomitant disruption to all their lives, plus the resumption of his turbulent relationship with Niki, he probably hadn’t been a bundle of charm and wit.

‘What is it you’re working on now, Mother?’ he asked, looking at a jacket proof. *‘The Athens Olympics – Boom or Bust? An Economist Writes.’*

‘It’s a very good book and a timely one,’ she said.

‘Yes, but how many jokes are there?’

‘Silly boy,’ Dorothy said, realising what he was up to. ‘Go and clean your flat. I’m sure that’ll cheer Niki up.’

‘I’m sure it would,’ Mavros said, getting up to leave. Seeing the Fat Man would cheer him up more.

‘So you’re going to the co-capital?’ Yiorgos said, using the term that was meant to make the northern city feel it was the match of Athens.

‘On Monday.’

‘Want some company?’

Mavros told him about Rachel, describing her appearance.

'You lucky bastard. What does Niki think about that?'

'Em . . .'

'You haven't told her? I didn't realise she'd taken both your balls.'

'Very funny. It's a . . . sensitive time.' Without going into detail, he told the Fat Man about the fertility issue.

'Oh, right.' Yiorgos was all at sea. He'd lived with his mother till he was in his late fifties – for convenience as much as anything else – and had very limited experience of the opposite sex; apart from female cadres, who were not encouraged to share their favours. 'So what are you going to do?'

'Search me. Nothing, probably.'

'That usually works. If she calls, I'll be sure not to mention the gorgeous Rachel.'

'I bet you will.' Mavros picked up a book from the cluttered coffee table. '*The Jews of the Greek Communist Party*? Since when did you care?'

The Fat Man shook a can of beer to see if there was anything in it and then drank. 'Just a bit of background reading. You never know what might come in handy.'

Mavros had told his friend about the Samuel case by phone the previous evening, but was taken aback by his friend's dedication. In the past it had been known to lead to disaster. 'Look, it's probably just a case of mistaken identity.'

'Doesn't matter. It's interesting. I knew a couple of Jewish cadres back in the Sixties. They were very dedicated. They felt they had even more to prove than the rest of us.'

Mavros was impressed. There weren't more than a few thousand Jews in Athens. The only one he'd met was a landlord back when he worked in the Justice Ministry. Mr Sabbetai was the only property owner he'd ever dealt with who was both fair and responsive to problems.

'Anyway, if you're up in the north, you'll need someone to hold the citadel here.'

Mavros looked around the chaotic room. The Fat Man's mother used to keep it immaculate, but now there were pizza boxes and beer cans everywhere and the paintings of the area around Sparta where the family originated were hanging crookedly. Dust would soon take over the maisonette. At least that would be a form of the collective ownership espoused by the party.

‘The citadel?’

Yiorgos followed his gaze. ‘Well, the rubbish dump.’

There was an outburst of hilarity, then they sent out for more pizza.

‘Here, why don’t you cook something?’ Mavros demanded. The Fat Man wasn’t only an expert at sweet delicacies. ‘Don’t answer. You have one major character flaw – you’re lazy as a pig in shit. And you’re a glutton.’

Yiorgos laughed. ‘So what? At least I can count.’