

PRAISE FOR
THE UNSPEAKABLE ACTS OF ZINA PAVLOU

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'Dark, gripping, utterly brilliant. Everyone needs to know this story.'

Susan Allott

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Unspeakable
ACTS OF
Zina Pavlou

ALSO BY ELENI KYRIACOU

She Came to Stay

THE
Unspeakable
ACTS OF
Zina Pavlou

ELENI KYRIACOU



An Aries Book

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*This work of fiction is inspired by true events,
and dedicated to the memory of Hella Christofis and
Styllou Christofi.*

PROLOGUE

They have told so many lies about me.

It's a terrible thing to be accused of a crime so dreadful. To be told every day that you're lying, when you are almost certain that you're not.

Their stories spin above my head, their words snagging in my hair. I dig my fingers in to pull them out. This morning I found black strands on my pillow. I must have tried to untangle the lies as I slept.

I don't speak their language and they look at me wary-eyed. Everything they ask me is kneaded into Greek through an interpreter and whatever I reply she twists back into English. She's young and I can tell by the set of her shoulders and the pull of her mouth that she regrets taking this work.

Today, again, she asked me if perhaps I'd committed this crime when I wasn't in my right mind. And I repeated what I'd told the doctor. I did not do this unspeakable thing. I may be uneducated, I may be poor, but I'm not mad. I'm a respected woman in my village. And, yes, it's true I didn't like the deceased, but it is also true that her disregard for me was well known. Even my son – who has abandoned me, but I'll save that for another time – even he will tell you that.

During her visit, the interpreter girl caught me off guard. She

said she'd come to see how I was, but I keep forgetting she works for them and now I'm worried sick because I said too much. Before I could stop myself, I mentioned the first time, years ago, when they said I'd killed the other one.

Her face went white and I knew I'd made a terrible mistake. But if she asks again I'll press my lips together to stop the story slipping out.

I'd like to see Anna but they say I can't. What have they told her? Does she wonder where her *yiayia* is? Or worse, does she believe what they say about me? She may be eight, but she's clever, that granddaughter of mine. She's here, always. A pebble of joy, held tight in my pocket, her imprint on my palm.

All I do now is wait – for their questions to stop, for the visitors who never arrive, for the officials to decide when I'll go to court. And then, once the jury's heard everything, I'll wait for their decision: will they set me free or will I be hanged?

The verdict will be translated through the girl. She'll know everything before I do. At times she cannot look me in the face. I don't think she can bear it.

CHAPTER ONE

London, July 1954

Eva had just slipped into sleep when the thud made her jump. Had the baby fallen from her cot? Had she forgotten to pull up the railing? She sat up quickly, searching the room in the milky light. Nothing. There was no railing, because there was no cot and no baby.

Another thump – it was the door.

‘Mrs Georgiou, you up?’ A man’s voice, outside their bedsit, his London accent all colliding vowels. ‘It’s the police.’

Jimmy shuffled further down the bed and pulled the sheet over his head. Sighing, she swung her legs round and placed her feet on the cool, cracked lino. She tiptoed towards the door and turned the key, cursing the way it always stuck. She opened it a crack and recognised the face in the hallway.

‘Sorry, miss – I mean madam.’ It was the same young constable they’d sent last time. Roberts? Robinson? Their names all sounded the same. He looked twenty, if that. ‘Can you come?’

‘*Now?* I’ve been working late. Can’t it wait?’

A lock of hair fell into her eyes and, as she pushed it away, she felt her thin nightdress pull across her chest. She stood back a little, letting the door shield her.

‘Who’s there?’ called Jimmy.

‘PC Robertson,’ he said, trying to poke his head around the door. ‘Sorry for the disturbance, sir. We need your wife’s services.’

Jimmy turned over and grunted an obscenity in Greek, something about the man's mother. It was always about the mothers, thought Eva. Of course, Robertson didn't understand.

'Serious case,' he continued, speaking past her into the room, as if Jimmy cared. 'Need to get things straight. But the suspect doesn't speak a word.' Then he looked at Eva. 'You'll come? Sarge will have my guts for garters if I go back without you.'

Eva sighed. 'Give me five minutes.'

She shut the door on him and went to the sink where she ran a trickle of water. Jimmy's plate was on the draining board, unwashed, a few beans still clinging to the edge. She'd started taking more shifts at the Café de Paris and he'd had dinner alone again. She splashed some water over her eyes, patted her face dry and wiped her hands down her hips.

'You really going?' asked Jimmy. 'You haven't been back long.'

She shrugged in the dark but didn't say anything. She walked past him to get her clothes and he reached out his hand to touch her leg but she moved away.

He sighed. 'They've got you on a string, Evie.'

It was money, wasn't it? They'd agreed the plan months ago. Step one, save up and move somewhere bigger. They'd made a start but it wasn't nearly enough. Step two, try to get pregnant again. Step three, hold on to the baby. Tight this time. Last week she'd turned twenty-nine.

She rummaged past her uniform and found the dress she'd been wearing earlier that day. Luckily she hadn't bothered to rinse out her stockings when she'd returned from the Café, so she pulled them on again and stepped into her shoes.

Grabbing her bag from the chair, she turned to leave.

'See you later?' Jimmy said, half sitting up. 'Before I go to the bakery?'

'I'm not sure – it might take a while.'

He nodded. 'Bye then.'

She started for the door, walked back and leaned down to give him a quick kiss on the cheek, not waiting for him to return it.

In the hallway, PC Robertson was leaning against the bannister. 'Careful,' she said. 'It's rickety.' Nothing in this dump felt safe or sure. He stood back and looked down the stairwell. She had often wondered what that fall would feel like; she'd pictured surrendering to it last Christmas when things had unravelled.

'I'm just out front,' he said. 'We'll be there in a jiffy.'

While the car lurched towards the station, Eva watched the empty Camden streets glide by. Before she'd lost the baby, she and Jimmy had loved walking at night, especially by the canal. If you knew where the trouble was and where it wasn't, you were safe on these streets. During their long walks, they would talk about their plans, what they hoped to squeeze from life. There was none of that now, of course. They still ate a meal together once a week in a café, but the conversation between them had dwindled and she suspected these dinner dates might fall away soon, too.

The constable was prattling on and she made herself pay attention: 'You're the only Greek interpreter we can rely on,' he said, taking a corner with gusto. 'You know Harry C, right? Harry Christos? He got done for forgery last week so he's resting at Her Majesty's Pleasure.' He laughed. 'And old man Whatshisname-opoulos, he must've moved out or died because we can't get an answer from him.'

She felt out of sorts, not ready. She hated not having time to do her face. She quickly ran her fingers over her hair, checking it wasn't sticking up at the back, then pulled her compact from her bag, turning slightly because she didn't like applying lipstick in front of anyone.

'What can you tell me?' she asked, as she Max Factored her bottom lip. 'About the case?'

'Well, Sarge took down her statement.'

'Her?' Eva jolted in her seat and just missed getting lipstick all over her chin.

'Yes – didn't I say? Not sure we've had a Greek woman in before. You ever translated for a woman?'

‘Once or twice, a robbery, that kind of thing.’ She blotted her lips on a handkerchief then dropped everything back in her bag. ‘But it’s rare.’ Despite the muggy evening, she felt cold and realised she’d come out without her mac. She recognised the street and could see the sapphire-blue beacon of the station ahead.

‘Well, there are plenty of women arrested,’ he continued. ‘But she’s not the usual type – you know, pickpockets and prosti—well. Working girls, if you get my meaning.’ He coughed and swung into a parking space.

‘So how did the sergeant get a statement? If she doesn’t speak English?’

‘Well, she’s got a few words, but *very* few.’ He yanked up the handbrake and turned off the engine. ‘We got her son to question her and translate her answers. He’s been here years, so his English is pretty good. But we have to get it all checked, of course. So it’s above board.’

He jumped out of the car, ran around the front and opened the door for her. ‘It’s a big case, so assuming Harry C doesn’t get out on good behaviour, you never know... You might get a lot of work out of this.’ He tapped the side of his nose twice as though he were doing her a favour and she should keep it quiet, although of course he had no say in the matter.

Eva pictured the money she could earn. Last time it had been five shillings an hour. That was twice as much as she got checking coats at the Café de Paris.

He sprinted up the stairs and held the door open for her, and she hurried through.

‘So what’s she done?’ Eva asked, as he signed her in. ‘The suspect – what’s she accused of?’

The constable leaned in a little too close and a sickly floral smell hit her nostrils. Then his mouth moved and she saw some crunched sweets inside.

‘Murder,’ he said, and slipped his hand into his pocket.

‘You’re joking?’

He shook his head, and one corner of his mouth tugged up, pleased at the effect he'd had.

'Wish I was,' he said. 'Terrible crime scene.'

Eva took a deep quiet breath and tried to get hold of herself. *It's a job, that's all.* She'd been on the Met's books for five years now and she'd translated for dozens of London's thieves, thugs and swindlers. But she'd never been hired to speak up for a murderer.

Robertson pulled out a small lilac box and rattled the Parma Violets at her.

'Want one?'

She declined.

'Shall we?' He motioned towards the corridor.

Her heels click-clacked on the tiled floor as they walked towards the holding cells.

'Who?' she asked, her voice quieter now.

'What?'

'Who's she killed – or meant to have?'

'Daughter-in-law,' he said. Eva slowed down. 'Gruesome,' he continued. 'Looks like she was strangled and set alight. There was some blood as well, so she was probably bashed about a bit, too.'

Eva stood still.

'You alright? Mrs Georgiou?'

Her mouth filled with saliva and she forced herself to swallow hard. She couldn't be sick, not right there in the corridor. *Breathe. Just breathe.* She put her hand to her forehead as though trying to shield her eyes.

'You alright?' he asked again. Then he laughed. 'You're not going to faint on me, are you?'

She shook her head.

'I'm fine.'

'It's shocking, I know, but best you hear it now before you go in. And she's a tiny thing – you won't believe it when you see her.'

Eva looked down the corridor. She could turn and walk out

and never have to face the accused, hear the details of the case, sit and listen to her tell her side then translate it all.

‘*Who* did you say was the interpreter at the scene?’ she asked.

‘Her son.’

‘You think she killed her daughter-in-law and you asked her *son* to be an interpreter?’

There was a silence.

‘The dead woman’s *husband*?’

Robertson nodded then gave a little shrug. ‘Nobody else around, and he’d got back from work an hour or so after we got there. We needed someone – she was talking gibberish. We had no choice.’

He waved her forward. ‘Come on,’ he said, pointing to a door. ‘She’s in here.’