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Island of Secrets

Written by Patricia Wilson

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*Island
of Secrets*

Patricia Wilson

ZAFFRE

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For Bert, with love.

STARS DON'T CRY FOR ME.

Stars don't cry for me,
Because I sing at night.
Because I hurt in my heart, for the dark-haired girl.
Stars don't tell me off
Because I lament at night.

I'll tell my pain to the stars,
Because they're discreet.
Because they have patience
And listen all night,
While I tell them about my pain, and you.

Moon, you've never been
In the mess that I'm in.
And you have the right to ask
What I've become, why I'm unhappy.
But you can't understand, it's never happened to you.

Chapter 1

Crete, Present Day.

THE VILLAGE OF AMIRAS WAS STILL, like a theatre waiting for the curtain to rise. Heat shimmered from the cobbled streets. In front of the kafenion, empty chairs stood in haphazard groups between square tables. Outside the closed supermarket, hessian olive sacks hung over boxes of potatoes and vegetables, protecting them from the fierce Mediterranean light.

A herd of long-haired goats shifted into the shadow of the hilltop chapel. For a few seconds, the dull clatter of their bells broke the peace and quiet of siesta time.

In the lower village, a blue door squeaked open and a wide hipped, middle-aged housewife hurried up the narrow streets. From the shade of a vermilion bougainvillea, a skinny white cat sniffed the air, narrowed its eyes and watched the woman.

Inside one cottage, an elderly couple sat as still and silent as the stone walls. A crucifix hung over a garish icon of Saint George. The martyr seemed distracted from his dragon slaying by an object in the living room. A chocolate box overflowed with photographs, letters and mementoes in the centre of a low round table.

The old woman, Maria, reached for a faded picture of Poppy cradling her baby. She studied the image and recalled Poppy's last words, still fresh in her ears, although decades had passed.

Forget me, Mama. Forget I ever existed.

A shaft of sunlight streamed through the window illuminating Maria's scarred hands – an ugly reminder of the fire. It took time for those wounds to heal.

Her wizened face hardened with a decision.

'I will write to them, Vassili,' she said to the Einstein look-alike sitting by the fireplace. 'Voula can help me.' She replaced the picture and closed the box. 'God's getting impatient, and I'm tired of it all.' She crossed herself three times and prayer-locked her arthritic fingers.

Vassili nodded as though he understood, but passing years had eroded his grief. He dropped his amber worry beads and hobbled to her side.

'Don't waste your thoughts on what's dead and gone, old woman.' He kissed her forehead.

Despite his words, scenes from the past returned and filled Maria's head.

'I can't forget,' she whispered, staring at ghosts that crowded into the whitewashed room.

Vassili followed her gaze, unable to see those who haunted her.

Recognising his confusion, Maria wished the spores of old age would moulder her mind too. Regrets were useless now. The time had come for forgiveness and, before she died, Maria hoped to touch the cheek of Poppy's child.

'Angelika has a right to know the truth, old man, she's our granddaughter.'

'Mama, Papa, your dinner's here.' Voula crashed through the doorway, the multi-coloured fly curtain whipping around her faded black dress. She gripped a casserole pot against her belly and grinned, her face a friendly gargoyle.

'No need to shout, Voula, we're not deaf,' Maria said.

Vassili cupped a hand behind his ear. 'Eh, what's that? Ah, the food. No chance of any meat I suppose? I'll be glad when Lent's over. I can smell the lamb already.' He shuffled to the kitchen table.

‘Only a few more days until Easter, Papa. I’ve made stuffed peppers. Will you have a glass of Demitri’s wine?’ Voula clattered the dishes and then helped Maria out of the armchair. ‘Anything else?’ she asked, pouring cloudy red *krasi* into tumblers before serving their meals.

Maria cut open a green pepper, hunched over her plate and sniffed the food.

Voula stopped bustling and watched Maria taste the rice stuffing flavoured with herbs, currants, and pine nuts. When she approved with a nod, Voula took a breath and smiled.

‘I want to write to Poppy and Angelika,’ Maria said flatly.

Voula’s eyes widened. She glanced around the table top and then at Vassili who guzzled his food. ‘Are you sure, Mama?’ She lowered her voice to a whisper. ‘What if it starts up again, the trouble, after all these years? Isn’t it better to forget? We can’t bring back the dead.’

‘No,’ Maria said, her face drawn and thin above the mound of colourful vegetables. ‘I’ve decided.’

* * *

The next day, Voula asked, ‘How do you want to start the letter, Mama?’ Her pencil poised over a child’s exercise book.

Maria grunted. ‘I’ve thought about it for hours. The beginning is the most difficult part. If it’s not perfect, they’ll screw it up and throw it away. We’ve got one chance at this, Voula. We should address the envelope to Angelika and put both letters in it. Otherwise, I fear her mother might tear it up unopened. Now, let’s see, how shall we begin?’

‘I know, what about: *Dear Angelika?*’

Maria rolled her eyes. She wondered if her daughter-in-law had lost more of her marbles in sixty-five years than

Maria had in ninety. ‘Yes, very good, Voula,’ she snorted. ‘And then?’

Voula lifted and dropped her shoulders, which made her breasts quiver against her belly.

‘Write this then,’ Maria said. ‘I have wanted to send you a letter for a long time. I hoped to see you before I die, but I realise our meeting is unlikely.’

‘Mama!’

‘Oh, face the facts, Voula; I’m on my way out. Let’s get on with the letter before the Angel Gabriel replaces you as my personal assistant.’

Voula scratched her lip and nodded.

‘Now, write this, Voula: Angelika, please tell your mother I have never stopped loving her. Put your arms around her and kiss her from me. Poppy is in my heart. Say that I am sorry. *Truly sorry*. If I could have changed things, I would.’

‘Mama, how do we know Angelika reads Greek?’

‘We have to trust Poppy will have taught her. Anyway, we can ask Demitri to translate for us. What shall we write next? Perhaps something about Angelika’s father.’ Maria tilted her head to one side. ‘Yeorgo,’ she sighed. ‘Wasn’t he a beautiful man, Voula?’ Silent for a moment, Maria’s eyes became glazed. ‘That’s another difficult part. I wonder if Angelika knows.’

* * *

At the kitchen table, Voula sat opposite Maria and opened the exercise book. ‘It’s been a week and we’re no further, Mama. Perhaps we should write *To Be Continued* on the bottom and post it, just in case . . .’ Their eyes met.

Maria shook her head. ‘The letter to Poppy wasn’t too difficult, but I’m struggling with what to say to Angelika. Let’s keep working on it. I don’t want it posted until it’s perfect, Voula,

but it isn't as easy as I thought. What do you think we should write?'

'Tell her about her aunts, uncles and cousins. What about me and my children and grandchildren?' Voula said.

'No, I want it to be something important.' Their eyes met again. A cockerel crowed outside the door. '*Tut*, you know what I mean, Voula. Considering I was a teacher, I shouldn't find a simple letter so difficult. Make us a coffee and then we'll sit in the garden and crochet.'

They settled in the shade of an ancient olive tree, opposite the cottage door. Maria gazed down, over the village rooftops and the bell tower of the church of *Agios Yeorgios*. Her eyes followed the local bus, miniature in the distance, travelling the pale, dusty road beyond the village. Barely two cars wide, the road snaked between silver-green olive groves, descending to the beach and fishing village of Arvi. The sound of a tootling horn drifted up as the bus neared a bend. The Arvi gorge, clearly visible, was a deep slash in the red rock. From the sheer-sided canyon, griffin vultures launched off their narrow ledges to circle up, over Amiras, on the thermals.

The view drew her in, so peaceful and calm, showing no hint of the horrors Maria had witnessed from under that very tree, long ago. She sniffed the air and caught the scent of burning wood, lamb, and rosemary. Chops on someone's BBQ. The memory of a fire, her darling boys in mortal danger and the worst day of her life hit her with such startling clarity she whimpered.

Voula looked up from her crocheting. 'Are you all right, Mama?'

Maria huffed. 'Why shouldn't I be? Let's keep thinking about this letter.'

'Why don't we tell Angelika about the village, it might make her want to visit; or about the olive crop, or that the school

is closing.’ Voula’s crochet hook flashed and dipped through a half-made tablecloth.

‘So much to say, but nothing seems worthy of such a significant letter.’ Maria struggled with her work, the silk snagging on her crooked fingers, but if she lost a day she’d never return to her crocheting.

‘I know!’ Voula said, making Maria jump and two hours’ work unravel as it fell to the ground.

Maria took a swipe at her daughter-in-law, but missed. ‘Now look what you’ve made me do! This had better be good, Voula.’

Voula had trouble picking up the crocheting, her legs too fat to bend, and her belly too round for the reach. ‘Start by telling Angelika about Poppy and Yeorgo’s wedding day. Tell her you still have Poppy’s dress. Ask if she’d like to have it.’

‘Bravo! That’s a good idea, Voula. Let’s aim to get the letter finished in time for next Monday’s post.’

Grunting and panting, Voula reached for Maria’s work and came up flushed but triumphant. The moment she plopped into the garden chair, one of her black knee highs rolled to her ankle and the house telephone rang.

‘Virgin Mary!’ Voula cried.

They both crossed themselves three times.

Chapter 2

Flight EZY1105, The Same Day.

THROUGHOUT THE FOUR-HOUR flight to Crete, Angie worried about her trip. Suppose she found her mother's family, how might they receive her? She wished there had been some form of communication before her visit to the island, but Angie had no way of contacting her Cretan family. What if they misinterpreted her good intentions as meddling? Who were her father's family? Why did her mother leave Crete and break all contact with her family so many years ago? The answers, she believed, lay in the remote, mountain village of Amiras.

Outside the arrivals terminal, Angie tilted her head and closed her eyes allowing golden sunlight to wash over her face. Things would work out. Anyhow, they could hardly get worse. Her mother – Poppy – seemed to be on the verge of a breakdown. Angie worried about her all the time. The doctor had prescribed sleeping pills for Poppy and Angie feared if she didn't do something to help her, the next prescription would be tranquillisers.

To add to this, Angie had just lost her job – the career in publishing that was her lifeblood.

With Poppy's illness, and her own redundancy, Angie wondered if her wedding would ever take place. Until now, she hadn't realised how much of her life revolved around her mother and her career. Despite always trying to appear confident, privately she struggled with everything that had happened.

What would she have done without Nick to lean on? He promised they would have their wedding, house, children, and happy-ever-after no matter what. Angie couldn't wish for a more supportive or loving man. But, in the aftershock of her redundancy, she realised she needed to prove her value in the whole scheme of things, mainly to herself.

She *had* to get another job soon, but, more importantly, she must find out what was troubling her mother so much that it was making her ill. It seemed the closer Angie got to finalising her wedding plans, the more Poppy suffered.

Angie hated the idea of looking for employment. What if she wasn't considered good enough for a major publishing house? Would she become sad and lonely because life had been unfair, and end up on medication like her mother?

At least now she had time to try and get to the bottom of Poppy's wretched unhappiness. Her mother so vehemently objected when Angie said she was going to Crete to find her grandparents that Angie almost cancelled.

'Don't go! Angelika, please, I'm begging you!' Poppy had pleaded, and then she had cried – breaking Angie's heart. Thank goodness Nick had promised to keep an eye on her.

The situation was awful. In all her thirty-seven years, Angie had never gone against her mother like this. If she was honest, though, She was using her wedding as an excuse to find Poppy's estranged family. She suspected the root of her mother's worsening illness lay buried in Poppy's self-exile from her homeland. Every time Angie brought up the subject of Crete, her mother would have a relapse.

Angie took a breath and studied her surroundings. The airport seemed dangerously close to the city of Heraklion. Perhaps less than a mile away, she could see the hotels and buildings of

Crete's capital quite clearly. Through the airport's chain-link fence, she gazed across the runway to the blue sea beyond. From her window seat on the plane, for a horrible moment, Angie had feared they were landing on the water.

She turned and faced Crete's interior. Past rows of shiny coaches and parked hire cars, Angie studied a backdrop of high mountains. On the south side of those peaks, which surrounded the Lassithi Plateau, she hoped to find her mother's village.

Suddenly, Angie saw a window of opportunity. Alone in Crete with no fiancé, no mother and no job left her completely unrestricted. Free to find direction. She could decide what she wanted most from life; a career, the commitment of motherhood, or the wellbeing of her mother. Was a three-way compromise possible?

Happy tourists dragged luggage and lively children around her. Slightly light headed, but calmer, Angie absorbed their holiday mood. Her shoulders dropped and the grip on her suitcase relaxed.

Angie's confidence gathered strength. Her plan was simple, and so long as she could find her grandmother, she couldn't foresee any problems. Hopefully, in the mountain village of Amiras, she would discover the cause of her mother's anxiety attacks. Then her family could reunite and Poppy's health would improve in time for the wedding.

When Nick and Angie had children, they would be her everything, and her mother would make the perfect Granny Poppy. In her mind, she could see the loving environment that would surround her family and it filled her with happiness.

Angie realised these things didn't just happen, they had to be worked on, earned. This week in Crete, she had to forget about herself and try to get to the bottom of her mother's unhappiness.

Yet the feeling of loss and shame over the job severance hurt like a great emotional bruise in her chest.

She hired a car from smiling, helpful Greeks. They welcomed her to Crete with a map of the island and then hauled her suitcase into the boot. She set off for the island's south coast.

To drive on the 'wrong' side of the road seemed weird. At gear change, her left hand searched for the gearstick and bumped against the door panel. By the time her right hand found the gearstick, she had inadvertently taken her foot off the clutch and she crunched.

'Come on, Angie, you can do this,' she told herself, trying to calm down.

On the outskirts of the city, traffic thinned and the modern infrastructure with its magnificent fountains, glass buildings and palm-lined streets disappeared. Traffic lights didn't work. Pavements crumbled. Roadworks, shopping trollies, and old cars lay abandoned along the highway. Deciding to stop and practise her gear change, she pulled over at a broken kerb, turned off the engine, and closed her eyes.

Clutch, right hand down to the gearstick, change, de-clutch.

Startled by the sound of the passenger door opening, Angie swung around in her seat. An elderly couple bundled themselves, and two bursting Lidl supermarket bags, into the back of her car. In heavy Cretan dialect, the man was saying something Angie didn't understand.

'Wha . . .' she stammered, glancing about for help, and then realising she had parked at a bus stop with a three-legged plastic chair tie-tagged to the post.

The man, gruff voiced and ancient, flapped his hand at the windscreen and said, '*Páme!*' which Angie remembered meant: Let's go.

Ten minutes later she dropped the old couple and their shopping at a small stone house. An enormous pink-painted cement swan dominated the front garden, and a row of supermarket bags, pegged to a clothesline, fluttered in the breeze. They offered her coffee. She explained, in halting Greek, she had to get to Amiras. The man kept hold of the car's door handle while the woman toddled indoors. She returned with a napkin full of fat short-breads and a plastic water bottle.

'She make!' the old man shouted in English, pointing at the biscuits, then at the bottle of clear liquid. 'Is raki here, I make! Very good, very strong, like me.' Beaming, he slapped his belly.

Angie said goodbye and continued her journey, laughing and looking forward to sharing the incident with Nick.

When their children came along, Angie could see them stalling at bedtime, as all youngsters do. 'Mummy! Tell us that story about that old couple in Crete.' She imagined a glance and a smile from Nick as she took her darlings to bed. She could see it all. The perfect family.

Angie thought Poppy must have found it difficult adjusting to life in London when she came from such a friendly environment. Once again, she wondered what had made her mother leave all the sunshine and laughter of Crete. Despite Poppy's claims of family discord, Angie decided that enough time had passed. A line needed to be drawn under that era and the family reunite.

Spring flowers grew everywhere, exploding from roadsides, nodding a welcome as she passed. Lines of ochre earth separated olive trees and vine trellises across a quilted, undulating landscape. The countryside shimmered under a densely blue sky. In the distance, snow-covered peaks rose majestically to challenge

the afternoon sun. The island seemed much bigger, and more intense, than she had expected.

Angie pulled onto the verge of a mountain road and gazed over a plateau. Hamlets of whitewashed houses clustered in the valleys of rolling green foothills. She noticed red-roofed churches with domes and bell towers which rose from the centre of each village. Angie got out of the car and took a panoramic picture with her phone, drinking in the captivating scenery.

In an olive grove just below the road, a flock of sheep stopped grazing and stared with curious, unblinking eyes. Their mouths twitched as if about to speak, and the clanging bells that hung from their wide red collars were silent for a moment.

Warm sunlight rested on her shoulders like her mother's arm. Angie wondered if Poppy had ever stood on that spot and admired the picturesque countryside. She considered her mother's forty years of self-exile. Could Angie heal old wounds without knowing the cause?

The photographs she planned to take were a start. Pictures of Crete were sure to bring happy memories to Poppy. A good feeling settled over her. In the bright sunshine, everything seemed so much more simple than it had at home.

Back in the shade of the car she reached for the ignition key, hesitated, and rested her head on the wheel as doubts set in. What possessed her to go against Poppy's wishes? Angie feared her stupid, self-centred plan could lead to even more heartache.

Her grandmother knew nothing of Angie's arrival in Crete. She could leave for a tourist area, have a few days of sun, sea, and sand and return to London refreshed. Her mother would be happy – on the surface. Angie dwelled on the deep-rooted secrets tormenting Poppy. Thinking of her from such a great

distance, she realised the intense loneliness of the woman who had given her everything.

Angie remembered when she'd had a splinter of wood in her finger as a child. All that she touched gave her pain, even the things she loved. It hurt when her mother took the tweezers to it and prodded around. Angie had begged her to leave it alone.

If Angie could find the cause of Poppy's unhappiness, despite the discomfort of her digging about, healing would be possible. Relief flooded through her. She started the car and pulled away from the tranquil scene.

* * *

Half an hour along the deserted road, cleaved into the muted red and green mountain rock, the landscape became sparse and rugged. A flurry of silky-haired goats with long mismatched horns skittered across her path. Kids romped and skipped around long-bearded nannie goats. Roadside poppies and rockroses gave way to clumps of sage and vast swathes of pink anemones. Neat rows of olive trees, so iconic of the Mediterranean, were replaced by tangle-rooted pine or holm oak that towered precariously overhead. Her adrenalin peaked as the uneven highway twisted and turned, always climbing steadily.

She rounded a bend and suddenly, far below in the distance, she saw the sea. The majesty of the scene took her breath away. She wanted to stop but the road, dangerous and unforgiving, had an ornate religious shrine on each hairpin. She guessed many motorists had lost their lives on those sharp corners. When the road levelled, starting a gentle descent, Angie spotted a Shell sign. Horrified to see her petrol gauge showing red, she

turned off the air-con to save fuel. With her palms wet on the wheel and her hair stuck to the back of her neck, she drove into a dusty forecourt.

Glad to be out of the sweltering car, Angie reached for the petrol pump. She gave a friendly nod to a pensioner sitting in heavy shade outside the garage shop.

A young man dashed from the workshop. 'No! I'll do it. How much?' he said.

'Full, please.'

He shoved the nozzle in place, dragged a chamois from a bucket, and washed her dusty windscreen.

'Lovely, thanks,' Angie said admiring the sparkling glass. 'Can you tell me how far it is to Amiras Village?'

'Ten kilometres. It's just past the town of Viannos.' He glanced at her cabin bag complete with flight labels on the rear seat. 'Why Amiras? It's not a holiday place.'

'I'm looking for my grandmother, she lives there.'

'What's her name? My grandfather's from Amiras, he'll know her.' He nodded towards the old man.

'Kondulakis Maria, but I don't have an exact address.'

While he spoke to his grandfather, the fuel clonked to a halt: forty-nine euros. Angie pulled a fifty from her purse and looked up to see the pensioner spit into the dust. The dense shade hid his face before he turned into the shop.

'Keep the change,' Angie said. 'Thanks for the clean glass. Did your grandfather know my grandmother?'

'No.' Sullen now, the youth avoided her eyes and walked away.

Angie glanced in the rear-view mirror as she drove onto the road. The two men stood together, watching her.

* * *

In the main street of Viannos, the last town before her grandmother's village, Angie reversed into a tight space behind a red pickup. A goat stared from the back of the battered vehicle, bleating its lack of confidence in her parking. She crossed the road and sat at a kerbside table, grateful for the cooling shade of an enormous tree. Tangled branches overhead were bursting with spring's first leaves. Electrical wire and fly-speckled bulbs snaked through the boughs and swayed in the light breeze.

Angie didn't expect a problem with her next task, to find accommodation. On the web, she had seen many rooms for rent in the town of Viannos. But for now, she needed to relax with a coffee.

A waiter approached and followed her gaze. 'Is more than a thousand years old, this tree.'

'Wow, so old!' Angie placed her palm against the trunk and felt the warmth of the day in its gnarled bark. She soaked up the atmosphere of the town square. Perhaps Poppy had also relaxed there, touched the tree and smiled up into its branches.

The waiter snapped her back to the present. 'You want a drink, lady?'

Too tired to try speaking Greek, Angie said, 'Coffee, please.'

'Frappé, Nes, Greek coffee?'

'Frappé, thanks.' An iced coffee would cool her and perk her depleted caffeine level.

'Where you from?'

Angie patted her chest. 'England, English.'

'Ah, I am Manoli. I speaks perfect English. You want something, you tell me, okay?'

While he made her drink, Angie enjoyed the town chaos, amused that such a narrow street was part of the National

Highway. Viannos, scruffy, dilapidated, yet postcard-picturesque, charmed her. Honeysuckle crawled up a whitewashed building and tangled around blue louvre shutters. Perfume from the spidery flowers drifted on the early evening air.

Upright old women with proud faces wore widow's weeds and shuffled across the street, halting traffic. Occasionally, a stream of cars reversed so that oncoming vehicles could continue along the pothole-ridden thoroughfare. Local pensioners greeted each other with the vigour of intense friendship. Everyone smiled – and everyone shouted.

Manoli, broad, sun-drenched and handsome with come-to-bed eyes, brought Angie her frappé and then sat uninvited at her table. 'What's your name? Where you from in England? Are you married? You have sister? Why you here, holiday?'

Angie answered the questions, amused by his interest. 'No, I'm here to find my grandparents.'

'Your grandparents, who are they?' Manoli asked.

Angie hesitated, remembering the atmosphere at the garage. 'Kondulakis, in Amiras, it's near here, isn't it?'

Manoli's head jerked back as if slapped. 'Kondulakis, you is the granddaughter of Kondulakis Maria?' His eyes widened.

Angie gulped. 'To tell the truth, I'm not sure where they live, and they don't know I'm here. Do you know them? I mean, I might not even . . .'

'Wait.' Manoli loomed over her. He placed his big hand on her shoulder, pinning her to the seat while he pulled a mobile phone from his jeans and thumbed numbers. Moments later, he bellowed into the phone, his free arm gesticulating.

Angie thought of running but someone had boxed-in her car. She had trouble understanding Manoli's Cretan dialect but caught, 'I'm telling you, she's here, in front of me!' He thrust

his open hand towards Angie as if the person at the other end of the conversation could see her. 'I'm sure, *malákas* – the granddaughter!'

Unsure of what to expect, Angie placed both feet flat on the floor and shifted to the edge of her seat. Several people appeared from nowhere, almost surrounding her table. She glanced from one to the other. Blankly, they stared back.

Manoli turned to Angie. 'Your mother's name?'

'Poppy,' Angie said. 'It's short for Calliope.'

He rolled his eyes. 'Father's name?'

'Yeorgo, but he died,' she said.

Manoli squinted at her. He took a breath and then continued on the phone, throwing in the occasional *malákas* – a common expletive meaning wanker. His animated voice made pedestrians turn. More people stopped and gawked, heads cocked to one side.

An old man rested on his stick in the middle of the road. He glared at Manoli and then Angie. A truck pulled up with a hiss of airbrakes. Traffic came to a halt and tailed back. Everyone stared at the waiter.

'You go to Amiras tonight?' Manoli said.

Angie glanced at her watch and shook her head. 'No, in the morning.'

After a few words, Manoli ended the call. 'I telephone Demetri from the supermarket of Amiras. He is family of Kondulakis. Tomorrow, he will take you to your grandmother.'

'Thank you, you've been so kind,' Angie said.

The old man who had stopped traffic hobbled to her side. He glared at Angie, his mouth tight, eyes hard and narrow. His jaw thrust forward in a lined face that appeared to have seen the worst of life. After a moment of contemplation, his look softened and his mouth relaxed into a smile.

‘Welcome,’ he said reaching out and shaking her hand. ‘I am Thanassi Lambrakis.’

Angie’s heart seemed to leap into the back of her throat. ‘Lambrakis . . . I’m Lambrakis too!’ she cried. This was so unexpected. Was he from her father’s family? Could her quest to find her relations be so simple?

‘Of course you are,’ Manoli scoffed, with a smile. ‘Lambrakis and Kondulakis are the two most common names in this area. There are hundreds of us living here, and thousands spread around the world. We go back to Byzantium.’ He poked his chest with his thumb. ‘I am Manoli Lambrakis. Manoli comes from Emmanouil, meaning God. Lambrakis means the light.’ There was no doubting the pride on his face, as if the name Lambrakis was exclusively his.

‘The *little* light,’ the pensioner corrected. ‘Akis means little.’

Manoli stood taller and broadened his chest while throwing the pensioner a scowl.

He turned back to Angie. ‘Here, the surname comes first so, translated, my name becomes: The light of God.’ He spread his hands piously.

‘The *little* light of God,’ the pensioner said.

‘Go and sit down, old man!’ Manoli shouted.

Angie could hardly contain her excitement. ‘Manoli, are we related?’ she asked, the words tumbling out.

Manoli huffed and turned his head away, as if the thought of being related to an Englishwoman disgusted him. He replied with a sneer. ‘Plato said: if you go back far enough, you will find we are all related.’

Angie’s elation died. Nothing was ever that simple.

The old man chuckled, nodded amiably, and sat at another table. With a cough of black smoke, the HGV pulled away and traffic moved along the street.

Children swung on the back of Angie's chair, touched her arms and stroked her long hair while chattering to each other.

'Go, go,' Manoli said, flicking the backs of his fingers at the youngsters. He turned to Angie. 'The frappé is from me, you no pay, okay? You need anything, you tell me,' he said in what appeared to be a complete change of mood. He showed his palms in a gesture of openness – and then made an exaggerated wink.

Angie still needed a room. 'Is there a tourist information office?'

'Tourist information, what you want? I am tourist information. We no need office, we have kafenion, tell me.'

She hesitated, feeling vulnerable after the suggestive wink and not wanting helpful Manoli to know where she would sleep. 'Is there a hotel?'

Manoli grinned and whacked himself in the chest. 'Ah, I have room.'

Oh, crap.

'A very good room – special price for you – over my kafenion.' Manoli glanced at her breasts, then back to her face. A triumphant smile blazed across his face as he pointed to a flaking balcony.

'Thanks, Manoli, but I need a quiet place away from the road.'

His smile fell and with less enthusiasm he said, 'Okay, my cousin have rooms, very nice, very quiet. How many days? I call her.'

* * *

Angie hauled her suitcase up a steep backstreet. The four-by-three white-painted room contained a new pine bed, a wardrobe, and a tiny modern bathroom that had surely been tiled by a blind man. Finding only one small towel, a coat hanger, and no soap, she locked the door and went in search of a store.

On her return, Angie's stomach rumbled and Manoli's kafention seemed the easy option.

'Welcome back, lady. The room is good, yes? What you want?' Manoli peered at her supermarket bag. 'What you buy?'

'Nothing exciting, Manoli, but I'm hungry, is there a menu?'

'Why you want menu? Tell me what you like, I am menu.'

'Moussaka? Lamb chops? Sardines?'

'Ah, all finished, we have pizza, any sort of pizza except four seasons, because we only have three,' Manoli said.

Angie couldn't figure out that little gem. 'What about Greek salad?'

'But of course, Greek salad. This is Greece. Always we have the Greek salad! I don't have to say, because *I* make the best Greek salad in Crete. Everybody knows it.'

Angie laughed. 'And a glass of dry red, please.'

While he busied himself preparing her food, night fell. She studied the locals and realised she didn't look out of place at all. With her olive skin, brown eyes, and long dark hair, she could easily be mistaken for a Cretan woman. She had just arrived, yet already the wish to belong stirred inside her.

Bathed in harsh light from the bulbs in the old tree, Angie wondered about the village of Amiras and her grandparents. Then, she thought about her mother and hoped she was doing the right thing. If only she had better understood Manoli's phone call. Still, her mother's parents and family were *her* family too, she had a right to meet them, to know them. Yet, despite her internal pep-talk, a niggling spark of anguish flickered in the back of her mind.

* * *

The following morning, Angie checked herself in the mirror. What would they think of her? First impressions were so important. Her sigh steamed the glass.

Calm down, she told herself. *They're family, why get stressed?*

She wore her best clothes and jewellery, and slicked her hair into a ponytail. Ashamed to realise she had forgotten to bring a gift, she decided to buy something from a local shop. First, she needed a coffee.

At the kafenion, Angie dropped into a chair.

'Madam, you go to see your *Yiyá* now, yes?' Manoli beamed.

'Coffee first. I'm nervous, Manoli. Do I look all right?' Her skin felt damp, her heart fluttery.

'Very nice.' His grin was ridiculous.

A pretty donkey trotted along the road. An old man in dusty dungarees and a black leather cap rode side-saddle, drumming his heels against the beast's belly. Bits of fodder fell like confetti from a mound of vegetation roped over the donkey's hindquarters.

Iridescent in the Mediterranean sunlight, a bright yellow petrol-tanker crept along behind man and beast. An occasional hiss of airbrakes interrupted the steady clip-clop. Angie noticed the tanker driver was reading his newspaper while he inched down the street. These people are so laid back, she thought.

Angie's grandparents would surely be pleased to see her, after so many years. This early step towards a family reunion was down to her. It hadn't been easy, and she regretted hurting her mother but she hoped Poppy was going to thank her for making this first move.

'Should I buy my grandmother cakes or chocolates, Manoli?'

'Bah! Take something that will stay when you've gone. You see the flower shop? They have beautiful lemon trees. You cannot have too many lemon trees. I make coffee, you buy a tree. Fetch it here and I'll put it in your car when you pass.'

Angie bought her tree, over a metre high and bearing four fat lemons.

‘What you pay?’ Manoli asked.

‘Eight euro.’

‘They rob you.’ His outspread fingers stretched towards her. ‘These are not the clothes to wear for shopping.’ He plucked a lemon and took it into his kitchen.

* * *

Angie drove out of Viannos with the tree sprawled across the passenger seat. Leathery, dark-green foliage bounced against the hatchback window, filling her car with a citrus zing. The horseshoe-shaped village of Amiras huddled on the mountainside and overlooked the Libyan Sea.

She saw the WW2 memorial, a simple procession of larger-than-life men cut from slabs of cream marble. The figures lined the road that led down into the village. Angie wondered if the monument was built after Poppy had left. She pulled over and took a photo through the car window.

With the phone still in her hand, she flicked back to the last image captured at home. Nick’s sleeping face, calm, dreamless, satiated. His thick dark hair falling boyishly over his forehead. His mouth, relaxed in slumber, reminded Angie of his wide, honest smile and beautiful, even teeth.

Angie adored watching him sleep. It had seemed slightly weird to photograph him without his knowing, but she had wanted something of the moment, with all its preceding pleasure and encompassing happiness to take to Crete with her.

They had made love, *really* made love. The room filled with flickering candle light. Puccini playing in the background,

champagne on ice, and creamy Belgian chocolates on the bedside table.

Perhaps because they were about to be parted for a week – for the first time in their three years of living together – they seemed even closer than ever. An intense, yet gentle passion grew between them. This new experience was nothing like their usual boisterous sex; noisy, athletic, and breathlessly enjoyable.

They had sprawled on the sofa with a Greek takeaway before them and their favourite old movie playing. Between feeding each other stuffed vine leaves and tiny lamb chops, they sang along to; ‘As Time Goes By’ and ‘It Had to Be You.’ Nick did his Humphrey Bogart impression growling, ‘Play it again, Sam,’ at Angie. She tried to flutter her eyelashes and look sad, but ended up giggling.

They murmured words that meant everything and nothing; odd lines from films, snippets, sensual promises and shared dreams.

They found themselves laughing, touching, and frequently kissing. When night drew in, their caresses became urgent, stirring a deeper desire to be closer, naked, and wrapped in each other’s arms.

Finally, as an aria from *Madam Butterfly* filled the bedroom, Angie clung to Nick, while a crazy emotional roller-coaster both melted and exploded inside her at the same time. Tingling surges of passion raced through her body. Every nerve ending set afire. She lost focus, breathing heavily, consumed by overwhelming pleasure so intense she called out his name. Again and again, she almost surfaced, and then drowned in painfully sweet euphoria until she lay, limp and exhausted, on damp sheets.

After making love, she had cried, unable to say why. He held her to his chest, stroking her long dark hair until her tears were spent.

* * *

Angie sat back in the car seat, closed her eyes, and allowed a great wave of emotion to wash over her. She remembered his last words before a goodbye kiss at the airport.

‘I love you Angie Lambrakis. I’m going to miss you,’ he said. ‘You must call me *at least* ten times a day.’

Angie sighed, dropped her phone onto the passenger seat, and returned to the mission in hand.

The small chapel next to the war memorial appeared quite modern and new. Through the open doors, she could see hundreds of highly polished gold lamps that hung from the ceiling. She took another picture, wondering about the significance of so many lanterns. A question to ask if conversation got awkward at her grandmother’s.

Angie realised she was stalling. This plan to find out what had upset her mother so much, for all these years, was only the half of it. She also hoped to learn about her father, Yeorgo. Poppy said he was killed. Died in the army before she was born. There had to be more than that, but her mother would never talk about him.

Angie needed to connect with her Dad. Was that so hard for Poppy to understand? She wanted to see her father’s birthplace, where he grew up, if any of his siblings were still alive. And discover Poppy’s Cretan life and family too. She was searching for her roots and knew she couldn’t be completely happy and able to start this new phase of her life until she found them.

A coach pulled up, tourists tumbling out, camera phones at the ready. Angie put the car in gear and drove down into the village of Amiras.

A bakery, kafenion, supermarket, and post office clustered around a central square. She parked opposite the supermarket. Men, sitting outside the neighbouring kafenion, stretched their necks and stared.

'*Yia sas!*' Angie called, knowing the stranger should greet first. They grinned and reciprocated.

She slipped into the dimly-lit shop, blind for a moment after the bright sunlight. Behind the counter, a handsome, thickset, forty-ish man looked up from a basketball game on TV. He stubbed his cigarette into a full ashtray and stood.

'Angelika? I am Demitri, welcome.' He shook Angie's hand, his smile cautious, eyes curious. 'Your grandmother's waiting.'

'Thank you, Demitri. I've brought her a lemon tree. It's in the car.' Angie blushed, wishing she had bought cakes too, or a nice piece of cut glass. Elderly people liked to receive ornaments. She had heard the Cretans were exceedingly generous. Now she was going to look mean and penny-pinching and she realised how much she wanted them to like her. Almost overcome by the longing to meet her family and be accepted, she watched Demitri's face.

'A lemon tree?' His smile widened. 'Maria is going to like that. Leave the car open, someone will bring it to the house.'

He didn't bother to close the supermarket door. They walked fifty metres along the narrow road and turned left at a row of green rubbish bins. Skinny, long-legged cats with grubby noses searched among the refuse. They stared with glassy eyes, their tails straight, the tips flicking. Angie followed Demitri up uneven cement steps flanked by trees that met overhead.

The air chilled in the shade. Angie's thoughts returned to her mother. Poppy had grown up here, played as a child and walked with Angie's father. What made her mother leave Crete? Why wouldn't she talk about Angie's father or her homeland? Muddled by melancholy, and a sudden dread of meeting her grandmother, Angie felt apprehensive about what lay ahead.

She searched for an excuse to turn back, afraid there was more to the family breakup than a simple quarrel. What if deep hatred awaited her? Why hadn't she thought of this earlier? Her grandmother might be deranged, angry and violent, and as much against a reunion as Poppy.

Perhaps this was the reason Poppy objected to the visit with such vehemence? Despite the shade, sweat prickled Angie's forehead.

She jumped when a rust-coloured hen ran across the path. Her legs seemed leaden, her body reluctant to move forward. At the top of the climb they broke into sunshine. A short walk took them to a red-roofed cottage. The garden overflowed with flowers. Riotous clumps of reds, pinks and purples fought for space, plants bursting from an odd collection of buckets and cans.

Two gnarled olive trees threw mottled shade over the area. In the corner of the plot was a white-painted stone oven. Long nails driven into the mortar supported an axe, scythe, and mattock. The glint of fresh steel along age-blackened blades suggested the tools were newly sharpened. From one stout olive branch, a length of chain with a couple of heavy butcher's hooks hung as still as death. Behind the trees lay a freshly-turned rectangle of red earth furrowed by neat rows of vegetables.

Aware of her breathlessness after the steps, Demitri asked, 'Are you okay, Angelika?' The overweight smoker seemed unaffected by the climb.

‘Give me a moment, I’ll be fine.’ She filled her lungs and blew slowly.

‘Don’t worry, it’s the altitude,’ Demitri said. He nodded at the house. ‘This place is about two hundred years old, and the trees are three times that.’ He pulled a multi-coloured fly curtain aside and shouted, ‘*Yiyá!*’

Angie pressed her hand against her chest and felt her heart thudding. She was about to meet her grandmother. Through the low entrance, two stone steps led down between cottage walls half a metre thick. She entered a cool, white-painted lounge with simple furniture. A gaudy icon of Saint George, displaying his dragon slaying skills, hung on the longest wall and a converted copper gaslight was suspended over a round, wooden table. A sharp-eyed matriarch sat on the sofa.

Chapter 3

ANGIE'S GRANDMOTHER, MARIA, WORE a faded blue dress and a washed-out floral scarf over her white hair. In the dim living room, the old lady appeared strangely fragile, almost ghostly, as if she had appeared in a dream.

'Hello, *Yiyá*.' Angie cranked up a smile. 'How are you?'

The old woman fixed Angie with a squint. Her sharp eyes darted over Angie's face, scrutinising every detail. She frowned at Angie's hands, stared at her feet, and came back up to meet her eyes.

Hardly breathing, Angie chewed her lip. A bead of sweat slithered down her spine.

After a moment, Maria's tension fell away and her eyes twinkled. She patted the seat beside her. When Angie sat, Maria cupped her chin, peered at her again and pressed a shaky hand against Angie's cheek.

'Oh, Poppy . . . your precious child has come to me after all these years,' Maria whispered. 'It's a miracle. I've waited so very long.' The old lady's eyes brimmed.

Angie's excitement peaked, then, to her dismay, her grandmother's tears spilled. She pulled a pack of tissues from her handbag and gently dried the old lady's face, worried that her grandmother might not be strong enough for so much emotion. But despite her tears, Maria seemed genuinely pleased to see her.

‘Sorry, sorry, please don’t cry, *Yiyá*,’ Angie pleaded. ‘I didn’t mean to upset you.’

Despite her great age, the high cheekbones and classical beauty of Maria’s youth shone through her deeply-lined face. She sniffed and nodded, taking the tissue from Angie and dabbing her nose.

‘Hello, Angelika,’ she finally said, her voice weak but clear. She pulled Angie forward to kiss her cheeks and forehead. But then her emotions rose again. ‘Oh my poor child . . .’ she muttered, shaking her head, allowing fresh tears to fall. ‘How I’ve missed you all these long years.’

That would be Poppy, Angie thought, wrapping her arms around her fragile grandmother and allowing Maria to cry on her shoulder. A great rush of relief, and love, coursed through her and, as she held the old lady in her arms, she found herself sniffing back tears too.

Before they had a chance to chat, the neighbours arrived. Angie dried her grandmother’s face, and then her own. They held hands and smiled at each other as the room filled with local women. All the questions for her grandmother went on hold and, deep inside, Angie found herself bursting with affection for the woman she had only met minutes earlier.

‘*Yia sas!*’ or, ‘Welcome, welcome!’ the local women shouted. Several were proud to speak English, eager to practise the language, others were shy and smiling. No one came empty-handed. Supermarket bags, stuffed to their over-stretched handles with local fruit and vegetables, lined the wall. Plates of cookies, candied peel and olives for Angie to take to England, covered the round table. The village people with their broad smiles and curious eyes had no concept of ‘Luggage Allowance: twenty kilos’.