

Where *the*
Wandering
Ends

A NOVEL

YVETTE MANESSIS CORPORON



HARPER MUSE



Where the Wandering Ends

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Published by Harper Muse, an imprint of HarperCollins Focus LLC.

Interior design by Emily Ghattas

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[CIP TO COME]

Printed in the United States of America

22 23 24 25 26 LSC 5 4 3 2 1

What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.

—PERICLES



HARPER
MUSE

One

Corfu

September 1946



Somewhere in the distance she could hear Mama's voice calling her, but Katerina willed her away, if only for a little while longer.

She was happy here, swinging back and forth under the shade of this beautiful old olive tree. Up and down she swung, soaring higher and higher and then floating back again. She could see the entire island from up here, the ancient gnarled and knotted olive tree groves, the weathered old church, the cemetery overcrowded with stones and loved ones long gone, and even Clotho's pristine house tucked into the hillside with her lush garden overlooking the sea. And as she soared higher, Katerina gazed beyond the jagged cypress-covered cliffs, across the azure Ionian Sea, to the distant horizon where fishing boats bobbed, silhouetted against the sun, and dolphins swam and jumped in unison.

The silk ribbons adorning her hair tickled her face each time she lifted back up toward the sky and her white silk dress filled with air like a balloon

each time the swing brought her back down. And then a smile unfurled across her face as she spotted her. The golden woman had come to her again.

She saw her in the distance, across the hillside, walking toward Katerina's swing. Her hair flowed free and loose behind her, lifting and tilting up and down like a sail, expertly catching the maestro winds. Katerina squinted her eyes as she leaned in as far as the swing would allow, but still she could not quite make out the woman's face. Even so, the golden woman's smile radiated light as pure and bright as the midday sun. Katerina felt so full of love for this woman, but yet she did not know who she was or why she came to visit. How could that be?

Katerina continued to swing higher and higher as she watched the woman walk toward her, closer and closer. Once more her body tilted up toward the sun. She leaned her head back, as far as it would go, and felt the wonder of weightlessness as her hair floated behind her.

She soared higher, pushing the boundaries between heaven and earth, but she knew the woman would not let anything happen to her. The woman was closer now. Close enough for Katerina to smell her sweet scent, the perfume of the village itself; roses and wisteria and rosemary and basil, fermented on the breeze.

The woman was almost there; Katerina could almost see her face through the haze of light. Katerina reached out her hand, imploring her to come closer.

Please, she thought, knowing the woman could read her innermost thoughts, a silent understanding between them. She mouthed the word as she released the swing to go to her. "Please . . ."

"Katerina."

Katerina opened her eyes. Her mother, Maria, was smiling above her. "Were you dreaming? You were smiling. It must have been a good dream."

Katerina rubbed her eyes and sat up on the cot, tucked into the corner below the icons of the Virgin Mary and Saint Spyridon that were affixed to the wall with black nails. Crosses made from dried palms were tucked

between the icons and the wall, replaced yearly after the Palm Sunday service. The older palms were burned every year after church, as it would be a sin to simply throw them away.

She changed from her yellowed and threadbare nightshirt to a plain brown wool dress, handed down from her cousin Calliope, that buttoned from her throat to past her knees and itched despite the undershirt and slip she wore beneath. Katerina walked out to the terrace where Mama had breakfast waiting on the table in the shade of the grape arbor that dripped with green orbs. The grapes filled the air with their sweet scent. A symphony of buzzing bees darted about. Through the morning mist, she could see the shoreline of Albania to the east and the silhouette of the tiny island of Erikousa to the north. Katerina nibbled on the crust of yesterday's bread drizzled with just a hint of honey and sipped from a cup of goat's milk, which was still warm. She tried her best to keep her head straight and not wince as Mama brushed and plaited her hair.

"I have to tell Baba what Calliope said yesterday. She's so mean, Mama. Why is she so mean?"

"Children often mimic what they see at home, Katerina. Calliope's mother is not a kind woman. I hate to speak ill of your father's sister, but your Thea Sofia is a vicious gossip and she puts her nose where it does not belong. It doesn't make it right, but Calliope is behaving the way she sees her mother behave. Just steer as clear of her as you can," Mama said.

"The way you do, Mama?"

Mama said nothing. She just kept plaiting Katerina's hair.

With her straight, sharp nose, fair hair, and green eyes, Mama looked nothing like the other dark and sturdy mothers in the village. Mama had come to Corfu twelve years earlier as an anxious young bride after meeting Baba at a cousin's wedding on her family's island of Tinos. After a few bottles of wine, and an intense negotiation by their fathers over the restaurant's finest ouzo, it was decided by the end of that first night that Mama and Baba would be married. Mama, just sixteen, and Baba, twenty, had never met before that day. The wedding took place in a small village church

with only a handful of family members in attendance. Mama's wedding day had been the last time she had seen her own family or stepped foot on Tinos.

With no dowry to speak of and no mother to send her off with words of comfort or advice, all the young bride brought with her to Corfu were her memories and a few trinkets: faded photos, yellowed linens, and her parents' wedding crowns all kept locked away in her mother's old keepsake chest.

Katerina loved to sit with Mama and look through all of the treasures in that chest. Each time they did, Mama would place the crowns on Katerina's head and smile, her eyes misting over as she promised to take Katerina to her beloved island of Tinos to visit the magnificent church of the Virgin Mary, the Panagia of Tinos.

"We'll go to Tinos together one day," Mama always promised. "And Panagia will bless you, Katerina. She will bless and protect you like she does all of the virtuous girls who pray to her."

Katerina couldn't wait for the day that she could go and pray to Panagia in Tinos. She knew exactly what she would pray for and hoped the Virgin would be kind enough to make her beautiful, too, just like her mother.

Katerina especially loved when Mama told her the story of how the church came to be. Katerina sat in awe each time Mama explained how Panagia herself visited an old, pious nun in her dream. Panagia spoke to the nun, telling her where the villagers should dig to find her buried icon. Not long after that, the wooden icon was found in that very spot. Katerina hoped that maybe one day she, too, might be visited by Panagia and told where to find buried treasure. She would like that very much.

As much as she loved hearing stories about her mother's island, Katerina often wondered why they had never been back to visit and why none of their relatives came to visit on Corfu. She wondered, too, if her mother was lonely with no one to keep her company all day but the kittens, chickens, and the family's stubborn skinny goat. Mama never joined the other mothers who met sometimes to clean the cemetery, mill their olives together, or

pick chamomile and oregano from the mountainside. Katerina had asked a handful of times if her mother had a best friend, if she might come visit, and if she had a daughter for Katerina to play with. But each time, Mama always found another chore for Katerina, insisting she urgently needed water from the fresh spring or the floor needed to be swept or kindling gathered. So Katerina had simply stopped asking. She never lost hope, though, that the day would come when she would at last learn all of the secrets her mother kept guarded and locked away as tightly as the items in the keepsake chest.

Each night Katerina prayed before bed, down on her knees, back straight with hands clasped, just the way Mama had taught her. Each night she asked the Virgin Panagia to help her grow as big as her obnoxious cousin Calliope, who called Katerina a baby and declared herself practically a full-blown woman. Katerina also prayed for their chickens to lay more eggs, for her father to catch more fish, and for their old, tired goat to produce more milk. She prayed that soon they would make the trip across the sea to Tinos.

Her prayers had yet to be answered, but Katerina had learned to be patient. With so much suffering all around them, she knew God was probably busy answering the prayers of other, perhaps more needy children. Night after night, as her knees bled on the floor, scabs cracking open like eggshells, she promised herself that she would be patient with God as she awaited her turn. But deep-down Katerina hoped he would hurry up already. She was growing quite tired of being small and hungry with ugly, scabbed knees.

“What will you study today?” Mama asked Katerina as she finished the plait, fastening the end with a piece of black yarn.

“Mr. Andonis said we’ll continue along with Odysseus and his travels. I’m so excited. I love the part when he comes home and no one knows it’s him. Only the dog,” she said, using her sleeve to wipe the milk from her lip.

“As you should be, my love. Pay close attention,” Mama said. “Remember, you are the first girl in our family to be taught to read and write. Each day

you leave this house, you take me with you. Through your eyes, it is as if I am learning too, as if I am sitting beside you in your classroom.”

Like all of the other daughters, wives, and mothers before her, Mama was never sent to school. Educations, like opinions, were thought unnecessary for those born to serve others. But Mr. Andonis, the new schoolteacher, had changed all that. When he arrived in their tiny village just five years earlier, he brought with him a passion for the classics and an intolerance for ignorance, as well as the fervent belief that even provincial girls deserved an education.

“Yes, I promise to pay close attention,” Katerina replied as she devoured the bread and finished the last sip of milk. “Where is Baba? He promised to walk me to school today.”

Mama did not answer.

Katerina watched as Mama walked over to the washbasin where Baba’s work clothes were soaking. Silently, Mama bent over the basin, scrubbing and pounding his shirt into the soapy water.



HARPER
MUSE

Two

Corfu

September 1946



Laki stood at the water's edge and looked out across the bay to the horizon. No stars were visible in the sky, the first light of the new day just now beginning to cut through the darkness. Only the silver moon could be seen against the black.

Laki looked down on the stiff body of the man and exhaled before flipping the corpse and rummaging through his pockets. From the wet billfold he pulled out a few *drachmas*. He whispered a word of thanks, grateful for the light of the moon and for the glassy sea, which reflected shimmering moonlight across the beach. He glanced up and down the shoreline again, squinting into the darkness to make sure he was indeed alone. Certain no one was watching, he stuffed the wet bills into his own pocket before shifting the man to his other side to search for more.

He knew what he held in his fingers even before he pulled the wet paper from the man's pocket. He had done this many times and could predict what he would find with one glance at a dead man's face. This was a

young man, clean-shaven with a square jaw, jet-black hair, and a thin band of gold on his finger. He had been handsome and strong and loved. But that was before his boat had been blown out of the brilliant blue waters between Albania and Corfu.

Laki thought for a moment of the woman's face that would soon greet him on this waterlogged photograph. He thought of the face that would soon be streaked with tears and of the body that would be shrouded in black upon hearing of her young husband's death. He said a silent prayer, asking God to give this woman strength, allowing her a few final moments of anonymity, of blissful ignorance before he glanced upon her face and branded her a widow.

Laki slipped the photo out of the man's pocket and held it up to his face. He sucked in his breath and let out a soft moan. Shaking his head, he said another prayer, this one for the beautiful little girl who sat on her mother's knee in the photo. She was no more than ten, just like his precious Katerina. The girl smiling back at him from the photo had shiny black hair like her father and the piercing black eyes and bee-stung lips of her mother. He looked closer at the photo and noticed the serene smile on the woman's face and then her hands, one wrapped around her daughter's tiny waist and the other resting on her own swollen belly. He was not a man who cried easily, or ever. But his eyes filled with tears as he looked down at this man and the family he had left behind.

"Senseless," he said out loud as if there were anyone to hear him. "Senseless." Louder this time. "Barbarians."

Greek killing Greek. Cousin killing cousin. Brother killing brother. After so many years of war, oppression, and Italian and then German occupation, Laki never would have imagined that his own people would turn against each other the way they had. The newspapers called it an impending civil war, but he called it something else: cannibalism.

He bent down once again and returned the photo to the man's pocket. When he heard that a boat belonging to the Communist Greek People's Liberation Army had been blown out of the water by government firepower,

he knew what would happen next. He knew the fish would be scared away once again, making it even more difficult for the villagers to feed their families. He also knew the tide would bring the dead men's bodies to rest here, to this pristine cove, just as it had the Italian soldiers years before when their ship was destroyed by German grenades in these very waters.

He shook his head as he thought of those men massacred by the Nazis. The Italians had been good to Laki and all of the villagers throughout the occupation, even trading squares of chocolate for octopuses and lobsters. He smiled thinking of the times he presented Katerina with the sweet treats. How she would squeal and sigh as the dark squares dissolved on her tongue. Those young Italian boys had boarded boats after the long occupation thinking they were finally homebound, waving to the villagers as they sailed away. In reality, the Italians were deceived and murdered, their boats bombarded with gunfire and grenades from the very soldiers who had assured them safe passage. Instead of returning to the arms of their loved ones, their lifeless bodies came to rest here on this beach, with Laki rummaging through their pockets hoping to find some way to feed his family.

Now, as he stood over the body of this young man, he realized he could not continue, even though he knew more bodies had washed up and there were more pockets to rummage farther down the beach. He knew it was time to leave this cove and head home before the sunrise could reveal his secret. He was a poor man with nothing to his name but his old family home, a torn and tangled fishing net, and a small garden plot. It was barely enough for them to survive on. But unlike the dead man at his feet, he had the luxury of walking through the door where Maria would have a meal waiting for him and kissing the cheek of beautiful Katerina, whose giggles echoed on the breeze like an angelic chorus. He knew in his heart that as difficult as things were, at least for now, they were the lucky ones.

Thousands were dying from famine all across Greece, but living in their tiny seaside village meant that at least there would always be fish to eat. Fishing might be difficult for a while after the mines planted just off the coast of Albania were detonated, or when the government managed to

identify and destroy a Communist navy boat, but Laki knew that eventually, as always, the fish would be back. No, it wasn't the famine that worried him most. It was the increasing violence and waves of terror that had started in the remote northern villages and now had begun to spread south, closer to Corfu and even to Athens.

Laki had seen the newspapers and heard the radio reports. Entire villages burned to the ground. Innocent civilians—shepherds, farmers, fishermen—tortured, slaughtered, often in front of their families. Lifeless bodies hanging from olive trees, heads impaled on sticks in village squares as a warning to others. Old women, mothers, and young girls assaulted and raped. He prayed every day that the madness would end. He prayed that his own village and family would remain safe.

Initially it had appeared as if the danger was confined to the north, to those poor, unfortunate villages bordering Albania and Bulgaria. But then the news came from Athens. Protests, Communists and monarchists fighting in the streets, civilians gunned down, bodies littering Syntagma Square. In villages like theirs, people were used to hardship, to going without. But hearing that the cultured and educated people of Athens were living without electricity and gas; that people were starving, murdered, dying by the thousands; that was more than he could fathom.

He also knew for certain that the threat was moving closer. This body at his feet proved it. He had heard rumors that the Communist navy had commanded units in the southern Ionian islands of Lefkada and Zakynthos, but had never wanted to believe that they could take root here on Corfu. Not on Corfu.

He was a poor man with barely an elementary education, but even so, there was a pride that came along with being born a Corfiot, one that had nothing to do with schooling or money or valuables. Laki felt it, infused by the island's rich history each time he visited Corfu Town and walked beneath the expansive arches, grand café-lined squares, and elegant esplanades. This was a place where even the poorest of men strived to be better and appreciated the art and beauty surrounding them and the magnificence

of their island and her storied past. He was never one for political arguments, unlike the other men who clustered around the radio at the *kafenio*, shouting over one another. In the past it was enough to be Greek, Corfiot, united against a common foreign enemy. But now it seemed the enemy was among them, of their own, and often hiding in plain sight.

Laki believed in civility and hard work. Only once had he raised his voice in anger during a political discussion. He could not sit silently when Panos, the left-leaning former schoolteacher, argued that the monarchist citizens of Corfu were brainwashed in their support of the royal family and tone-deaf to the plight of the poor Greek citizens. The tone and tenor of the conversation quickly rose along with the volume of their voices. What began as a heated debate ended with an overturned *kafenio* table and an ill-timed, ill-advised punch thrown by an old fisherman at the teacher. But while other men in the village argued that a man with such extreme political beliefs had no business teaching children, Laki—though he disagreed with the teacher’s political views—argued that he was a good teacher and deserved to keep his job as long as he kept his political views out of the classroom and away from the children. In the end, Panos was forced out, issuing a warning to the villagers as he stormed away from the schoolhouse and his only source of income, “Mark my word, King George will never return from exile. Open your eyes and minds. The monarchy will never be restored. It’s time for the people to take our country back from these false idols.”

Laki often thought of that day, the teacher spitting at the villagers as he walked past, then tipping his hat toward Laki when they crossed paths. His words often echoed in Laki’s ear as he played the rhetoric over again and again in his mind. Despite the passionate arguments on both sides, Laki kept coming to the very same conclusion. He had always supported the monarchy, nationalistic pride swelling in his chest when the king and his family were here on Corfu, enjoying their time in the summer palace of Mon Repos. But truly, what difference did it make to him if King George returned from exile? After King George was driven out of the country by

the German invasion in 1941, Greece was now set to vote on whether he should be restored to power. While Laki was steadfast in his support of the monarchy, he also knew that even if the king returned it was not as if Laki would ever be invited to the palace for dinner.

And what of the Communists? They had been the heroes, the ones who led the resistance and fought so valiantly against the Germans during the occupation . . . initially. But those slaughtered innocents who voiced their support of the monarchy or refused to publicly stand with the Communists proved that even the noblest of causes could quickly turn to bloodlust when personal vendettas drove politics and inhumanity was masqueraded as ideology.

And Laki knew that regardless of who claimed to be the salvation of Greece, the sea would always be the sea, and the earth and sky the same as well, no matter what the newspapers or radio said. He had lived off the land and sea his entire life, just as his parents had, and their parents before them. These are the things that mattered to him, the things God provided that could not be controlled by guns or violence or rhetoric.

He was a poor, uneducated man, but his faith was strong. Laki believed that in some way, by some miracle, they would survive this horrendous war and everything would be all right again. Even a man with empty pockets could be full of hope. When all else had been stripped away, sometimes that was all he has left to sustain him.

Laki took one last look at the dead man's body before beginning his walk home. The amber light of dawn now reflected on the sea's surface and the gold band on the man's finger.


"Please forgive me," he whispered. Then he reached down and pulled the wedding band from the man's finger.

Laki dug his hands deep into his pockets and started toward home. Last night as he tucked Katerina into bed, Laki promised he would walk her to school in the morning. In these lean and difficult times, Laki's word was all he had to offer his little girl. And Laki would move heaven and earth to keep it.

Three

Corfu

September 1946



“Marco, Stefanos,” Yianna shouted again as she climbed the rocky path leading to the house. With one hand she lifted the hem of her skirt, stepping gingerly over the collapsed portion of the stone wall between the garden and the patio, careful not to crack the precious eggs that she cradled in her apron with her other hand.

“Marco, Stefanos. Come on. Your father will be back any moment. Get up. You’ll be late for school.”

It was not yet seven o’clock and Yianna had climbed up and down the hillside a half dozen times already, including two trips down to the fresh-water spring, which meant two trips back up the steep and craggy terrain hauling the filled water jugs. Usually this was Marco and Stefano’s job. But with the threat of the approaching maestro winds, Aleko had left the house long before sunrise this morning, hoping to lift his nets before the glassy sea turned choppy and white-capped. With Aleko gone and no one there

to simultaneously tease and accuse her of coddling them, Yianna had not been able to resist the urge to let her boys sleep in.

It was hard to tell sometimes which of her sons hated fetching water more. While Marco was more vocal in his complaints, Stefano had learned that bemoaning his chores only served to delay the inevitable. And with that her eldest son had come to the realization that no matter how hot or heavy the dreaded trip to the spring was, it simply served him best to suffer in silence. Marco, on the other hand, loved to moan and complain and occasionally throw himself to the ground in protest. In those instances, Yianna would simply hand him the empty jugs with strict instructions to strip naked and wash himself in the cold-water spring before stepping foot in the house again. It didn't matter that the floor of their home was dirt itself. Yianna, like all of the village mothers, understood that embarrassment is often a mother's most effective way of making a point.

With a laugh and a slap of his calloused hands across the backs of the boys' heads, Aleko often liked to remind Yianna that boys were like mules, stubborn and stupid, whose only redeeming quality was the ability to carry heavy loads up the mountain. It was not that she completely disagreed, but in these difficult times it was so rare that she could treat the boys to something special. Luxuries like a bit of sugar or a sturdy new pair of shoes existed only in a well-intended mother's dreams. Knowing this, she made certain to savor each of life's unexpected gifts, however small. An extra hour of sleep was the only escape she could provide her children right now.

It was the least she could do for her boys, she reasoned. They had both made such a fuss over her birthday the night before, singing to her. And then with a broad smile on his sun-kissed face, Stefano had asked her to lean in, to remove the white kerchief covering her hair, and to bend down toward him just a little bit closer. Her eldest son's gesture, as sweet as the scent emanating from his hands, overwhelmed her. From behind his back, Stefano presented her with a crown of gardenias, a simple yet exquisite wreath woven from her favorite flowers. He placed the crown on her head

and smiled, his white teeth gleaming against the deep olive of his skin. “Happy birthday to the most wonderful mother in the village.”

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“All right, all right. I stand corrected.” Stefano laughed. “Happy birthday to the best mother in all of Greece.”

Yianna nodded her head and lifted her chin high. “Now that’s better.”

“Happy birthday to the best mother in the whole wide world,” Marco shouted, stretching his arms as wide as he could, and then he turned and stuck his tongue at his brother.

Stefano shook his head and laughed. “You win.”

“Happy birthday, Mama, from the winner,” Marco declared as he threw himself into her arms.

Yianna wrapped one arm around his waist and the other flew to her head to keep the flowers from tumbling. She savored each and every hug from Marco, who at ten was nearing the age when she knew his unbridled and bountiful hugs would soon become yet another precious memory of better times long in the past. At twelve, Stefano rarely allowed her to hug him anymore, except for the rare occasion when the need for a mother’s assurance outweighed his desire to be a man.

“Happy birthday, my love,” Aleko added from the doorway where he was rolling a cigarette between his fingers. He smiled at her in that mischievous way of his. Salt and sweat stained the black fisherman’s cap tilted on his head, black eyes twinkling beneath his dark lashes. It was what she had first noticed about him, those eyes and those lashes. She would never forget the way he unabashedly stared at her that Easter Sunday as the parishioners all shouted and sang “Christ Has Risen” while hoisting their candles in the air at midnight to celebrate Christ’s emergence from the tomb. She had felt his eyes on her, burning into her as if he had stepped too close to her with the light of the resurrection.

She stood there smiling at her sons and husband, wearing a stained apron over a faded black ankle-length skirt, frayed brown cardigan sweater,

and a glorious crown of gardenias on her head. The tears fell from her cheek, leaving tiny watermarks on the dirt beneath her feet.

“See, Mama, even if you don’t live in a palace anymore, you can still wear a crown,” Marco added. She knew he intended his words to bring another smile to her face, and so she forced one, even as she felt the familiar wave of melancholy pull her under.

Yes, she had lived in a palace once, a grand royal palace among princes and princesses, with even a young prince as her playmate. She had no true memories of that time, only hazy, fractured images, but her mother, Vasiliki, had told her the stories again and again. And Yianna in turn had recited the stories over and over again to her husband and sons until they, too, were well versed in how their family’s fate and fortune had turned.

It was a lifetime ago when Yianna’s mother had served as a maid to Princess Alice, the wife of Prince Andrew, the fourth son of King George I. Yianna’s mother lived and worked with the princess’s family in the royal palace of Mon Repos, just forty kilometers away on the outskirts of Corfu Town. It might well have been as a million miles and lifetimes ago.

Some of Yianna’s earliest memories were of the nights she sat curled in her mother’s lap right here on this patio as the fireflies danced around them and the sky above faded from blue to black. And each night Yianna would listen as her mother recalled the stories of her life working as a maid in Mon Repos and her unlikely friendship with Princess Alice. When Yianna was born, Alice had welcomed her to Mon Repos, where she was raised beside Alice’s only son, Prince Philip. Just shy of three years old when Philip was born, at first Yianna thought the tiny prince was her very own living and breathing doll. And then, when Philip grew to babble his first words and toddle his first steps, Yianna was always beside her little playmate, roaming the cavernous halls and bucolic gardens of Mon Repos under Vasiliki’s watchful eye.

Those idyllic years abruptly came to an end when Alice and her family were exiled from Greece after her husband, Prince Andrew, was blamed for the disastrous outcome of the Greco-Turkish War in 1922. But Princess

Alice was so moved by Vasiliki's love and loyalty that she made a promise to her loyal maid.

"I will never forget your kindness and how you loved my family, Vasiliki. I will return to Greece one day. This is my home. You have helped make it my home. And your family will always find a home with mine."

With the royal family forced into exile and Mon Repos shuttered, Vasiliki had no choice but to return with her husband and Yianna to the village where generations of her family had been born and raised. Perched on the verdant cliffs of northeastern Corfu overlooking the Ionian Sea, with the shores of Albania in the distance, Pelekito was a place where families were as deeply rooted and entwined as the ancient olive trees that canopied her landscape.

And while Yianna's earliest memories were of her mother telling her of Princess Alice's promise, reciting her words each evening like a prayer, they were Yianna's final memories of her mother as well. Vasiliki went to her grave still waiting for Alice's return, insisting she would somehow, someday fulfill her vow.

And now, in this tiny home bursting with generations of memories, both joyous and heartbreaking, Yianna and Aleko were raising their own children. But it wasn't just the old house, garden, and little plot of land that Yianna inherited from her mother. She, too, never gave up hope that Princess Alice might one day return to keep her promise and that she might be reunited with Philip, the prince who had been her first friend.

As the years went on, the details of her mother's stories faded into soft focus, as if it were all a dream. But while the minutia slipped away, muddled with the passing years, Yianna never could allow herself to completely lose hope, however difficult it was at times. She often found herself staring out across the sea for hours, wondering if her family's luck had sailed away from Corfu that night along with the tiny prince.

There were times Yianna would laugh and smile and warn her husband and sons that they just might wake up one day to find her gone, returned to Mon Repos where she rightfully belonged. And then there were days that

it was difficult to joke or smile at all, when the reality of what was and the longing for what might have been consumed her.

She pushed those thoughts away. Not today. Even when she cursed her fate at times, Yianna always thanked God that at least she had been born on Corfu, a fertile green island, unlike the barren, arid earth found across so many other islands and villages. Between her garden and the fish Aleko caught daily, Yianna went to bed each night knowing that despite all of life's hardships, at least her children would never starve.

"Boys, come on. I let you sleep in. It's time to get up for school," she yelled into the house. Yianna glanced at the gardenia crown, now hanging on the wall beside the plastic crowns she and Aleko had worn on their wedding day as the priest led them three times around the altar. Even from several feet away in the outdoor kitchen, she could still smell their sweet scent carried on the breeze.

She grabbed a handful of twigs from the pile next to the outdoor stove and lit a match, setting the kindling ablaze. With her small paring knife, she cut up two small potatoes that she had dug up from the garden the day before and fried the potatoes in olive oil. When the potatoes were crisp on the outside and tender in the center, she removed them from the fire and cracked four eggs into the sizzling pan. The smell of the fire mixed with the eggs wafted through the door and into the house. The boys sprang up from the thin mattress they shared on the floor, just as she knew they would.

"Mama. Are you sure?" Stefano looked from the frying pan to his mother.

She nodded and smiled.

"But how?" Marco asked.

"Don't worry." Yianna waved their concern away with the back of her hand. Just yesterday she had spotted the boys listening from the garden as she and Aleko discussed in hushed and worried tones why one of their two hens had stopped laying eggs.

"Don't worry. I took a little walk today and happened to pass the mayor's house."

“You didn’t?” both boys shouted in unison, picturing their mother stealing eggs from the mayor.

With its imposing iron gate, freshly stuccoed exterior, ornate wooden doors, and vast garden, the mayor’s house was the envy of all the villagers and by far the nicest home for miles around. And while the mayor took great pride in maintaining his home to perfection, the mayor’s mother, Thea Olga, took even greater pride in protecting it from trespassers. Thea Olga was a bent old woman with a habit of leaning out the house’s windows and throwing rocks at children who dared cross her property. Despite her gnarled fingers and cataracts, the old woman’s aim was legendarily precise.

“I merely borrowed them.” Yianna smiled as she plated the eggs and potatoes. The eggs’ edges were brown and crisped and the orange yolks were slightly soft, just the way the boys liked them. “I’ll replace them when that lazy hen of ours decides to earn her keep. Come on, finish your breakfast. Don’t be late for school.”

She leaned against the doorframe and watched as the boys inhaled their breakfast, then pulled water from the well to wash their hands and faces. They dressed, bounding back to their mother for a kiss. As Marco stood before her, she bent down to tighten the fishing line that was tied around the sole and leather of his shoes. The shoes had served Stefano well and for a while, Marco too. But now it seemed the old shoes had nothing left to give and were well beyond help from even the fishing line. Marco scratched his head as he looked up at his mother and smiled. She smiled back at him, tweaking his nose.

Stefano waved a final goodbye and grabbed his leather school bag, which his grandmother had brought back to the village when she returned from Mon Repos, claiming it once held the schoolbooks of the royal children. Stefano had laid claim to the bag, draping it proudly across his shoulder each day as he left for school. Yianna would never speak the words out loud, but she knew Stefano’s prized bag held nothing more than a crudely fashioned slingshot, a dulled pencil nub, and just for today, a single

book. It was a tattered and frayed copy of the *Odyssey* borrowed overnight from Mr. Andonis, the schoolteacher.

Yianna knew what this bag and this borrowed book meant to her son. It was as if she could somehow see deep inside her eldest child, to his heart and most private thoughts. She knew he longed to be a schoolteacher himself one day with piles and piles of books to devour and teach. She understood that draping the leather strap across his chest each morning made Stefano feel like a proper scholar, even if he did not own a single book of his own.

Each week she would dip a soft cloth into a bit of olive oil before rubbing and polishing the bag to shined perfection. As she handed him the bag each morning, Yianna made sure to encourage Stefano's dreams and passions, even as she tamped down her own. In her eldest son, Yianna saw the truest reflection of herself.

While she prayed that Stefano might somehow, someday achieve his dreams, it was her youngest son, Marco, for whom she worried most. Sweet, precocious, yet innocent Marco. Well-intended and loving, like a puppy stumbling over his own paws. As worrying as it was to think Stefano might not one day see his dreams of scholarly success come true, at least he had a dream. Marco, she feared, had none.

"Let the boy be," Aleko insisted again and again. And each time he did, Yianna would nod and force a smile, avoiding unnecessary confrontation. But internally Yianna's emotions churned like the current. She wanted more for her sons, things that existed beyond the land and sea. Yianna wanted a life for them measured by more than the weight of one's fishing nets.

Once the boys left for school, Yianna set about her chores. Today she would pull down and wash her mother's linens as she did each month without fail. She went from window to window and door to door, gathering the curtains and lace cloths and runners that Alice and Vasiliki had crocheted together over the years and that Alice gifted to Vasiliki in their final hours together. The delicate patterns that now covered every surface of the tiny stone house had once made their home among the grand windows and marble foyers and finery of Mon Repos. Yianna soaked them

first in soapy water drawn from the fresh spring, massaging the fabric ever so gently with her fingertips. She was always careful not to wring them, lest they lose their shape; the delicate rosettes, silken scalloped edges, and weblike patterns were so magnificent that they made her think they could have been woven at the hands of Arachne and Athena during their famed competition. Yianna stood over them, sometimes for hours upon hours as they dried in the sun, keeping watch, shooing away any birds or insects that dared come too close before hanging them again in the windows and doorframes among the dirt and stones and rotting wood.



HARPER
MUSE

Four

Corfu

September 1946



“So, tell me. What did you dream?” Mama asked.

But before Katerina could answer, he swooped in from behind, grabbing her by the waist and tossing her into the air. It wasn’t nearly as high as the swing in her dream, but it was just as exciting nonetheless.

“Baba,” she cried.

Baba hugged her. Katerina let out a little squeal, like a kitten grasped too tight in a child’s hand.

“I thought you had forgotten,” she said. “When I woke up and saw you weren’t here, I thought you had forgotten.”

“I made a promise to my girl.” Baba glanced at Mama as he spoke. “I promised you that I would walk you to school. So here I am.”

“But where have you been?” Katerina asked.

“I had some work to do in the village early this morning. But I came back, just as I said I would. Have I ever broken my promise to you, Katerina?”

“No.”

“And I never will. Do you love me, Katerina?”

“Of course I do,” she said as she wrapped her arms around his neck. The scruff of his beard scratched her cheek, but she just held tighter.

“Then you must have faith in me, because I love you too. I love you more than you can ever imagine, even more than all of the numbers Mr. Andonis could ever possibly teach you.” He laughed as he unwrapped her arms from his neck and placed her on the garden wall beside a glorious rose bush blanketed with deep red flowers. Mama stood in the doorway watching them.

“I want you to think of love like a flower, Katerina. A rose,” he continued, tracing his fingers along a single perfect rose. “Look at this beautiful flower, so rich in color and so fragrant and so very beautiful. But this flower, this beautiful rose, can’t grow without the soil. This precious flower needs soil to keep her rooted and to thrive, the foundation upon which she grows. That’s exactly the way it is with love and faith. For love to exist, between a parent and child, between adults, even between friends, for any type of love to grow and thrive, it must be rooted in faith. There can be no love without faith in one another, without trust. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Baba. I do.” She nodded her head up and down.

“Good. Because I love you, Katerina. I love you with all of my heart. When I give you my word, you can trust that I will never lie to you, my sweet girl. And in turn, you must have faith in me,” he said as he plucked the rose and handed it to her. “Come on. I’ll walk you to school like I promised to. And I know exactly the story I’m going to tell you as we walk.”

Katerina ran to the doorway to kiss her mother goodbye.

“Remember, pay close attention. I want to hear every detail tonight,” Mama said.

Katerina skipped back to Baba and grabbed her father’s hand.



Maria watched as Katerina and Laki walked together out of the gate and

toward the schoolyard, Katerina's dark braids bouncing down her back with each step, Laki's tanned arm wrapped around her tiny waist. As they faded from sight, Maria wondered what might have been had her own father kept his promises. She sometimes wondered how life might have been different had she not lost her mother so young and if she had grown up with the reassurance of an arm wrapped protectively around her.

"There can be no love without faith in one another, without trust."

She had once had both love and faith in her life. Maria had known a mother's love so beautiful and pure that it was difficult to believe sometimes that it had actually existed. But then in a single moment, her childhood and her faith were shattered, stripped away. She had often wondered in the years that followed if her ability to love had been lost that night as well. And for the longest time she believed it so. But then ten years ago, after the tears and the blood and the screams, in the moment the midwife at last placed Katerina, yelling and slick into her arms, she knew that despite it all, a piece of her heart had remained intact.

Maria wondered if perhaps one day, with the passing of time, the pain and the memories might dull. Perhaps one day she might discover another small portion of her heart that had survived as well, waiting for the right moment to release her from her promise. But as quickly as the thought ushered into her mind, she as quickly willed it away. She had trained herself to sweep these considerations from her thoughts like cobwebs from the rafters.