



*International Bestselling Author*  
**YVETTE MANESSIS CORPORON**

daughter  
of  
ruins



daughter  
of  
ruins

*a novel*

YVETTE MANESSIS CORPORON



HARPER MUSE

*Daughter of Ruins*

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## prologue

*Cephalonia, Greece*

1940

*Dear Mama,*

*Today I am so excited. Baba and I are going to visit Thea Olga. It has been so long since I've seen her. I'm ten years old now, old enough to take the bus alone, but Baba won't let me so I begged and begged for him to take me. I think he agreed to get me to stop asking. I can't wait to see her and the sacred snakes! I get so excited each time I see them, especially when Olga places one in my hands. I will say a special prayer for you, like I always do. Maybe you will come visit me one day like the snakes do. That would make me so happy.*

*Your daughter,  
Demitra*

DEMITRA GLANCED AT the clock and smiled. She still had enough time to send the letter before they left to catch the bus. She looked out the window and saw *Baba* at the well scrubbing his hands.

She slipped to the outdoor kitchen and grabbed a book of matches *Baba* kept in a jar beside the kindling. Placing the letter between her lips, she struck the red-tipped match against the striker and inhaled the smoke and sulfur. She held up the burning

match, then took the paper from between her lips with her other hand and touched it to the fire.

Her eyes widened as the paper erupted in flame, her gaze following the smoke as it drifted up to the sky. Distracted by the dancing smoke, she waited a bit too long before dropping the burning paper, watching as it floated to the ground. She brought her finger to her mouth to soothe the sting where the heat singed her.

Demitra was three when Mama died in America and Baba returned here to Cephalonia to raise her. Demitra's fragmented reminiscences of Mama were more feelings than actual memories, since she'd lost her at an age when memories are as easily made as they are lost. The security of her small hand in Mama's, the sanctuary of sleeping tucked within the curve of her body, the wave of warmth and love a mother's mere smile can elicit.

She was unsure if the hazy, disconnected moments she coveted were even true memories at all. Perhaps they were a daughter's wishes floating up to the heavens, like the smoke of the letters she began composing to Mama before she could write, when her letters were nothing more than a child's hopeful drawings—a stick-figure family of three, a crudely drawn heart tossed into the evening fire when Baba was not looking.

As hard as she tried and did her best to focus and concentrate to conjure Mama, Demitra could not remember what Mama looked like, only what she felt like. Soft. Warm. Safe. She wanted to believe she might one day recall her face, that a personification of her existed, yet Mama was always somehow out of reach, like a magnificent oasis in the distance of a dream.

She searched for her night and day, staring at her own image in the mirror for hours sometimes, hoping she might recognize at least a piece of her mother. Did Mama share her dark eyes flecked with brilliant gold? Did Mama's hair cascade in a torrent of curls,

unruly and wild, as if the River Styx itself flowed down her back? And like Demitra, had Mama dreamed of a life beyond the stifling confines of her village?

“I hope my note finds you, Mama,” she whispered as she knelt, reaching out her hands to sift through the pile of ashes, all that remained of the dozens of letters she had written these past several weeks. “I hope I find you.”

BABA SHUFFLED ALONG behind her, dragging his feet as he smoked cigarettes one after the other, while Demitra raced ahead. The walk was short from the bus stop to the church where they would meet Olga, but to Demitra it felt like an eternity.

Olga had explained the legend of the snakes of Panagia to her years ago. The story dated back centuries to when pirates once invaded Cephalonia. Knowing the invaders were coming, the nuns of the monastery locked themselves inside the church and prayed for the Virgin Mother to save them. When the pirates finally broke down the door, they entered the room to find the nuns gone. Only the snakes were left behind, slithering across the floor and marked with the shape of a cross between their eyes.

Every year since then, the blessed snakes of Panagia have returned each August in preparation for the Ascension of the Virgin Mary on August 15. They made their presence known by appearing in the church, slithering across the altar and icons, and allowing the faithful to hold them and pray with them. And each year after August 15, the snakes disappeared again until the following August, when they came again to bless the faithful.

Demitra spotted Olga pacing the courtyard the moment they walked through the gate leading to the church.

“Thea Olga!” Demitra shouted as she ran into the arms of her aunt. Instantly she was enveloped in the woman’s black robes, smelling of incense and soap.

“Hello, my sweet girl.” The nun held Demitra tight, kissing the top of her head.

“Hello, Pericles.” She greeted Baba with a kiss on both cheeks. He nodded in return.

“Thea Olga, I’ve been dreaming of this since last year. Can I please hold a snake again? I promise to be gentle.” The words spilled out of Demitra’s mouth as she scanned the grounds of the churchyard while holding Olga’s hand and pulling her toward the church entrance.

The nun looked down at her niece, her usual bright smile replaced by pursed lips. The black fabric of her habit obscured her hair and rested low on her brow. Olga’s deep brown eyes, usually so clear, were red tinged. Her skin, typically sun-kissed from working in the garden, had a gray pallor, her face lined with wisdom and with worry.

“Demitra.” Olga spoke softly, kindly.

Demitra continued to tug her toward the church entrance. “I promise to be gentle. I’m not afraid of them, not at all.”

“Demitra, listen to me.” The nun stopped and knelt in front of the child.

Demitra paused, still giddy with the excitement of spotting her first snake, her eyes darting about the grounds.

“They are not here,” Olga said. “They have not come.”

Demitra looked at her aunt and tilted her head, confused by her words. Even Baba inched closer from the edge of the courtyard where he was smoking a cigarette.

“What do you mean?” Demitra asked. “Who is not here?”

“The snakes.” Olga spoke slowly and gently, as if the tone of her voice might somehow temper the implications of her message. “They haven’t been seen, and tomorrow is Panagia’s. They always come at least a week before, but they have not come.”

Demitra's brow furrowed as she contemplated her aunt's words. "What does that mean?"

"This has never happened before," the nun responded, her voice a mere whisper.

Baba flicked his cigarette to the ground and stomped it out with his foot. He walked toward his sister and daughter. "But what do you think it means?"

Olga scanned the ground one last time. Nothing but dirt and grass and rocks all around them.

"It's an omen." Olga did not whisper this time. Taking Demitra's hand in her own, she led the child toward the edge of the churchyard, overlooking the lush green hills below. "They are sending us a message with their absence. I don't know what it is or what it means. But I fear they are trying to warn us of something."

Although she felt the flush of her cheeks and the sting in her eyes, Demitra promised herself she would not cry. As disappointed as she was, she vowed she would find another way to get a message to Mama.

Squeezing Olga's hand, she noticed for the first time the slight tremble in her aunt's touch. "It's all right, Thea Olga." Demitra leaned in and hugged her. "I'm sure everything will be all right."

Taking both of Demitra's hands in her own, Olga raised them to her lips and kissed Demitra's knuckles. She remained silent rather than frighten the child or speak words that were untrue, which would have been a sin.





part

one

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# chapter one

*Cephalonia, Greece*

1943

**T**HE SNAKES WERE right.

There was reason to worry. Just as Olga feared, the disappearance of the snakes was indeed an omen, ushering in years of devastation and destruction on Cephalonia, across Greece, and around the world.

*We are the lucky ones*, the residents of Cephalonia thought at first, confident that their Patron Saint Gerasimos and the snakes of Panagia had once again performed miracles, protecting the islanders from harm in the early days of the war when the Italians occupied the island. But as the years passed and the civility of the Italian soldiers gave way to the bloodthirst of the Germans, it was evident that even beautiful Cephalonia was not immune to the horrors of war.

At first the islanders feared and resented the occupying Italian soldiers who descended upon the island by the thousands. But soon the Italians and the villagers found themselves coexisting, as they learned that occupier and occupied were more alike than different.

For thirteen-year-old Demitra, life under Italian occupation went on as it had before. Her days were filled with school and chores around the house. Mr. Stafanotithes, the schoolteacher, was a kindly man who helped fuel Demitra's passion for mythol-

ogy by allowing her to borrow his personal copies of works like the *Odyssey*, *Medea*, and the *Oresteia*.

Just last year when Demitra turned twelve, Baba announced that money was tight and Demitra was old enough for the cooking, cleaning, and other house chores to fall to her. She heeded Baba's orders and came straight home after school, passing the hours after her chores were finished by losing herself in the ancient myths, enthralled by their tales of love, betrayal, and revenge. She spent hours reading her favorite stories and then attempting to draw them, translating her favorite scenes to the page in her own way. What had begun as a lonely child's attempt to communicate with her lost mother, the crudely drawn pictures of hearts and flowers and stick-figure images of a family, developed over time into a hobby and then a passion.

Each day, after finishing her lessons and then her chores, Demitra filled the quiet, lonely afternoons with her sketch pad and pencils, bringing to life on the page the friends and companions she longed for and prayed might one day appear. She was tempted to show Baba her sketches but thought better of it, deciding her art would be her secret, just as he had his.

Demitra could never claim that Baba was unkind to her. He kept to himself, going about his day, working any odd jobs he could find, and providing for her all the things one might need to survive. But surviving and thriving were two very different things. The house never lacked firewood or food. The well provided more than enough water for drinking and cooking. And each year Baba commissioned two new dresses from the local seamstress, as well as new shoes from the cobbler.

"*She's a girl, not a feral cat,*" Olga would scold him each time she saw her brother, reminding him that young girls need more than food and water and firewood to survive.

One spring day in 1943 a slight breeze filled the air, carry-

ing the scent of burning kitchen fires across the island. Demitra watched as the tall, slim cypress trees swayed back and forth as if dancing to music only they could hear. She glanced up at the majestic spears towering above, dreaming that they were not trees but skyscrapers like the ones in America, where she had been born. Lost in her thoughts, Demitra imagined what her life might have been like if Baba had stayed in America, if she had been raised there, among tall buildings and beautifully dressed women like those in the magazines that Areti, the kindly woman at the *periptero*, allowed her to leaf through even though Demitra had no money to pay.

Her daydreaming was interrupted by a sound she was not accustomed to hearing in the quiet of the village—a woman’s voice, boisterous and unbridled. A laugh like that seemed out of place in this time of uncertainty with talk of tensions between the occupying Italian forces and the Germans. It was a time when friends and neighbors went about their daily chores as quickly and as quietly as possible before retreating again behind closed doors and drawn curtains.

“*Come straight home.*” Baba’s warning rang in her ears. And yet, curiosity got the best of her. Demitra diverted from the path and followed the sound of the woman’s laughter toward the bluff overlooking the beach.

She had seen the Italian soldiers in town a handful of times. They were always in uniform, always polite and surprisingly friendly, buying bread or unloading supplies at the port. She had never seen them like this. A dozen of them were down on the beach, shirtless and glistening with sea and sweat. With the soldiers were the women, beautiful with curled hair and painted lips. They, too, ran toward the surf and then into the arms of the young men, who twirled them around and around, laughing and singing before falling into the arms of the next one in line for a dance.

Demitra watched in wonder, feeling butterflies in her belly as she gazed at them. She counted three women on the beach, each clad in a beautiful dress with a bold color and pattern. A raven-haired woman sat beside a soldier on a blanket, lifting the hem of her dress just above her knee. She unhooked her stocking and peeled it off with the tips of her fingers. She batted her kohl-lined eyes at her companion before tossing her stocking into the air, then tilting her head back and laughing before jumping up and running toward the surf, kicking and splashing at the men as she lifted her face toward the sun.

Then Demitra heard the same laugh that first caught her attention and called her to the bluff. She scanned the beach but could not place her at first. Finally she spotted the woman as she sprang out from inside a changing closet, followed by a young soldier with crimson lipstick marks visible on his mouth and cheek.

Unlike the other women, her hair was yellow, a shade so pale it looked like the silk of September corn. She wore it short, hanging just past her chin, curled in the American style. The blonde woman ran toward the surf, splashing the young man who chased her into the water and then picked her up, flinging her over his shoulder effortlessly as the butcher might carry a baby lamb.

He carried her back to the blanket and placed her down gently. She smiled up at him, reaching her red-tipped fingers around his neck. She then pulled him toward her, falling back on the blanket, his mouth on hers.

Demitra inched closer to the edge of the bluff. As she did, she stumbled on the stones, dislodging a few that tumbled down to the beach below. Hearing the rustling, the soldier sat up and looked toward her.

*“Chi e la?”* he shouted in Italian. His blonde companion sat up as well, placing her hand over her eyes to block the sun.

*“E una ragazza,”* she announced as she spotted Demitra.

Frozen now with fear and shame, Demitra stayed rooted on the ground, unsure of what to do.

The soldier stood and took a few steps closer as the blonde woman remained on the blanket.

“*Caio bella!*” the soldier shouted and waved to her. He removed his cap and bowed, revealing a shock of red hair. Demitra had never seen red hair before and wondered if the soldier had dyed it.

The woman stood and ran over to the soldier, who placed his cap back on his head. She wrapped one arm around his waist and waved the other frantically in the air toward Demitra.

“*Caio bella.*” She smiled broadly. “*Bellissima.*” The woman then brought her fingers to her lips and blew Demitra a kiss.

Demitra felt the heat of her face and imagined the flush on her cheeks matching the red of the soldier’s hair. A tenuous smile crossed her mouth as a mix of embarrassment and excitement whirled inside her. Still seated on the ground, she lifted her hand slowly and waved back.

The blonde woman smiled again, winking at Demitra before turning away, running again toward the surf with her soldier in pursuit.

That day was the first of Demitra’s many visits to the bluff and into the world of the young women the Italian army imported, along with the food and wine and supplies, to keep the regiment satiated.

For weeks, a rare excitement filled Demitra’s world as she stopped by the beach on her way home after school to bask in the laughter and levity of the young, beautiful women and their soldiers. Each time, she sat on the ground beneath the towering olive tree, wedging herself between the massive roots that perforated the ground, imagining what it would be like to peel off her own stockings and run along the shoreline, laughing and twirling among them with unbridled abandon.

The first surprise came after a month of visits. At first she thought it was a trinket left behind, perhaps fallen from a pocket or lost in the entangled limbs of an afternoon tryst. As she kneeled to take her place on the ground, she spotted a tube of lipstick propped against the olive tree. She reached over and opened the tube, twisted and watched in awe as the cherry-red wax emerged.

She had never seen a tube of lipstick before and had certainly never held one. She looked around to see if perhaps the owner was nearby, but she was alone. After glancing around one more time, Demitra touched the lipstick to her mouth, running the tube across her top and bottom lip. With no mirror she had no way of seeing what she looked like, but knowing the color was there lifted her spirits and put a smile on her face.

She sat and watched, scanning the beach for the blonde woman. Demitra knew now that her name was Elena. She had heard "*Elena!*" shouted countless times by then in loud, boisterous laughter and in soft, urgent moans. She spotted her that day as she emerged from the changing closet, hand in hand with a young soldier who looked to be only a few years older than Demitra. Elena glanced up and smiled as her eyes landed on Demitra. She waved and shouted, "*Bellissima!*" as she traced her fingers across her lips and smiled.

Demitra understood at once. This was a gift. She clutched the lipstick tightly in her hand as excitement swelled in her chest.

The summer months brought an unprecedented heat wave and unexpected adventure as Elena continued to leave surprises for her new friend. First Demitra found the lipstick, then days later, the remnants of a perfume bottle. And Demitra found ways to reciprocate, leaving clusters of wildflowers or a piece of sea glass for Elena.

Fall approached and as the heat of summer broke, so did the

dream that Cephalonia was immune to the horrors of war. Demitra had overheard Baba speaking with the men at the *kafeneio* who worried what it meant for the islanders that the Italians had surrendered to the Germans, whose crisp uniforms, guttural language, and penchant for cruelty changed the fabric of the island.

She climbed to the bluff once more, wrapping a shawl across her shoulders against the crisp breeze as she took her place on the ground between the roots of the olive tree. Down below on the sand, the soldiers appeared more subdued than usual. Instead of singing and dancing, they huddled together, deep in conversation as the women listened and appeared to comfort them.

Elena lay on a blanket stroking the hair of a young man as he rested his head in her lap. She glanced up toward the bluff, smiling as she spotted Demitra but making no effort to greet her as she usually did, instead quickly turning her attention back to the soldier.

There was no way of knowing that mid-September afternoon in 1943, as Demitra watched Elena and the young men on the beach, that it would be their final goodbye.

“Don’t go out today,” Baba warned as he left for work the following morning. “There’s talk of problems with the Germans and the Italians. I don’t know what it means, but it’s better for you to stay home.”

Baba had never learned the secret of her afternoons on the bluff. It wasn’t like she was lying to him, she reasoned. He never asked where she had been or how she spent her days. He always asked the same question as he walked in the door each evening: “What’s for supper?” There was no need for any more questions, or any more answers.

As she approached the bluff that crisp September day, she should have sensed something was wrong. There was no chatter of



conversations carried on the breeze, no hint of smoke from a bonfire or notes of an old favorite song filling the air. As she neared her spot by the tree, Demitra was met with nothing but silence.

She shivered as she walked closer to the edge, unsure if it was the breeze or perhaps a premonition of what was to come. When she reached the olive tree, she glanced down at the beach and saw nothing but sand and surf below.

Then she heard the commotion of urgent conversation farther down the way, not in Greek or Italian but the guttural language of German soldiers.

She inched forward, making sure to stay hidden, tucked behind the trees. And then she spotted them, unsure of what she saw at first, not believing it to be true. Stumbling back, she found herself on the ground among the roots and rocks and dirt.

*It can't be true*, she thought. *It can't be*. She shuffled ahead again, this time on her hands and knees, closer to the edge, certain her eyes had been playing tricks on her yet fearing they had not.

A second glance down the beach confirmed her fears.

Just beyond the changing room where she had first laid eyes on Elena, Demitra saw the Germans walking back and forth along the sand, shouting and pointing their guns at a handful of Italian soldiers. She could not make out what they were doing at first, but then she looked closer at the mounds piled up on the beach—bodies dressed in the uniforms of the Italian soldiers.

As the Germans pointed their guns and shouted, the young men who had run and played and laughed as they carried Elena and her friends over their shoulders were now carrying the bodies of their fallen brothers. One by one they lifted lifeless bodies and carried them to a barge in the water where they piled them on top of each other.

She watched as one of the soldiers walked to the pile and re-

moved his hat as he bowed his head. Even from the distance, she could clearly see the shock of red hair as he knelt.

A German soldier walked behind him, hit him with the butt of his rifle, and shouted. The soldier staggered a moment and then stood. He reached down and lifted the body of his friend over his shoulder and placed him on the death pile.

Demitra felt the hot, wet sting of tears streaming down her face and the urgent need to leave that place. She stood and ran the entire way home.

NEWS OF THE Acqui Division Massacre spread quickly across the island. Demitra caught fragments of whispered conversations as she went about her chores in town. But it wasn't until she lingered behind the well next to the kafeneio where several of the village men were gathered, that she overheard the full extent of the Germans' atrocities.

"Those animals killed seven thousand of those young men."

"It was supposed to be a civil surrender." Another man spat in disgust as he spoke. "But the Italians refused to give up their arms so the Germans retaliated by shooting them five at a time."

"Even those who were left behind were not spared." Demitra recognized Baba's voice. "Those bastards promised the survivors safe passage home to bury their dead, only to blow up the barges."

Demitra never told Baba about her visits to the bluff while the soldiers were alive, and she never mentioned what she saw in the aftermath of the massacre either. She, like Baba, had her own secrets that haunted her.



THE SKY ABOVE was a cloudless, brilliant blue that mid-November morning as Demitra left her home for the thirty-minute walk up

the mountain to Elena's house. All across the village giant tarps were laid out beneath olive trees in preparation for the harvest. She stepped gingerly as she walked among the ancient trees whose roots protruded from the earth and gnarled branches dripped heavy with fruit.

At last she reached the clearing where the ground was covered with wildflowers, and a dozen or so sheep grazed as their shepherd napped in the sun. Demitra continued along, farther up the mountain, until at last she spotted the small house in the distance. It was a simple village home, like so many others, that had been built with nothing more than raw determination, mud, and stones. A small garden out back burst from the ground as white sheets swayed on the laundry line next to a pale-yellow dress Demitra recognized from happier times on the beach.

The other women had gone back to Italy in the aftermath of the massacre, but Elena did not join them. The story of the blonde *poutana* was fodder for the island gossip mill, the villagers whispering and snickering about the Italian prostitute who came to service the young men and then stayed to entertain their ghosts.

Demitra walked to the door and stood there, breathing deeply a few times before she finally summoned the courage to knock. They had never been face-to-face before and Demitra did not know what to say or how to act. She only knew she needed to be there, to bring the woman this gift. She hesitated a moment, then reached her hand out and rapped her knuckles against the door three times. Demitra leaned in, attempting to peer through the window, but it was covered in yellowed newspaper.

She waited for several minutes in silence.

"Elena?" Demitra called out, tentative at first and then finding her voice. "Elena?" she called again, but there was no reply from within the house, nothing but the sound of the breeze rattling the leaves of the olive trees and the occasional crow of a far-off rooster.

Demitra waited a few more moments before bending down and slipping her gift under the door. She placed her hand against the wood one more time, leaned in, and whispered, "I hope you like it," before turning to walk home.

She should have been halfway down the mountainside by then, but the pomegranate trees just beyond the clearing next to Elena's house proved too tempting a detour. She had been so excited by the idea of meeting Elena that morning that she'd raced out the door the moment Baba was out of sight, forgetting to make her own breakfast after preparing his.

She promised herself she would remember this spot. Here, the fruit was plentiful, hidden away from the foot traffic of the villagers. The pomegranate tree was a short distance from the house, affording a perfect view of the front door should Elena arrive home while Demitra was near. She reached up and plucked a few of the red orbs from their branches. They were dense and heavy, which made Demitra smile as her mouth watered. The fruit inside would be juicy and sweet. She placed the scarlet treasures in her pocket, excited to bring them home to Baba.

Of all the fruits, Baba loved pomegranates most. Demitra recalled a time when she was ten or so, and a neighbor brought over basket of giant pomegranates from her tree. After Baba had soaked himself in drink, he was unusually chatty that night, sitting back and sipping his whisky and popping the tiny seeds into his mouth one after another. As he filled his glass for the third time, Baba began to recount the story of Hades and Persephone to her, slurring his words as he drained his glass.

*"And so, because she had eaten six tiny seeds at Hades's table, Persephone was bound to spend six months of the year with Hades in the underworld as her mother, Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, mourned and cried and refused to allow any crops to grow on earth until her daughter was returned."*

Demitra smiled again at the memory of Baba slurring his way through the myth. As much as she loved to read and learn about ancient myths, the story of Persephone, and how she longed for her mother, always moved Demitra in a way the others did not.

After she plucked one final pomegranate from the tree, Demitra glanced up and saw it. She dropped the fruit and it tumbled to the ground. But Demitra paid no mind to the pomegranate as she sat in the dirt, never taking her eyes off the white stream of smoke now rising from the chimney.

The reality washed over her in a wave of disappointment as she struggled to catch her breath. Elena was inside and had been the entire time.

## chapter two

*Cephalonia, Greece*

1943

THAT MORNING INSIDE the house, Elena had pulled the quilt over the bed and tidied up the dishes from her simple breakfast of hard-boiled eggs and orange slices. Each day was the same. She would make a fire and then settle into her chair, a blanket draped across her shoulders and lap, and spend the afternoons, often well into the evening, staring into the blaze.

Within the frenetic dance of the darting flames, Elena watched transfixed and transported as scenes of her life played out. Between the flames she saw images of herself as a young girl, the lonely childhood among the pleasure houses of Sicily, where her mother and the other women did their best collectively to raise her in between entertaining their clients. There, in the thick smoke rising and swirling up the chimney, images of her school years played out like a newsreel on a cinema screen.

She could see herself as clearly as if it were yesterday, sitting alone in the back row of the school, the other children forbidden from sitting with her or playing with her. Among the orange embers burning themselves out until they were nothing more than dead black lumps, she saw the moment she realized what she was, what she had been destined to be.

Elena was nineteen years old and filled with dreams and possibility when she splurged her savings on a beautiful black dress,

cut elegantly like the ones worn by women who worked in the bank. And that day, as she sat straight in her chair in her tasteful dress, the employment officer announced that no one would ever hire a woman like her.

It did not matter that she carried herself with the refined elegance she'd studied on the screen of the American films she devoured in the cinema. It did not matter that she was a virgin who attended Mass each Sunday and sometimes during the week as well. Her fate had been decided by where she was born and to whom.

Elena closed her eyes and replayed that afternoon in her mind like she had countless times before. She had left the employment office in tears, returned to the pleasure house, and told her mother what happened. Elena sat on the bed and cried, watching as her mother wrapped the black dress in tissue paper before tucking it away in the back of her closet. Elena's mother then took her by the hand and led her downstairs to the salon where she sold her daughter's virtue to the highest bidder.

Also in the darting flames Elena saw glimpses of her life in Cephalonia before the day that devastated them all. She wondered and dreamed endlessly about the boys who had in her arms imagined themselves men. Hers had been the last hands to caress their cheeks, to stroke their hair. She had been their last embrace, their final kiss. And she could not help but wonder, could not help but hope and pray that in some way the finality of it all made it somehow matter. For them and for her.

She focused on the flames, desperate to see those images of happier times replayed before her again. All she had left were the images embellished in her mind and in the fire.

They were all gone now. She had no proof that their time together had happened, that it had mattered. That *she* had mattered.

But the young girl from the bluff had been a witness to it all.

Elena had been so excited when she spotted the girl coming up the path toward her door this morning. Elena glanced at herself in the mirror, tidying her hair and pinching her pale cheeks to bring some color and life to her complexion, readying herself to open the door and welcome the girl inside.

As she lunged toward the door, Elena stopped herself. She felt the cool metal of the doorknob in her hand and could have easily turned it. With one swift movement she could have ushered the girl inside and reminisced together of the handsome young men and the laughter and the songs.

Then more memories came rushing back to Elena, the whispers and the stares of the women in town. The way they pointed at her as they held tight to their children, warning their sons to stay away from women like her, warning their daughters to keep their distance. She remembered the pain of what it was to be an innocent young girl so unfairly branded and judged. And she took pity on the young girl who knew loneliness as well as she did.

Releasing her fingers from the doorknob, Elena turned and walked away from the door. She dragged the chair farther into the recesses of the room, away from the light and the window, and sat down and listened as the girl knocked and called her name.

When she was certain the girl had left, Elena finally stood. Wrapping her shawl around her shoulders, she walked over to see what the girl had slipped under the door. She unwrapped the paper, her once perfectly manicured fingernails now chipped and jagged as they slipped under the wrapping to reveal what was inside.

“Ohh.” She sighed as the paper fell away. Instinctively she drew her hands to her mouth, dropped the paper, and watched as it drifted to the floor. She stood motionless, staring down at the gift.

It was a drawing, a black-and-white pencil drawing of Elena on the beach. Her head was tipped back, her eyes wide and bright



as a young soldier held her in his arms as if twirling her in time to the music. The fine details, the glint in her eyes, the laughter in his, were all drawn in black and white. The only color on the page was the crimson of her lips, the imprint of her lipstick on his cheek, and the red of her fingernails, which she ran through his dark hair.

Elena smiled as she recognized the familiar stain of her lipstick on the page.

Taking the drawing in her hand, she sat back down in the chair, where she spent the rest of the afternoon gazing at a drawing made by a young girl whose name she did not know, and yet who managed to capture a fleeting moment in time when Elena's existence had mattered.

## chapter three

*Cephalonia, Greece*

1948

*Dear Mama,*

*It's been years since I last wrote to you. I'm eighteen now, no longer a child, and I know I don't need to send you messages in smoke and ash for you to be with me. I now understand that you are always with me. But today is a special day and I felt the need to tell you about it myself, to feel you close to me. Today, Baba is getting married.*

*Her name is Stella. The villagers joked that her mama fainted when Baba asked for her hand in marriage, that Stella's parents never imagined marrying her off at this age. And to be honest, I never imagined Baba marrying either.*

*It feels good to write to you again, Mama. I no longer believe in the myths and fairy tales like when I was a child. But I still believe in you.*

*With love, your daughter,  
Demitra*

**D**ESPITE THE FACT that both the bride and groom were of a certain age and that everyone, including the bride, understood this was a marriage of convenience, the wedding itself was a celebratory affair. Typically, the marriage of a couple advanced in years would merit a small church ceremony and simple lun-

cheon. But Stella's parents, who had resigned themselves long ago to their only child dying as a childless spinster, viewed the occasion as nothing less than a miracle worthy of slaughtering a lamb and hiring the best musicians on the island.

Many in the village whispered that Stella, with thick, unfortunate ankles, was well past the age of conceiving a child, but her mother, Martha, refused to give up hope of becoming a *yia-yia*. Martha prayed incessantly to Saint Gerasimos, the island's patron saint, to cure her thirty-seven-year-old daughter's womb of the ravages of age and see fit to grow a child inside her.

Martha had but one request for the quiet widower who asked for her daughter's hand. She begged him to delay the wedding until after October 20, the feast day of Saint Gerasimos. It was only after mother and daughter made a pilgrimage to the Saint's church in Lixouri—where Stella was made to lie on the ground as the procession carrying the saint's relics passed over her—that the bride's mother deemed her daughter ready to perform her sacred duties as a wife.

Wearing wedding crowns joined by a ribbon, Stella and Pericles walked three times around the altar that afternoon as the priest joined them in holy matrimony. The bride wore a simple dress of beige cotton, which her mother had embellished by embroidering tiny gold flowers along the neckline and hem. Her hair was pinned up off her face and adorned with a cluster of white stephanotis.

"Really, she would be better served to wear her hair down to hide those wrinkles and that lazy eye," Andriana, a sharp-nosed distant cousin of Stella's, muttered. As the bride and groom emerged from the church to a shower of rice, Demitra made certain to aim her generous portion of rice not at the bride and Baba but straight down Andriana's back.

The luncheon was held in the town square under the fading afternoon light with the Ionian Sea glistening in the distance. It

seemed as if everyone from the neighboring villages came out to enjoy the festivities. Even those who had not attended the church service could not resist a free meal of lamb and a chance to witness and gossip as the curmudgeonly old widower and the woman he saved from spinsterhood began their new life together.

“We’ll leave in an hour,” Olga said as she took a glass of wine from Demitra’s hand, wagging her finger and shaking her head at her niece.

Demitra nodded. “I’ll be ready.”

Olga began to walk away, but Demitra called to her. “Olga.”

The nun turned. “Yes, child?”

“Why do you think he did it?” Demitra finally found the nerve to ask the question that had been gnawing at her since Baba came home several weeks ago and broke the traditional silence of dinnertime to announce that he would be marrying Stella.

Olga took a moment, breathing in deeply as if measuring the significance of her words.

“I know it seems new and strange, but I pray it will be a new beginning for you all. I hope she brings your father some joy and comfort.” Olga then took Demitra’s hand in her own and squeezed. “And I pray she is a kind soul who will bring you comfort and joy as well.”

*Yes, but why now?* Demitra could not get the question out of her head. All those years when she was a child, when he could have used the help of a wife and companion to help care for her and raise her, he never mentioned marriage. Demitra was no longer a child and could take care of herself and her father and the house as well. It made no sense. Then again, not much about her father, his life and choices, made much sense to her.

The drone of the bouzouki music picked up. Stella made her way from greeting a group of well-wishers to where Olga and Demitra were standing.

“I hope you are enjoying yourselves.” Stella smiled at them both.

“Yes. Very much,” Olga replied. “I don’t think the village has seen an event like this in years. Everyone is having a wonderful time. Your parents are most gracious hosts, and you are a lovely bride.” The nun turned her attention to her niece. “Demitra, please make sure you are ready. We can’t miss the bus.” Olga smiled at the bride one last time before walking toward the other side of the *plateia* where Father Emanuel was chatting with several villagers.

“Where are you going?” Stella asked Demitra as she filled two glasses with wine and handed one to her, winking conspiratorially.

“I’m spending the night at the monastery with Thea Olga.”

“Why?”

“I was told it’s the right thing to do since it’s your wedding night.”

“Is it what you want?” Stella asked, the sincerity of her words evident in her kind eyes. “There’s no need for you to leave.”

“That’s not what your mother said,” Demitra replied. “And I don’t mind, really.”

“My mother?” Stella’s eyes narrowed as she leaned in closer to Demitra. “What does my mother have to do with where you are staying?”

“She came to the house a few days ago when Baba was at work. I made her a cup of tea, and she gave me an envelope with bus fare, saying it was only proper to leave you alone on your wedding night.”

“Oh, that woman.” Stella huffed, scanning the room until she found her mother holding court among the *yia-yias* of the town, no doubt dreaming of the moment she might join their ranks.

“She means well. But from the moment I said yes to your father, she has thought of nothing but holding a grandchild in her arms.” Stella shook her head. “And you’re a little too old to be

bounced on her knee.” She gently poked Demitra in the ribs, dissolving them both into giggles.

Demitra caught her breath and looked up at the woman who had with three turns around the altar become her stepmother. There was a gentleness about her and sincerity in her eyes, despite what that horrid Andriana claimed.

“Why did you say yes?” The words escaped Demitra’s mouth before she could stop them. “I’m— I did not mean to . . .” Her face flushed red.

“No, that’s all right.” Stella lifted her hand into the air as if to wave away any perceived misunderstanding. “It’s a fair question, and I’ve wondered many times what you must think of this.” She glanced away, her mouth pinched, eyes narrowed, but then she looked back at Demitra with a warm smile.

“I know your father is not much for words. I know he loses himself in his memories and in the bottle, Demitra. We all find ways to cope, to try to help us forget our pain sometimes . . .” She leaned in and took Demitra’s hand in her own. “But that’s all right. I tend to talk a lot, in case you haven’t noticed already.” Stella shrugged.

A chuckle escaped Demitra’s lips as she brought her hands to her face, attempting to regain some composure.

“Oh, I see you’ve noticed.” Stella cocked an eyebrow at her, and they both laughed again. They composed themselves, but in that moment, Demitra sensed a shift. In that moment of shared conspiratorial laughter, Demitra understood that Stella could be more than just her father’s wife.

“So why did I say yes?” Stella continued, glancing up at the star-filled sky and pausing a moment, collecting her thoughts before turning once again to Demitra. “I’ve never been someone who dreamed of a husband. I’ve never had fairy-tale visions of being someone’s wife. But I’ve always wanted a child, Demitra.”

She lifted her chin with a finger, smiling dreamingly as she spoke.

“I’ve always prayed that God would answer my prayer and help me become a mother one day. One by one the years slipped away and so did my prospects of ever finding a husband, of having a child. And then a few months ago I ran into your father in the church where he was painting the wall around the cemetery. We talked for a few moments, and I thought nothing of it—until he came to my house a week later to ask if I would marry him. I was surprised at first, but then I realized it made perfect sense.

“We’re all missing something in our lives. Companionship, comfort, someone to talk to, someone to listen to us, and somewhere to belong. We can all help one another, your father, and me, and you. You’re practically a grown woman and I would never try or pretend to be your mother. But I can be a lot of things. I can be someone to talk to and someone to listen to you. And someone who is there, so you know you are not alone. Because I don’t want to be alone anymore either.”

Demitra wanted to say so much in that moment, but words escaped her. As she scoured her thoughts to find the right response, Stella seemed to find the words for her.

“I know you had a family once, Demitra, and a mother who no doubt loved you so very much. I know I can never replace her, but I can be something else for you, a new beginning. Look around. I bet most of the women here despise their husbands, forced into marriages they had no choice in. No one forced me. This is my choice, and I choose you. I choose you as my family. Let’s lean on each other and help each other find our way? Ok?” She reached her hands out to Demitra, who offered hers in return. They stood there in the middle of the reception understanding that with three turns around the altar, they, too, had been bound to each other.

The pace of the music changed, and Baba tipped his glass and bowed his head to the bouzouki player who responded with a nod.

Each chord became more melodramatic and soulful than the last, each note seemingly summoning Baba to the dance floor.

Half-drained ouzo glass in hand, shirt unbuttoned now to his navel, he placed the glass on the ground, lifted his arms and snapped his fingers as he closed his eyes and began to feel the music. He twirled and spun as the melody changed, bending down in rhythm, slapping the floor with his hand and standing back up again, eyes closed, head tilted back as if he was in his own world, dancing to a song whose words only he could hear.

Dusk settled across the island, and Demitra watched, transfixed, as her father danced a *zeibekiko* while the lone bouzouki player strummed his mournful lament. It was as if all the passion, emotions, and even the stories he'd kept locked away from her all these years were on full display for the entire wedding party to witness. *How could he bare his soul to an entire village and still feel like a stranger to his own daughter?*

"He's a fine dancer," Stella said as she leaned over and filled their glasses with more wine.

"Yes. He is." Demitra scanned the plateia, making sure Olga was nowhere in sight before bringing the glass to her lips. Confusion and hurt etched on her face as she watched her father dance.

"You know, it's like this for men." Stella's gentle demeanor matched the tone of her carefully chosen words. "Sometimes the things they can't or won't speak about, are expressed only through their dance."

"Even today, even on your wedding day, did you notice that he didn't dance earlier with everyone else? Only now, alone," Demitra said, never taking her eyes off him.

"There's a reason your father only dances the *zeibekiko*, Demitra." Stella spoke softly, her words barely audible above the music. Demitra inched closer, and Stella smiled at her, as if confirming that this would be the first of many secrets shared between them.



“It’s a dance that originated on the battlefield, a soldier’s mournful dance for a fallen comrade. It’s a dance of feeling, of inexplicable emotion, of allowing their movements to speak for them, to express the things men can’t bring themselves to say out loud. I don’t pretend to know a lot about men, but I do know this: a man will say things in dance he could never bring himself to say with words.” Stella turned again to face Demitra.

“Some men keep their pain bottled up, hidden from the world, and the world rewards them for it, calling them brave, stoic, strong. When men express their pain, it’s seen as beautiful, poetic.” She paused a moment, frustration evident on her face as she finished her thought. “Heroic. And yet, when women express pain, we are seen as weak. Weak in character and weak in strength.” She exhaled deeply, leaning in closer until their faces were inches apart. “But you and I know the truth, don’t we? We are nothing of the sort. We are stronger than they would like to believe and in ways they can’t even begin to imagine.”

Demitra nodded, blinking in rapid succession. She opened her mouth to reply, to agree with her new stepmother and to ask why it was this way, but before she could get the words out of her mouth, she was interrupted by Irene, the wife of Nektarios, the village baker. While her husband was well regarded for his baking skills, Irene was known for being the town gossip and know-it-all. She marched over to where Demitra and Stella were standing. In one hand she held a platter of honey-soaked baklava and in the other she gripped her son, Niko, her fingers wrapped viselike around his wrist.

“What a beautiful wedding,” Irene gushed. “We are so happy for you all.” Her steely gaze fixed not on the bride but on Demitra. “Isn’t that right, Niko?”

Niko was silent.

“Isn’t that right, Niko?” Irene repeated, digging her elbow into

her son's side.

"Yes," Niko replied, keeping his eyes cemented on the floor.

"Demitra, make sure you stop by the bakery this week. I'd love to send you home with some treats to celebrate." Irene leaned closer to Demitra as she spoke. It took all of Demitra's willpower to keep from wiping away the spray of saliva she felt land on her cheek.

"I will." She forced a smile.

"Wonderful. Niko will make sure you get the freshest bread and pitas. Won't you, Niko?" Again her elbow landed with precision on his rib cage. "Niko will take the very best care of you, no matter how busy we are. Right, Niko?"

"Yes, Mama," he mumbled, this time daring to look up at Demitra, who met his eyes and never once looked away.

Across the room the music stopped as Baba finished his dance. He glanced over to where Demitra, Stella, Niko, and Irene were gathered before draining his glass and walking over to join Nektarios and the other men.

"We look forward to seeing you at the bakery," Irene said before leading Niko away.

"What was that all about?" Demitra whispered.

"I may be new to all of this, but I'm not stupid. And neither are you." Stella shot Demitra a knowing look.

"You don't think . . ." She didn't want to say the words out loud. Demitra always knew this time would come. And now it made perfect sense. She was eighteen, the age when most girls had already been betrothed. Baba had never once mentioned the idea of marriage to her. But then again, he rarely said much to her beyond asking what was for dinner.

Just as Demitra lifted her wineglass to her lips, Olga appeared at her side.

"All right. That's enough." Olga reached out and took the glass

from Demitra's hand.

"Congratulations, my dear Stella, and welcome to the family." Olga leaned in and kissed Stella on each cheek. "Come, Demitra. It's time to go."



DEMITRA WOKE WITH the sun the next morning. She always slept well at the convent. How was it that there the stillness and quiet were comforting while at home she found it suffocating?

Breakfast was the same as always in the convent—a cup of chamomile tea that the nuns picked and dried from the mountain-side and sweetened with honey harvested from their own hives. There were also hard-boiled eggs and savory biscuits. The existence of a second tin, filled with sweet biscuits, was never discussed out loud.

The other nuns had come and gone before sunrise, off to their morning chores, leaving Demitra and Olga alone in the kitchen.

"I'm going to be like you. I'm never going to get married," Demitra said as she added another teaspoon of honey to her tea.

"Why would you say that?" Olga wiped her hands on her apron and walked to sit beside her niece, winking as she placed a sweet biscuit before her.

"I don't want a husband." Demitra dunked the biscuit in her tea. "I got the feeling yesterday that Baba and Nektarios have come to some sort of agreement about me and Niko. But I have no interest in being a baker's wife, or anyone's wife." She took a bite, lingering a moment as the softened biscuit with hints of clove, orange, and nutmeg melted on her tongue. She closed her eyes, savoring each note and sensation. "Oh, these are my favorite."

"Maybe if you marry the baker, you can ask for the recipe." Olga flashed a mischievous grin.

As she reached for another biscuit, Demitra waved her cloth

napkin at Olga. "Very funny. Who knew nuns could have such a sense of humor?"

"Ah, you'd be surprised," Olga said. "But don't change the subject. And don't close yourself off to love, Demitra."

"Why? You've never been in love, and you've done just fine."

"Don't be so certain." Olga's raised eyebrow was partially obscured by her habit.

Demitra's eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"I know what it is to be in love, Demitra." Her eyes softened as a smile formed on her lips. The creases around her eyes deepened as her smile broadened at the memory.

"You were in love?" Demitra put down her cup, pulling her chair closer to Olga. "With a man?"

"Of course, with a man. What did you think, with a goat?" Olga chuckled, the sound resembling more of a snort, which melted them both into giggles. "Don't look so surprised," she scolded even as she smiled. "I was young once too. I know what it is to fall in love, and I also know what it is to have your heart broken."

Demitra's mouth was agape. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You never asked."

"I'm asking now," Demitra said, leaning closer. "Tell me."

"All right then." Olga smiled and sighed. She closed her eyes for a moment as if to conjure memories long ago tucked away. "I was younger than you, about fourteen years old, when I fell in love. He was my neighbor. We promised ourselves to each other and we were engaged. Our family did not have money for a dowry, but your father was in America at the time, and he promised to send money, so the betrothal went forward.

"His name was Marco. And like so many men—then and now—he left to find work in America with a promise that he would return for me, and we would be married. It was only supposed to be a year, just one year of separation and savings, and he

was to return to me.” She smiled at the memory, a distant, fleeting moment in time that even now, even so many years later and after so much pain, could summon the youthful feelings of being in love and hopeful. And then, as suddenly as it had appeared, her smile dissolved.

“What happened? How did you end up . . .” Demitra paused. “I mean—”

Olga put her hand up. “It’s all right.” She looked off across the kitchen toward the window and the garden beyond, as if the scenes of her life were playing out again among the lemon and apple trees.

“He said he loved me, but in the end he loved his new life in America more. He never came back.” She turned to face Demitra, her eyes red and glassy even now, a lifetime later.

“Did you ever hear from him?”

“No. Not a word. Only once did he write about me to his parents. He told them I was released from our betrothal.” She lifted her teacup to her lips, blowing on the hot liquid before taking a small sip. She set the cup down once again in its saucer and straightened the napkin on her lap. When she glanced up again, she smiled sadly as her gaze landed on Demitra.

“He released me from our promise, from our bond, but how do you release your heart?” She glanced down again at the golden liquid inside her cup. “We made a promise to each other, and I could not see my way past it. I overheard my parents talking about how they would never find another man to take me, now that I had been tainted.”

“Tainted?”

“I had given my heart to him, even though I had not yet given my body. For me it was one and the same. And it was this way for the rest of the village as well. I knew I had done nothing improper, but who would believe me? Imaginations and inuendo can be a

dangerous thing for anyone, Demitra. Even more so for a girl who has nothing to her name, whose most valuable . . .” She inhaled deeply and then exhaled a long, slow breath as she contemplated her words.

“No. Whose only assets in life are her virtue and reputation.” She lifted the cup to her mouth again and sipped before continuing. “I knew then that I would never marry and never allow myself to love another man. In my mind and heart, I had already committed myself to him. And in my dreams, I had not only envisioned our life together; I had lived it. In my dreams I experienced our wedding day. I saw the home we would make together, the children we would raise. And, yes, in my dreams I saw our life together as man and wife. While everyone around me cried and cursed and asked how God could be so cruel, I knew they were wrong. Because I realized then that my dreams were a gift from God, that God had allowed me to experience in sleep what I would never have the chance to live in the light of day. In my dreams I had experienced a true love, a pure love. And I realized it was enough for me.”

“But why?” Demitra leaned across the table. “You were so young. You could have found another man to love.”

“What other man? There were no other men to love, even if I had wanted to. All the men had gone. They left one after the other for America, for work and new opportunities. But even if the village had been filled with men, the choice was mine. I didn’t want another man. I knew even then that once a heart is broken, it is forever changed. You are forever changed by knowledge that the person you love and trust most can change their mind and hurt you in such a way.

“No. I had a pure love once, Demitra. And for me, that was enough. I decided I would devote myself and my life to Christ. It’s the circle of life, Demitra. This is God’s promise to us. Even in our

darkest hours, God will always provide a new path, a new beginning, to remind us that there is always new life after death. Never forget this, Demitra. Even when the world seems so dark that you think you will never find your way, God brings the dawn, and with it, the light shines on a new path. The light of a new dawn will always pierce the darkness.”

Demitra took a few moments before she could respond. “I had no idea. Does everyone in this family have secrets? Does everyone have a lost love they keep hidden and locked away?”

“No, it’s not the same. Your father never talks about the past because he was so deeply wounded by what happened. He never shared the full story with anyone, not even me. I tried. When he returned from the United States to Cephalonia with you, he was a broken man. So broken he could not even stay in our family’s home in Sami. He left it all behind and said he wanted a fresh start. He found your house in Argostoli, and at first he barely ate, barely slept. I left the convent for a while to help him and to care for you.” She placed her hand on Demitra’s shoulder. Demitra leaned in, her cheek against Olga’s skin.

“Day and night I tried. I was patient, allowing him the space to grieve. But he never talked about it. He never talked about her. Not to me. Not to anyone. All he would say was *‘I lost her, Olga.’* And nothing more. None of us knew your mother. All we knew was that they met and married in America and they had you, this precious child.

“The pain was too much for him to relive, Demitra. He never discussed her or how she was lost—perhaps a sudden illness that took her from him, from you, so cruelly and unexpectedly. So many of us tried to convince him to let us help. I asked if he would allow me to bring you here, to raise you with the sisters as we have done with so many children before. But he would not hear of it. He would not even let me finish. He was determined to do it his

way. So he raised you himself and did the best he could, all while keeping his memories of your mother locked tightly away.”

“I wish I had clearer memories of her, Olga,” Demitra said. “I’ve tried so hard to remember her. Sometimes I think I do. Sometimes I think I can see her clearly in my mind. But then the picture fades before I can be certain. There’s one thing I do remember—her laughter, this sweet sound, a soft giggle that echoes in my mind. Even as I struggle to remember her face, I hear her laughter so clearly sometimes and I know that she, that we, were happy once.”

“Memories are a precious gift, and it seems so unfair for you to have none of your mother. Hold tight to the sound of her laughter in your heart.”

“Do you remember the book of myths you gave me when I was about seven?”

“Yes. I do. You always had a passion for those stories. I remember you curled up in your bed reading them over and over again.”

“They were more than stories to me,” Demitra said. “I would read those myths and wonder if they held the secret to Mama’s true identity, to mine. Was she a goddess, an ethereal, magical creature, like in the myths? Had Mama visited Baba under cover of darkness, the way Cupid visited Psyche? Had she tried in vain to keep their perfect love hidden from the jealous gods, keeping her identity secret, even from her one true love? Did Baba bring me back to Cephalonia to keep me safe, to hide me from the jealous gods?”

She stood, clearing the table and taking her teacup to the sink. She gazed out the window toward the garden and lifted her face to the warmth of the sun. After a moment she turned toward Olga.

The older nun smiled then and said, “You are not wrong, my dear. Of course she was magical. After all, she created you.”



## about the author



Photo by Connie Fernandez

YVETTE MANESSIS CORPORON is an internationally bestselling author and Emmy Award–winning producer. To date, her books have been translated into sixteen languages. A first generation Greek–American with deep family roots on Corfu, Yvette studied classical civilization and journalism at New York University. She lives in Brooklyn with her family where she spends her spare time reading, running, and trying to get into yoga.

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