

KRISANTHI'S WAR

IN HITLER'S GREECE

A NOVEL

IDA RÆ EGLI



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Krisanthi's War is a work of fiction set during and after Hitler's occupation of Greece in World War II. The novel is inspired by true stories. Where the fictional characters engage with known historical figures, the engagements and dialogue are fiction.

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Book One

Athens

Peace

Lindos, Rhodes, Greece: 1927

ARAGTAG DAY at the end of May. Three eight-year-old girls, Krisanthi, Maria, and Kalliope, shoeless, in loose-fitting dresses, play on the beach at Lindos Bay.

They run close to the water in moist sand, stretching their legs, their arms imitating the wings of birds, of budding in-flight Winged Victories of Samothrace. Later, they bound into the sea, foam splashing up to their calves, water dripping from their dress hems. Later still, they become a trail of kites, their skirts caught by the wind, their long hair borne aloft like twisted silk.

Finally, breathing heavy, throaty puffs, they slow. They hum, imitating cantors at the village Orthodox Church.

In single file now, they drag their toes in the sand, staggering to the end of the beach, where the sand gives way to a four-hundred-foot wall of windblown sandstone high upon which rests the ancient marble columns of the Temple to Athena, Goddess of Wisdom and War. They tumble into a heap of laughter and still panting, begin whispering secrets.

The wind blows. The sea beats a gentle rhythm on the sand.

1. My Dead Friends

Krisanthi Skambilis, Athens, Greece: 1985

THIS WRITER DOES not go out walking with dead friends. My dead men come to me.

“Is there honey for the tea?” my dead husband asks, slipping quietly on bare feet into the kitchen, his hair thorny brambles. He asks this every morning, as if his memory of where the honey jar rests on the shelf above the stove has slid like a Sisyphian rock into the sea.

I raise my head and hear him shuffle over, take the honey pot from the shelf and the tea from the drawer, the familiar yellow of the packaging glowing nearly pink in the warm, early light. He fills the kettle with water and drops it on the burner. I meet his eyes as he turns, his dark orbs circled and puffy, and yet at ease in the apparition of his life, and happy to see me. He was always happy to see me. Even just after our wedding when he wanted to hate me.

“Ahaaa, Krisanthi,” he says. “My little parakeet is writing. This is good.” I can feel him staring at me as he pours the tea, stirs the honey and milk into the big mug our grandson made him. The spoon clatters rhythmically, almost musically, against the inside of the mug. “Are you finally writing the story of our clubbing during the war... that asshole Nazi lieutenant? Or is this just something for the newspaper?”

I glare at him. He keeps encouraging me to write about the war, but I am petrified of entering that trauma again—even if only in my mind. I might lose myself in it.

Smatterings of rosy chaffinch and midnight-and-white martins settle in the fig tree off the porch. The door open, we turn toward the birds, their chatter welcome and sweet. We hold mute, Yorgoes slurping his tea. Once the birds sing, we return to our conversation.

“I’m not sure what to do, how to begin. Should I presume?” I stammer, my face teasing, but too, ponderous. His look is steady, helpful. It eases me into feeling secure. Or is it the memory of his strong maleness? His mass, his height?

We flinch when we hear the braking of an automobile outside. The sound of its door slamming—with a rattle, not a snug catch—tells us it is

Alexi. He's come by for coffee. I rise from my chair and have filled the pot, am reaching for the coffee can when Alexi comes through the screen door, banging it shut as he has since he was a boy, closing it quietly never his style. He swoops in with that cockiness of youth, flinging his fisherman's cap on the table. He kisses my cheeks, slaps Yorgoes on the arm, slouches into a chair. "Did you read the paper?"

"Not yet." Yorgoes nods to the paper Alexi has just brought in from the driveway and is clutching in his hand. "Why?"

Alexi hands him the paper. "Six million tourists this summer. Can you believe it? What's happening to Greece?"

"In God's name! Enough about the tourists! I wish they'd all go home and let us get back to shipping something other than Coca-Cola."

I pour Alexi's coffee, add milk and sugar, hand it to him as he and his father discuss politics. "What's going on with Papandreou, and will he win the election?" "Why is he attacking the West so vigorously?" "What about Cyprus? The U.N. proposal?" I feel distracted by what they are saying. I'm struggling to decide—can I give voice to the old violence? Last week I wrote about the day the Germans took Athens, but is it good enough? I sigh. The room is quiet.

"I'm worried about your mother." Yorgoes sighs, measuring his breathing to fall in rhythm with mine. It irritated me when he did this when he was alive, as if by doing so he could get inside my skin, draw me closer—possess me.

"Why? She's beautiful, Papá."

"Yes," he says, as though I cannot hear, am not sitting just there, "but look how she struggles. It's been that way since we died. She needs to write the damned story so she can forgive... the Nazi... herself."

"Ah, perhaps yes... but can you forgive the murdering Nazis, Papá? What happened to Mamá? To Maria, Kalliope, Kyriokos, Gino?"

"Greece survived, Alexi. Your mother survived. We had good years after the war."

"True." But clearly Alexi is begrudging.

"If she allows it, reenters Hades, recalls the beatings, the blood on the square, the rapes and shattered children, maybe she can... let us move on. Let go of us, unknit the pain."

"Is this true, Mamá?" Alexi asks, easing toward me, his old brown vest missing—I notice as he approaches—a button. I fight an impulse to run and find another, sew it on. Then he is there, his bright dark eyes

penetrating mine, as they had done since he became a man, always there to comfort his sister and me. In the village during the war he lead the children around, kept them safe. His arms encircle me like bees swarming the queen, tenderly, and I smell him, his Ivory soap and Vitalis and that subtle musk of a man who sweats enough to dampen the back of his shirt. Yorgoes, too, hugs me, his breath slightly stale. This never changes. How many times did I rattle him to brush his teeth before he came to me for his morning kiss? And yet now I find this endearing. Even his bare feet, one toe going weirdly to the side, broken during the northern campaign and never set. All this, endearing.

I protest their coddling me though I love it.

“She’s an intellectual. What can we do? *Ti na ekonomai?*”

“What can we do, Mamá?” Alexi’s grin is wide, his heart beating faintly against my arm.

“Oh...” I shrug “just continue coming to breakfast. I’ll need you if I do this, if I add this salt to my old wounds.”

“Write it, Mamá,” Alexi commands. “Even that black night! Maria and Kalliope will help if you ask them. Send them letters.”

Yorgoes searches my eyes, the smoke curling up from the fag held in his loose fingers. “The entire catastrophe!” He stares down at me, as though commanding me, though he knows that never worked. “And don’t forget the night I made love to you at Thea’s villa, shelling going on outside, my hands shaking with desire. And how Kyriokos wrote poems for Kalliope, and Maria saved Gino—and baby Argos came to us. Do it, Parakeet! Look the jackal in the eye. Remember what your father said?”

“I know. Never give in to a bully.” *As well: In dust there is promise. He said that too.*

“Then no problem, Mamá.” Alexi puffs with confidence but looks to his father nonetheless. Yorgoes is preoccupied at the doorway, cigarette burning close to his tobacco-stained fingers, smoke rising in ringlets, as though it will morph into a genie springing from a bottle. “You have my journals, my war letters, Parakeet. And we’ll be here. Right Alexi?”

I feel the edge of Alexi’s movements. I make notes. Wonder if Maria and Kalliope will talk to me about what happened. I envision scenes, but then hesitate, acknowledge the uncomfortable gnawing at my gut, the anxiety. But, too, anticipation, a desire for catharsis.

And then they are gone—puff—and I am alone.

2. Waiting for Hitler

Athens: April 1941

OUR ARMY IS ABANDONING US, abandoning Greece! Impossible! Yet true. Filthy and bleeding, what is left of the Greek army slouches toward Piraeus harbor to ship out to exile. Just twenty-four hours ago, on these same streets, we watched British troops march out, we begging them to stay and fight with us. And now this.

Athenians pack the streets, jostling, screaming, searching for their men, sons, husbands, cousins. Touching them, tossing kisses and flowers. Weeping. Weeping. I bob up and down to see around the angry crowd, searching for Yorgoes, waving, tears wetting my cheeks, desperate to find him in this train of transport trucks packed with shattered lives. I think I see him, catch glimpses of strong jawlines like his, or curly crowns, or long-fingered hands not unlike his, but in the end I conclude he is not among them. He would look for me here outside Papa's gold shop, would see me racing around, arms flailing, shouting, "Yorgoes! Yorgoes! Yorgoes Skambilis! Have you seen Yorgoes Skambilis?"

I pull back finally, rigid, aghast at the sight of the open wounds, the bloody men, bandages dirty and oozing red and black, anguished men on stretchers swatting at flies, or bravely waving their caps. Some lie comatose, wavering between life and death. Church bells clang, as if trying to wake them.

A makeshift military band haltingly plays *Ode to Liberty* over near the Tomb of Unknown Soldiers, and our troops, as they pass, shout the familiar words: "Hail to Liberty. We knew thee of old...." They spread through Syntagma Square, then snake along Leoforos Vasilisis Amalias, trucks bumper to bumper spewing black diesel smoke, grinding in low gear, the calamitous hum inching away from us: this holocaust of defeat, our Greek army.

I do not sleep. I curl up in the window-seat of our bedroom where Yorgoes took Sunday naps. I smell him, that nearly sweet muskiness that Alexi inherited from him. I ache for his sinewy, thick body; the way he stares, locks eyes with me when he wants me; his teasing grin and practical jokes—jumping out from behind doors or sheets drying on the line.

His irritated forbearance—combing his fingers through his hair—when I fly into rage. I miss even that cigarette-staleness, the unruly mop, but not his scolding. His torso warm at night, yes, the sheets flung about the bed.

In the dark I recall Greece's history, how many times before this one Athens has been invaded since Pericles guided the construction of the Parthenon. *How many? Fifty? A hundred? More? How many women raped? Oh God! Mothers, like me? Please God, no! Children run through with sword blades? I would rather die! No! Never... as long as I am living! Yorgoes would shrivel and die either way.* He's a *Nous*, me an *Eros*, meaning he leads with his head, me my heart. That has caused us problems, as has the difference in our ages. Still, until recently we've lived in entitlement. Now any belief in a secure future feels as fragile as a robin's egg.

At dawn I begin hearing the distant horn blasts of our naval ships departing Piraeus for Crete or Patras. The islands of Syros and Chios, surrounded by Italian and German destroyers, have already fallen. Reading this in the newspaper, Emmanuel, Yorgoes's youngest brother, the only one not conscripted into the army, immediately ordered the family ships and most of the ferries out of Piraeus to safer ports. Not so wise was the Alimanou family, whose ferry, last week, trying to escape Athens for the Cyclades, was bombed and sunk by German Stukas as target practice. The ferry was just outside the gulf when struck, bloated with Greeks desperate to escape the escalating war, a Red Cross banner tacked to its deck roof. No survivors.

On Saturday I leave the children with Mamá and take a cab to the Harbor to help Emmanuel with the accounting, one of the *wife duties* Yorgoes assigned me years ago. I'm there less than an hour when we hear approaching shrieks from Stukas, the hiss and blast of bombs falling, at first up north, at Mandra perhaps, but heading toward us. We drop everything and race along the street with others pouring out of buildings. We scramble down boulder embankments to cower beneath the heavy beams of the old dock.

Emmanuel orders me to stay put, then skitters back up to help children and old people navigate the rocks. I listen to the Stukas diving and then pulling up, the roar of their engines deafening. Like angry bees, they unload their venom on ancient Piraeus, blowing rows of buildings to concrete heaps. My ears hurt. Women and children scream or beg God, snippets audible amid the detonating bombs and machine-gun fire that flashes red, pinging into the water. In an eardrum-numbing blast, a bomb

hits a diesel tank near the Port Authority office, flames rocketing, black clouds billowing confusion, diesel raining down on buildings that catch fire, seeming like infernos of hell.

We cover our faces, cough wildly, struggle to breathe.

When the bombing ends and the buzz of planes trails off, Emmanuel finds me where I stand, my brain ringing like a school bell, afraid of what I'll see. I struggle to reconcile what is left with what was there an hour ago. In a collage of mingling color like in a kaleidoscope, morning shoppers—an hour earlier buying cabbage and *chórta* at the dock market—float face-down in the sea like vegetables in a pot. The dead are wreathed by thousands of silver fish floating side-up amid iridescent swirls of diesel fuel and human blood. This is not the Gulf of Salamis we know.

I hear myself scream, feel Emmanuel wrap around me, bury my eyes. He is not as tall or muscular as Yorgoes, is soft, chubby, with a childlike face. He's eternally kind.

Later we form a human chain to draw up the bodies from the water. I vomit and weep. We pile the unidentifiable body parts and make a line of the intact bodies, side by side on the dock in the shade of the smoldering harbor house. The sea washes in and out in shades of purple, its liquid blue run through with red. The air smells of charred flesh. My forearms are sticky, and still shaking.

I realize I am in shock. My ears buzz like sirens. Yorgoes's sister, Melissa, not as striking a beauty as she was before having four daughters, yet bubbly and often wickedly funny, appears red-faced from a dead run from her house west of Athens. Seeing us alive she drops to her knees. And then together we begin patching the shipping office into makeshift operational. Thankfully it did not take a direct hit, though the windows are blown. Shattered as we are and glum, we have work to do. The Nazis are marching toward Athens and Emmanuel must make a case for their not expropriating Skambilis Shipping Line—what is left of it.

Next day, almost predictably, the old gods testing us with disaster upon disaster, Prime Minister Ioannis Metaxas, afraid of being hanged by the Nazis I suppose, shoots himself dead, leaving ineffectual King George and our panicked generals and flapping, useless politicians to fight over who will surrender Greece. It is, as Papá says, "a disgraceful moot point."

The Nazis have yet to arrive; nonetheless, Athens is anarchic, fear visible as rolling fog. I panic going out with the children, but need money, drachmas I can hide, stash in the basement. Emergencies will arise. So, to

the bank. Rushing along Dionysiou Areopagitou, Kiriaki in the carriage, Alexi wide-eyed at my side, I spot a team of elders turning an old root cellar into a bomb shelter, stacking bags of sand all around the pithy-framed entrance, sweeping out the interior. The old Bee Man, who sells the tastiest honey at Athens's Pláka Market, is nailing up reinforcing boards. Two old *theas* in soiled aprons tack up icons, one of St. Michaeli, field commander of the Army of God; the other a Virgin Mary. They have loaded a scarred table with incense burners and a sandbox to place burning candles in, a pyramid of white candles stacked alongside.

"How many people do you suppose can fit in there, *Thea*?" I ask the tiny crone, whose white hair is so thin at her crown it looks like threads over a darned knob. She stops in her labor to stare hard at me, chewing at her lip in thought.

"When bombs are falling, we can crowd a bunch in here, even perhaps the high and mighty who don't help us put it together." I chafe at the jab. *Me, the high and mighty? Hardly! She wouldn't agree.*

Downtown I notice, strangely, that the store windows on Platía Syntágmatos are decorated with new cloche hats and silk and rayon dresses that fall flatteringly just below the knee. Fluffy pink cotton towels, colored sheets, crystal and china. *How ironic, I think, that these windows make no mention of the war, of the Germans bearing down on us. Where are the drab wool blankets, handguns, canning jars, pots, and long underwear?*

At Papá's gold shop on Leoforos Vasilisis Amalias, across from the National Gardens, I find him showing a pearl and gold brooch in the shape of a swan to a well-dressed Italian couple, both in silk-blend suits. It's momentarily reassuring that a few Italians remain in Greece. Do they live here? Are they buying jewelry to hide, barter?

We are hardly inside the door when Alexi darts away and leaps into Papá's arms, disregarding Papa's pressed suit and my admonitions. They are magnets, these two, and inseparable when in the same room. Alexi begins digging at Papá's suit pocket, chanting, "Papou! Where's my candy?" A speedy if clumsy pickpocket, he's next into the inside pocket, his grubby hands flashing like lightning. My father giggles like a child.

"Hold on, *micro mou!* Hold on." Then to his customer, "Excuse me a minute, madam. We seem to have an emergency." Then to Alexi, "Let's see how smart you are, boy. I've hidden the candy." I move in to attend to the Italians as Papá parts the curtain and slips into the back room with Alexi, but they're back in seconds, Alexi unwrapping a lollypop. Papá hoists him

onto the counter, takes up again with the Italians, Alexi smacking on the lolly. I move to collect him; Papá waves me away.

I leave for the bank, but return quickly, anxiety burning my cheeks. "The line at the bank is two blocks long! There's a run on the bank, Papá! My God, what are we going to do? I need money for the children!"

"Relax. It's been that way for days, Krisanthi," Papá says matter-of-factly, although behind his reassurance I see puffy eyes twitching with anxiety. "Greeks are crazy. Like children...crazy." He shrugs his shoulders, poking at Alexi while chewing on the stub of a cigar, and I wonder if this is a charade, or because it's his second war, because he survived the first.

"I know the president of the bank, remember," he says finally. "We play backgammon at lunch at the café. I already talked to him. He'll keep our money safe...if he can, of course." He picks up Alexi and pokes Kiriaki in the ribs to make her laugh, then stares up at me with a brave grin. "I've hidden money. You know where. But I'll ask if Yonni can let you in the bank after hours."

His voice trails off, our attention drawn suddenly to a noisy pack of young men barging into the shop, the doorbell clanging, the intruders loud and brassy, drooping cigarettes, clothes worn and ill-fitting, hands shoved deep into trouser pockets. By the smell of them, they've been drinking. They draw out their hands and begin groping the counters. They whisper and point, make crude jokes. One looks up, into our eyes, his own steely cold, jumping from Papá to me, then around the shop. He points at Papá, his finger a make-believe gun. He pulls the trigger. But he seems new to this intimidation game. And my father is no fool. Before the boys realize it, Papá has scooped them into the thick net of his arms and swept them out the door. Papá locks the door behind them and lowers the shade. "It's time for lunch anyway," he says, his forehead wet with perspiration, his tense blank stare transparent. I realize I am hardly breathing, my chest tight, but then Alexi speaks up, brave now that the thugs are gone.

"Those were bad boys, Papou! They didn't act nice or say thank you. My papá would punch their ears in!"

Mamá and I argue bitterly that afternoon. I beg her to convince Papá to leave Athens, to board a ferry and head for Rhodes and our old summer villa, where they can grow a garden and live out the war in relative peace.

"You're not young," I remind her, generating steely glares.

"Your father cannot leave the shops. The people who work for us depend on him, Anthi! What do you imagine these people will do to survive if we

up and leave?” She throws up a hand of disgust, her avoidant dark eyes ablaze, tendrils of graying-brown hair escaping from her chignon to fall across her cheek. “How will they feed their families? No!” She points at me. “Leaving would be cowardly, Anthi. I’m surprised at you!”

Mamá shakes her finger, her usual reproach. “Anyway, you know your father can’t leave. His heart!” She points to her own. “The hospital on Rhodes is a miserable place, one step up from witchcraft. How can you even suggest that?” Her scowl tells all. Raising her voice, “You can leave the city Yorgoes will return to, wounded or dead, but we will stick it out. Stamati will stay too.”

I feel the insult, respond. “Yes, Stamati will stay, and sell food from the Kifissía farm on the black market...or worse.”

Impulsively, Mamá raises her hand to slap me, but then lets it fall. We glare at one another. We always clash over my brother. Both our remarks were below the belt, but also true. I’ve heard Stamati trying to convince Papá that money is to be made from these invaders, selling to them.

“Have you gone mad, Stamati?” Papá slammed back at him days earlier. “Are you a Greek or a German?” His hands thrash with agitation, his belly jelling. “And just where will you live once the war is over?” He pokes Stamati’s narrow chest. Stamati, slighter than Papá, with thinning dark hair and a slightly hawkish nose, winces, glares. He’s clearly seething, but remains silent, grinding his teeth. “If you sell to the Germans, for the rest of your life people will spit at you on the street!” Papá is breathing heavily, beginning to wheeze. “And so will I, Stamati. So will I! Don’t ever bring this up again!”

Stamati might not care, but Papá and I do. Greece is defeated. We know this, even though our small but fierce Greek army thwarted Mussolini’s invasion at the Albanian border, thrashing them back into a quagmire of mud. Yorgoes fought in that campaign, and I’ve had only two notes by post from him since. He is well, heartened by the army’s defeat of the Italians, wanting urgently to come home, though he will not:

... I think the Germans might come to the rescue of these debacling Italians and doubt we can withstand a blitzkrieg. But I must stay and do my part. I miss you and the children desperately. Please kiss my funny-faces for me. Love, Yorgoes.

Yorgoes's hunch proved correct. Hitler avenged our victory over Mussolini the first week of April, photographs in *Athens News* showing Wehrmacht and Panzer divisions of Field Marshall List's 12th Army—tanks, convoys of troop trucks, bombers, Stukas, hundreds and hundreds—swarming in blitzkrieg into northern Greece from Bulgaria. Like ants on a carcass. I felt nauseated.

That moonless evening the sky shone with a red glow from our burning northern cities, Salonika, Katerini, Larissa, Lamia, Livadia, red-orange pulses bringing a smothering acrid-smelling smog that blurred the stars from imparting hope.

Saturday's paper is plastered with reports and photographs of our destroyed North. One shows enemy lorries carting away animals, grain, and booty. In another, German troopers, frenetic with zeal, drag away teenage girls, their mouths open in silent scream, torn dresses exposing thrashing bare legs. The caption reads "...sometimes raping them in front of their families."

As they near Athens, I hear them. First as a faraway hum. Then as the drone of madness. Dante's flies buzzing around a swirling gyre. The minute the Nazi troops enter our city, miles north along the coast road, I hear a low clattery churn, feel the earth's trembling, watch light fixtures shake, hear glassware clang in discordant jarring. When they reach Avenue Leoforos Amalias, we can distinguish between the clanking of tanks and the umpapa of a military band, grinding away (poorly) on *Das Lied der Deutschen* in an insulting attempt to draw us into their victory reverie. *As if we would!*

By the time they turn onto Dionysiou Areopagitou, which runs along the front of the Parthenon, I recognize that the drumbeats are not drumbeats at all, are instead the syncopated stomp of the Wehrmacht infantry in dress boots, marching, pounding the street as steady as the sickle sweep of the Grim Reaper.

It is April 27th, 1941, a nearly warm Sunday, breeze moving the leaves of the ficus tree in the yard, jays squawking at the birdbath, clouds wispy in a dull blue sky tracking pink. Trying to ignore them, I focus on changing Kiriaki's diaper on the baby chest by the window, she giggling as I walk my fingers up her chest and over her face. She is five months old, Alexandros three. He is sputtering engine noises up and down the hall, peddling in the red car Yorgoes brought home before he left for the northern front. Suddenly realizing how near the Nazis are I shout, too loudly, startling

Alexi, ordering him to get his shoes on—now! His car’s sputtering ceases immediately, overridden by the growing cacophony that is the German army parade, the clanking tanks, the deep-throated throb of motorcycles, the well-oiled thrum of Mercedes sedans, the jarring crash of colliding cymbals and fast, hard-hit drums, all part of the anthem to Hitler’s satanic blitzkrieg of Greece.

They are stopping at the Parthenon!

I grab up the children, terror a thick phlegm in my throat, and rush—glancing back often—the five blocks up to my parents’ house on Aginoros Street, because it overlooks the wide circular pláka at the foot of the Parthenon. My heart pounds like a hammer on anvil as I fast-climb the steep curvy streets overhung with oleander and hibiscus already in bloom. Alexi complains as I drag him along; Kiriaki cries being so jostled in my arms.

Mamá wears an apron over her floral rayon dress. Papá is nearly dressed for church in his navy double-breasted suit, his tie hanging loose, all making him look shorter and more corpulent than he already is. His forehead spots with sweat, he and Mamá limp at the window, their heads nodding as though trying to dispel a bad dream, eyes bearing down on the plaza, at what they want not to see: the surrender of Greece.

The pláka quickly fills bumper to bumper with tanks, motorcycles, and black Mercedes sedans with swastika flags at the front fenders. The inside of the circle, too, begins to cluster with officers sprouting from vehicles, pressing their caps into place, and a hundred or so infantrymen rushing in, their drab green uniforms still muddy at the pant-hems—from the northern campaign? They swarm from sidecar motorcycles and square, funny looking, whiny small automobiles, arm-stretching military gentry, medals glinting in the sun. They converge at the bottom of the steps leading up to the Acropolis, and then, once the man in balloon pants with the crop arrives, begin climbing, slowly, chatting back and forth, gesturing, pointing, intentional, possessed by victory, their three-week blitz from Bulgaria to Athens, to conquer in the name of Adolf Hitler. They have slaughtered and won. They will now assess their booty. Assume our history. Germanize Greece—all of Europe.

How heavy this growling black dog in my chest....

I hug my parents crumpled at the window, and we weep in despair.

“Why are you crying?” Alexi asks my father, who reaches to pick him up.

“Because we are defeated. Because Greece is defeated, my boy.”

Alexi raises his hands and wipes Papá's tears away. "Nobody beats us," he says in his big-boy voice. "My daddy is fighting those bad men, remember, Papou? Daddy's really strong!" He clinches his fists to show us.

When we return our eyes to the Acropolis, the Greek flag is being lowered and, with the flick of a match, set afire to char and crumble to ash, to float on the breeze onto the old marble steps that have seen many flag-burnings before. Minutes later, that most despised red and black swastika ripples in its place. Almost as quickly, the radio across the room stops playing the Greek national anthem. Someone with a German accent clears his throat, identifies himself in German and then in Greek, and announces in staccato blast "the liberation and occupation of Greece in the name of Adolf Hitler!"

We cannot move, hardly breathe.



Book Two

The Island of Rhodes

War

Lindos, Rhodes, Greece: 1943

THE WINTER TIDE THRASHES THE BAY. An abandoned fishing boat knocks against the swamped pier. Waves like curling ram's horns threaten to undermine cement pillars installed en masse by Axis engineering units. Atop the pillars, a hulking monument forged in gleaming metal: an anti-aircraft gun. Unmanned.

A hundred and fifty feet above, on a limestone shelf, the village of Lindos waits out winter and war, battened down against rain and ruin.

Some yards behind rolling swirls of barbed wire at water's edge, three women walk solemnly, arms locked, sweaters and shawls clutched firmly, the tails of their wraps, the ends of their headscarves, the hems of their print dresses, whipping and snapping. Heads bowed, they move determinedly into the stiff wind. Around them children circle like seal pups in shallow water, chasing one another, tagging in giggles and shrieks that disappear in the thunder of weather. If one of the pups strays near the crossed bars or barbed wire, one of the women claps hands, or barks a command, retrieving the small one, admonished but undaunted.

At the end of the beach, where the sand gives way to the reaching wall of wind-smoothed sandstone and where the salt-smell of the sea is pungent, the women sit on rocks, the wind less violent in the cove, their scarves and shawls now gently ruffling.

They groan out their losses from the war, share fears, hope, and news.

Gulls glide above them in ellipses, like circling aircraft, nonplused by the crumbling majesty of the Temple to Athena. The sea pounds a troubled path to the shore.

24. Rhodes

Rhodes, (Capital City of Island Rhodes): January 1943

THE MORNING IS SULTRY, DAMP WITH RAIN. Streaks of sun filter through silver clouds to brighten parts of the island coming into grainy view out ahead of the ferry. Gawking from my perch on the top starboard deck, children squealing around me, deck hands shouting, I hear Alexi bellowing to Mamá on the deck below. “Look, Yaya! Look! I see the castle! See!”

“That’s right, Alexi. Do you remember Papou showing you the photographs, telling you about the castle?”

“Ummm. Well, he said there were hundreds and hundreds of knights there, a long time ago, and that after a while their mothers called them home...and we got the castle.”

“Well, not exactly-- But yes, it’s our castle, and Greeks live inside, and Italians.”

“But are there soldiers there? And do they have crossbows, like Papou said?”

“Bows,” Kiriaki pipes, trying to join in.

“There are Italian soldiers, yes, Alexi, but--”

“Wow, look, Yaya! What are those tall things sticking up?” Alexi sounds ecstatic.

“Minarets of the mosques in Old Town, agapi mou. The Muslims use them like a church tower. They sing from up there.”

Alexi is quiet for a moment, no doubt staring. “Our church is bigger,” he says.

I notice my face reflected in the water that ripples alongside the ship, my visage ribboning into focus and then out again, my crucifix pendant reflecting bursts of light. *Like life, in and out of focus, changing from one ripple to another, fading in the wake of events. And yet so much here is the same, the city and harbor I grew up around, built centuries before Cleopatra ruled in Egypt.*

I feel exhilarated, away from Athens and the danger, the scramble for food. At the same time I ache for my tether to Yorgoes, the comforts of Thriason Street, the protection of the Skambilis family, Emmanuel, Mellissá. And I desperately miss Papá.

Finally in clear view, the capital of the Dodecanese archipelago—Rhodes. It still takes my breath away. Is there anything man has made that is more stunning than this?

Through tears of nostalgia I view this island I love, its coastline edged with rock and plaster houses on cobbled streets, its open spaces seeded to farmland, its center rising gently then steeply to the ancient stronghold of Monte Smith. I see Mandraki Harbor, its old port stones now patinaed, covered in millennial dust, its pillared surfaces pocked by shells and cannonballs from Greece's wars, so far in the past they seem like mythology. Only this war seems real. One of the Seven Ancient Wonders of the World, Helios, the Colossus of Rhodes, once stood here nearly a hundred feet tall, in his bronze hand a flaming torch that guided ships safely into harbor between his spread legs. Today, on marble pillars, a bronze stag and, across, his mate, her belly full with promise. They welcome us back home.

The early light washes gold-pink the sandstone, the worn walkway of the jetty now puddled with rain. As we glide by I can distinguish parallel grooves cut by ancient stonemasons in the megalithic stones of the harbor-keep. Just past, windmills—their white canvas blades moving slowly in a threading breeze, contrast to the deep blue water. At the long neck of the market wharf, bright fishing boats bob in the wake of the ferry. Across the wide boulevard, Mandraki Market with its huge green Moroccan dome, its Arabic arches, the smell of fresh-brewed coffee faintly drifting in the air. Dogs and swarms of cats search for food, their noses down. Alexi screams gleefully at dogs bounding down the wharf in chase of a German shepherd with a bone. Farther down, the Medieval limestone rectangle that is the Cathedral of Rhodes with its high bell tower; the low-rising Italianate Governor's Palace next door, its twenty painted arches fading; and across the street, the modern, boxy Mussolini Theater. Behind all this, the minaret of the Mosque of Murad Reis. And as geologic backdrop, Monte Smith again, site of the few remaining columns of the Temple of Apollo, its fifth-century BC stadium and theater humbly quiet now and crumbling.

Dominating the beautiful panorama, looming huge, the Rhodian castle-city built by the Knights of St. John in the Middle Ages, its high walls camouflaging a bustling metropolis, its impregnable stone ramparts fast as Atlas's arms. Crenellated towers remind us of Rhodes's involvement in the Crusades, the castle then a hospital for injured soldiers returning from the Holy Land wars.

Alexi is shouting. “*Ella! Pamaí!* Let’s go, Yaya!” I sneak a last view from my perch, marveling as the gigantic castle doors swing open, people rushing in and out.

Luggage batters my legs as I disembark. It’s Saturday. I see no Germans. Scattered Italian recruits slouch against pillars, smoking. Swaying with sea legs, I drag our bags toward the herbal-smelling agora spread in spiny rows along the port, vendors hawking cabbage, chorta, dried beans, kale, blood-red dried tomatoes. People stroll by, gawking mainly. Tables farther along offer crystal and porcelain vases, silver tableware, organza dresses with hand-tatted lace, men’s wool suits and shiny leather shoes, amber cufflinks, diamond pendants, Byzantine filigree earrings. A mink coat. Sellers bark, competition fierce, the stress of war beading their foreheads. They thumb worry beads smooth from generational handling. Just like Athens, I think, the same pleading desperation of people selling family heirlooms in order to eat. I can smell it, see the scalpers circling like vultures, dressed in black suits, hair oiled or crowned by fedoras, rolls of drachmas bulging their pockets. Theirs is the power to choose.

Communicating with our eyes, Mamá and I buy dried beans, salt, rice, polenta, a smattering of dried tomatoes, a head of cabbage, dried peaches and raisins for the children. I cringe at the prices, grateful for Emmanuel’s gift of money.

Once away from the castle dock, we join ranks, casually, trying to control the children throwing themselves at me, awed by my costume. We stroll through Elephtherias Square, by Plateía Alexandreas and the fountain, its splashes singing even in this war. Alexi and Kiriaki run in giggling circles, dipping their hands in the water, staring at the sparse flotilla of fishing boats that occasionally chug from the harbor. We trudge slowly, me constantly untangling myself from the yards of black drapery that thwart forward movement, dragging, hauling, pushing the luggage, the food tied in a scarf at my back. A block ahead, Mamá, less burdened but red in the face nonetheless, stops every few yards to grab Kiriaki and holler at Alexi, darting about like loosed cats.

Finally, we’re straggling up the stairs of my parents’ sad-looking Italianate villa nearly overgrown with hibiscus and bougainvillea, leaves brown in winter dress, the clinging web haggard by years of neglect, the house padlocked since Papá and Mamá’s visit the summer before the war. The massive door, the pillared porch, remind me of Papá.

We open only the back shutters of the villa that face out to the sea, hoping not to draw attention. We eat small meals and rest, shuffling about like vineyard mice. Alexi finds the wooden wheelbarrow that Papá made for Stamati as a toddler. Alexi sleeps with it next to his bed, his hand dangling down into it. He runs behind it all day, often with Kiriaki in the bucket, her auburn curls floating out from her round face, her lips turned up in a doll's smile.

Days later Mamá goes out, makes contact with her cousin whose son delivers mail to the villages around the island. Finally, late one evening after the neighborhood has settled to stillness—at first the quiet of the island feels unsettling—we hear a soft knock at the door. I freeze, go into the bedroom and close the door. I hear Mama shuffle to the door, which creaks ominously as it opens, hear Alexi and Kiriaki chattering at her side. After a tense moment, she sings out, “Thomás!” When I come out, he still has his fisherman's cap in hand, his once-bushy hair now fine and white as spider webs. He's come to advise us where to meet his son, Lukás, for the ride to Lindos the next day at sunrise. We make tea and settle into sweet chatter.

Next morning we're there. Lukás turns out to be a square box of a man, a *psomas*, soft as bread dough, his hair as thick and unruly as his father's had once been. Affable face. He chatters about his five daughters, his anxiety about providing their dowries; also, about the times, the Italians. Yes, German troops have stopped him in his round of the island. “There are not so many Germans, and luckily they're not in charge. The soldiers sometimes search my truck, open the mailbags...for contraband, I suppose, or fugitives from the city...but not often. Just remember my instructions.” He shakes a finger, his eyes wide. He mocks a crude German accent. “To leave the city of Rhodes without Axis papers is *verboten*.” We laugh, all four of us feeling the rocky road and the hard surface of his truck bed making bruises on our legs and hips. “If I'm caught it is my neck, you know, cousin, and my wife will live in poverty with our daughters forever, as there will be no dowries and no one will marry them without one.” He turns his body, smiles. “But you're family. Family is family.” He shrugs, acquiescing to fate.

Lukás has no sooner uttered these words and turned back to check the road then we spot on the horizon a troop truck speeding toward us in clouds of dust. He gasps as though his air pipe's clogged, coughing out, “Down! Enemy! Down!” We collapse, wriggling into mailbags to curl in fetal position, pulling other bags of mail atop us, as practiced. The children

think it a game and so, mercifully, are silent. My whole body trembles, as Lukás handles the matter with Shakespearean finesse.

An Italian sergeant rises up over the passenger-side cab of the dusty troop truck, motioning Lukás to stop. Brakes squeal, the two engines shutter and clang, and Lukás barks an easy greeting over the babble. He drags from under his seat a sack, handing it over to an unshaven soldier leaning across from the bed of the truck, his uniform unbuttoned, other soldiers in the bed gagging like greedy geese. The bag is sticky with bakláva, and the Italians paw at the pastries like children, as Lukás recalls later, “tugging like drooling boys, savoring those pastries in small bites, as though mailed to them by their grandmothers. Ha!”

The soldiers inquire, crumbs spurting, about Rhodes. “Any news, Lukás?” He hands over an old underground newspaper shabby from sharing, and they gossip about goings-on. Abruptly they switch.

“Where are the best poutanas?” one asks. “Home in Italy!” another yelps. “Any ships docked at Mandraki?” “Any news about the Germans or about the Aegean ports closing to civilian traffic?”

“Yes,” Lukás says flatly, “I’ve heard that.” He asks about the Axis base at Gennadi, some miles past Lindos. “What’s new?”

“Nothing. Boring!” one says, spitting into the dust. At that their engine roars to life and in a cloud of dust they move on. Without so much as getting out of their truck. Without threatening Lukás or intimidating him. After the hum of the truck’s engine has faded, we emerge from the mail sacks, inhaling deeply the fresh air.

We reach Lindos late afternoon, Lukás small truck sputtering up the winding, steep cobblestone streets. He helps us haul our baggage up the remaining staircase to the old stone summer villa sitting at the edge and crest of the village, its thick-planked gate secure in the street’s high rock wall. Small symmetrical second-story porches cantilever out.

Our medieval *archontikó* with its stone archways leading into fingerling living and sleeping spaces, was abandoned in the fifteenth century, probably by some errant French knight returning to Europe. Now it’s cold as the stones it’s made of, matted with dust, an embroidery of cobwebs. Mouse droppings swish about the floor in the breeze of the open door. But once we swing open the doors of the porch that faces Lindos Bay, the fading sun running a sallow streak directly toward us over the raucous Aegean, Mamá and I bounce and hug one another and the flummoxed

children, and dance in circles. We are home. We are safe. We make tea, feed Lukás bread and olives. Kisses, and he is gone.

Tired and stiff, we descend the hundred or so steps to the beach, walk in the sand, let the children run. Gossip having announced our arrival, Maria, and Kalliope with her boys, find us there. We hug and shout joy, the children standing like stones staring at one another, then tearing off in a cloud of thrown-up sand. We squawk like gulls, thrilled to be reunited. Kalliope has three sons. Maria is not yet married. They work the fields, and in winter catch up on chores left undone during the busy growing season. And rest. And visit—and gossip.

I withhold for now what I've seen in Athens, the putrid haystacks of bodies, the boy the Germans beat to death outside the monastery. The beauty of my still, blue Irini.

By the time Alexi and Kiriaki run off their energy, the wind is turning chilly, so we make our way to Kalliope's for vegetable stew, her husband Kyriokos joining us from the field, entertaining us with pranks and funny stories, his latest poetry. It is nearly midnight by the time we lumber in our door, carrying the sleeping children. Mamá and I lay them on the luggage while we remove the dust covers from the beds and mattresses. We wrap the children in blankets from the closet, promising sheets tomorrow. As I transfer him to the bed, Alexi sleepily asks, "Mama, what is a poutana?" Before I can conjure an answer, Mamá responds, "Oh—well, that's a woman who makes a living rubbing men's...feet."

Those first weeks we are a curiosity in the village, people walking by us to stare. In Lindos, because there is more available food, there isn't the fraught competition I felt in Athens. It is as near as the nearby gardens, or dried beneath sleeping platforms, and because the Italians control Rhodes, little is being confiscated. Nonetheless, I perceive a distance one might clearly call resentment—or distrust—in searching eyes and stares. Some older women remember Mamá, embrace her, others accept us out of respect for Kalliope and Maria, but there are others who stand back and whisper. This is not the old Lindos we've always known. Something is not quite right. But what?

The Lindos house was always my favorite—until Thriason Street. It is worn and cozy; its five-hundred-year-old walls resonate with the joy and angst of hundreds of families, with betrayal and fleeting luxury, with life and death, its vanished inhabitants quiet, eavesdropping specters. What did they do in this house? Did my ancestors do the farming for them?

I suspect they did. And who moved in when the crusader (and his half-Greek family?) sailed back to Europe? A Turkish family, perhaps, after the Ottomans conquered us in the sixteenth century? What did they grow inside these garden walls? What tethered animals bleated in the yard? This whitewashed double-box stone-and-stucco, high on the half-bowl of the village, its wide sea view mutating between soothing and bewitching, encourages these fantasies of exotic worlds, passing foreign ships. Bossy children yelling in foreign languages. Leather-vested men with flared Turkish pants and tall leather boots bringing flowers to women they hope to seduce. Tired mothers squatting over charcoal fires cooking for hoards of bickering kin. Adolescent girls chanting prayers into carpets they are weaving in the sala. Snapping belts as well, although I try not to focus on that.

No running water. Alexi will be our water boy. I already miss Athens' taps and electricity, but this house fills our need. There is a romance to candles and lanterns, storytelling in the flickering glow.

Once the door is bolted, the kitchen window cracked to sea and stars to freshen the rooms, I speak with Yorgoes. I ask him where he is, if he is well, if he is alone or with another woman. I comfort myself that he is wholly mine...but there is still that demanding greed of the flesh. And I listen as he answers me, calling me Parakeet, teasing, throwing his smelly hat on the table so he can wrestle me into his arms. And once in bed I can feel him at my shoulder, his breath on my skin, his gabby chatter fading to rhythmic snore. I ask him to bless us. And I wonder about Nigel in London, if he's been drafted into the war and if he, too, has married and has children. And Irini, my beautiful daughter, buried now in her father's shirt in our Athens garden.

25. Maria

Lindos: 1943

Early NEXT MORNING, Maria arrives at the house to give us a hand. Square and buxom, barely five feet tall, her common face made attractive by creamy skin and perfect teeth, she has little work until spring planting begins. And with her father's permission, she's relieved a small corner of his larder of potatoes, cabbage, beets, and beans. The next day she enlists the help of Kalliope's eldest son, Kostas, to drag up the steps a heavy bag of wheat flour. Days later, a bucket of tomatoes she'd dried atop a shed at their farm, and dried figs and peaches, and grapes half shriveled into raisins. Later, olives for curing.

Kalliope, as sinewy and thin as Maria is fleshy, her large brown eyes contagiously enthusiastic, delivers a creamy brick of feta in a red clay crock—she has a goat she brings in each night to sleep alongside the family mule, TsiTsi, both sheltered beneath her plastered-stone one-room home with its expansive keystone arch. Kalliope has less to share, apologizes: her extended family is large, their gardens and orchards small when compared to Maria's.

Mamá and I feel ecstatic and yes, humbled, by this generosity.

The village, we learn from them, is unfortunate in that it is the closest village of size to the main Axis military base at Gennadi, just seven miles south down the coast. Command headquarters is in Rhodes, with a smaller encampment of infantry troops barracked there. Increasingly, each month, the Italians mostly, but lately more Germans, have swept in from the south and raided the village, taking food, especially grain, goats, and sheep, and men for labor at the camp, now being expanded to accommodate the newly-arriving German troops. Occasionally too, they take women, usually pretty, younger ones, to work in the kitchen and garden, and probably, to serve the troops at night. This is not the news we wanted to hear, although talking together after dinner that evening, Mamá and I confess we are not surprised. War is non-discriminatory in its doling out of pain. The noose of war in Greece is tightening—everywhere.

Days later Maria is working with me in the kitchen, showing me her recipe for brining olives. Mamá works across the *cuisina* cutting olives. She asks, “Maria, how’s your family?”

“My family,” Maria repeats with a sigh, perhaps as way of explaining her nearly constant presence with us since our arrival, “is *trelé!* Crazy! Papá, Anthula, shout, shout, shout! My mother sometimes too, when she isn’t curled up in the corner. I get tired of it. It makes me angry. Fighting, fighting, fighting.”

Shouting was always the *Metallis* way, I remember. Maria’s mother, Saroni, would shout out orders the moment we girls came into sight: “There are carpets to be dragged outside and beaten! Vegetables need to be peeled for *briam!* Maria, where’s my tea? Why do you vex me?” Her father, Petros, is a short, stocky, obdurate man nearly goat-like in his pointed goatee, his flat-nosed imperious glare, his voice raspy as a file on rock. He has an unhesitating hand that occasionally falls dexterously on his wife or children. Reputation says he’s overbearing, ambitious, but “lazy as a cut pig”—as my father once said. I remember feeling afraid of Theo Petros, his whining about his bad luck. “Three daughters! Three dowries and houses to provide! God has hexed me!”

When Maria was in sixth grade her mother, after twenty-five years of backbreaking farm toil, announced to Petros that she was “through working in the fields!” He rarely worked there, could usually be found playing chess or cribbage at Kleoboúlos’s *Kafenío* across from his hole-in-the-wall gold shop the size of a closet, built to legitimize his loitering about the square. So he huffed over to the school and dragged Maria out, plopped her on a donkey, and led her to one of their garden plots—to take her mother’s place.

“I remember, yes.” I nod to Maria, validating her family pain, noting that Mamá’s face still registers curiosity. It’s good to see Mamá engaged. “Why does your mother cower in the corner?” Mamá asks hesitantly. “Your mother wears only black. Is she grieving or melancholic?”

Maria does not answer, but that evening, once the children are asleep, Maria explains to Mamá. She is the youngest of twelve, seven of whom survived. She and her just older brother, Achilles, were best friends, had loved school, wanted to go on to high school and college, but were denied. Their father had other plans for them. He had plans for all his children, which focused mainly, on fattening his own purse. He sent his three oldest boys, Manoli, Nikos, and Stavros, once they were twenty, to America, with

instructions to work and send money home so he could buy land and supply the dowry needs of their sisters. Maria's mother, Saroni, watched helplessly as Petros sent her pride, her sons, to a far-away continent. Each time, a piece of her flesh died. So when, at last, Petros readied Achilles, just nineteen and desperate not to leave the dimple-faced young woman he loved in the village, Saroni caved to blackness. Maria recalled "church bells ringing when Achilles stepped up into the municipal bus headed for Rhodes to catch the ferry for Athens. Papá had bought passage with Achilles' own savings, sending along a note directing where he should join Manoli, by then in St. Louis, Papá scolding the same order, that Achilles save and send money home for my dowry and to buy land. Achilles turned, crying as he waved goodbye, his hands chapped and ruddy from fieldwork with me, my mother stretched her twisted old fingers above the crowd reaching for him—beseeking him to spare her this unbearable heartache. She was a ghost of her younger self by then, black headscarf shading her dark hollow eyes. She turned to wildcat, pleading, grabbing at Achilles, screaming, 'Who? Who, Achilles? Who will close my eyes when I die? Achilles! Please! No! You are my last son. Please! Please, God, no!'"

By the look on Mamá's face, this is painful, too reminiscent of her leaving Stamati and his family behind in Athens. Recognizing this, Maria and I recall Achilles as a boy, how skinny and funny he was, how he tried to please his mother, how he taught us to dance the Charleston. We remember, too, what a surprise it was in 1932—we were twelve—when Maria's father took her two-years-older sister, Katarina, all the way to Paris to meet her intended husband. They went by ferry to Athens, then by boat to Marseilles, then by train to Paris. "In America, Manoli had arranged a marriage for her. Photés Papamichaelis, her fiancé, met them in Paris."

"Why Paris?"

"Photés is from Lindos, but he had bad blood with a sister so wouldn't come here." Maria tucks her fleshy chin in. "They married on Saturday, on Sunday took the train to the port at Le Havre, and on Monday Photés led her onto the ship leaving for *Néa Yórki*. They live in *Baltimóri*." By the time they got to America Katarina was pregnant.

Maria said, "I made a mistake then, asking Mamá, 'why didn't you cry for Katarina when she left?' I tried not to be sarcastic. I just wanted to understand. She turned on me, her eyes bulging, and smacked my cheeks, the slaps cracking like thunder.

“She’s a girl!’ she screamed as I grabbed my face. ‘That is her fate, Maria!’ Her face was scarlet. ‘Same as mine! Same as yours! Same as yours, Maria! Girls are burdens parents accept, a drain on everyone. A family’s sons bring wealth and strength. We are happy if our girls do well. And if they have sons, well, even better.’

“But daughters take care of their parents when they get--’

“But she had turned away, wiping her eyes on her apron. ‘I was too old and too tired to have you, Maria, but your father would not call the Turkish woman to --. What could I do?’ When she turned back around, my heart stopped, then raced when she said, ‘I can’t help that I love my sons, Maria. If you have sons, you’ll understand.’”

Later, once we’re alone, I tell Mamá that Maria and her sister Anthula are the only two siblings left in the village. Anthula is the oldest child and has not had it easy—nor is she easy. Much like her father, irascible, and yes, greedy for land, and for anything that will keep her only child, Loisos, in medical school. Her father had married her off at sixteen to his own older cousin, Markos, who had several olive orchards. But the cousin drank the orchards away and Anthula still screams at Markos every time she spots him in the village. Loisos quickly learned the power of his mother’s rage.

“He’s the hawkish-looking one,” I yelp out, “has those nervous darting eyes. I’ve never trusted him. When he was a teenager Thea Anthula told him—‘You will be a doctor, Loisos, or you will leave this house and never return.’ So, smart guy that he is, he made medicine his dream. He’s the guy who hid me at the medical school in Athens, Mamá—he’s the one who showed me that line of hanged civilians, including small children, on light poles the morning after the Germans arrived in Athens. Remember? When he returns here to practice medicine, Anthula will be an albatross around his neck. For now she just drives Maria and her father crazy—demanding.”

We hear the bedding and tablecloths whipping in the wind on the roof as we sip chamomile tea and enjoy some dried figs and almonds. When the soup is tender, I add more garlic, dots of bright dried tomatoes. The kitchen smells savory, whets our appetites. I leave to retrieve the children, finally locating Alexi climbing with other boys in the huge ficus tree at the *platía*. Kiriaki is reluctant to leave her friend in the yard next door. As I drive them through the door, I find Maria at the table. Mamá asks about the children’s day. When Alexi leaves with the jug to retrieve water from the spring, she hauls Kiriaki to her lap and turns to Maria, unable,

apparently, to resist asking, "Maria, didn't you say your oldest brother came home. Does he live here now?"

"No, Thea. No. Manoli owns a *grocería* in St. Louis. His wife Kitty does the banking."

"The banking? A woman? *Einai Americanétha?*"

"No, she's Greek-American, family from *Peloponnesus*." She grins.

"What's funny?"

"In America women go to the bank and wear pretty dresses all the time." Maria draws herself up, assuming an air of authority. "Kitty is beautiful. You should see her."

"Why would they want to go to the bank? Why would they want to do what men do? We do enough already." She stares critically at Maria.

"She's somebody, Thea. Everyone knows that."

"So what did your old sad mother do when Manoli came back to see her?"

"For a month, Mamá was somebody too.... And happy."

Maria and I share a grin. Mamá does not miss this, asking, "So, is Kitty the reason you want to marry someone from America, or go there?"

"Yes. I want a good life, Thea, to see more of the world than Lindos. I want to wear nice clothes, have beautiful hands. I don't want to be a farmer's wife, have hands like a man. I'll die if that happens, really I will."

I can see Mamá does not hear this, but I do. I hear Maria's dream.

"I'll never understand you young women," Mamá says, shaking her head. "Next you'll want to work in offices. With men!"

About the Author



Ida Rae Egli is a writer, editor, lecturer, and educator whose books, *No Rooms of Their Own: Women Writers of Early California* and *Gold Rush Women: The New Penelope and Other Stories* focus on women in pioneer California. This new book was born while she lived in Greece. She lives now in Northern California with her Greek husband, historian Kosta P'manolis.