

*Whispers In The Olive Trees*

I'd never been to Greece before. The heat was a shock as I walked down the lane to the beach where the air shimmered in a haze. Bubbles of tar oozed, forming black sticky streams that flowed to the gutters on either side. I shielded my eyes and squinted into the distance. White-washed buildings appeared out of focus, gleaming like sugar lumps in the sunlight. So this was where she spent the summer that was to change her life for ever.

I reached a narrow strip of soft sand and I let the sea water cool my feet, allowing it to wash away the burn of the beach. This was where my mother must have walked. A breeze sprang up and made me shiver, not with cold but with an unease I couldn't explain.

'Thissss way, thissss way.' A murmuring came from behind me. The tone was sad and wistful but on turning around, I could see no one. Was it just my mind playing tricks? I was tired after the long journey down from Athens, that was it. Surely, it was only the leaves of olive trees rustling in the wind. I heard it again but this time it was more insistent. The whisper gathered in volume as more voices joined in. They appeared to be coming from the olive trees that stood like sentries inside a fence which ran the whole length of that part of the beach. But one voice stood out amongst the others, 'Cariad, thissss way!'

'Mam?' I said aloud. Silent again, the breeze dropped. I looked down at the sand and saw delicate footprints forming a track in the direction of the olive trees, beckoning me to follow. I stepped on each one with trepidation expecting them to burn my soles but they were damp and cool. The beach was deserted and the footprints came to a stop in front of a single olive tree set away from the fence. I looked up and took a sharp intake of breath, placing a hand over my open mouth.

I had been concentrating so hard on fitting my feet on the footprints in the sand, my crooked little toe fitting exactly into hers, that I hadn't noticed. The scene confronting me had been part of my life ever since I could remember. The ancient gnarled face on the bark of the olive tree, its thin strands of leaves cascading like unbrushed grey hair, had stared out from a water-colour painting that hung on the sitting room wall.

'Can you see a face on the olive tree, Mam?' I'd asked when I was a little girl and it became a joke between us. We'd imagine who 'she' was and make up stories about a wrinkled old lady called Olive.

I felt that mother and daughter warmth again as I stood at the very spot she must have sat with a pad of thick grained paper, her sable brushes and palette of colours. I moved to sit under the silver green canopy for shade and, from my bag, took out my

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mother's diary. The whispers started again, the leaves above me shivering and shaking. I looked behind me and the wrinkled face on the bark smiled back.

'He'ssss here, he'ssss here,' it said. The murmurings echoed.

'Who's here?' I was starting to feel heady as though the mid-day heat was making me hallucinate. In front of me, a shimmering glow hovered over the diary on my lap and then disappeared as quickly as it had formed. The book now lay open at July 18<sup>th</sup> 1969.

*Friday.*

*Waited for C. under the olive tree as usual. Why didn't he come? Last night I'd told him I was seven weeks late. I didn't expect anything of him. Told him I'd manage. Felt he should know before I left. If only she hadn't interrupted us. Told me to go. Shouted at me. My only crime was not being Greek. No, he didn't want to see me. Not even a good-bye, then. But I'll tell our daughter about her father. I know it's a girl.*

Underneath the untidy scrawl were doodles of olive trees, patterns of waves and... a broken heart.

'So you didn't go straightaway, then, Mam? You waited a bit longer, gave him more time,' I said aloud.

In the months since she'd died, I'd read my mother's diary from cover to cover. I was looking for clues, I suppose, clues about the summer months she spent here a generation before because she *didn't* tell me much about my father. All I knew was that he was Greek and he lived here on the Peloponnese. I hadn't even known of the diary's existence until her solicitor had handed it to me that day in his office with a letter giving me her blessing to read its contents. Reading the selected entry again made more sense. In 1969, my father must have lived in the house behind the olive trees. Could he still be living there? I wondered. Well, that's what the whispering said.

I was jolted out of my day-dreaming by the sound of voices. A slim tanned woman was racing two young boys down the path from the house.

'Last one in has to help YaYa with lunch,' she said.

The children squealed, charged over the sand and hurled themselves in the sea. They were soon splashing each other in a mock fight.

The young woman turned and walked over to me. She began speaking Greek.

'British?' she said when it was obvious I didn't understand.

I nodded.

'I didn't see you there. I was so busy acting as referee for the boys' race into the water,' she said in perfect English. 'I haven't seen you here before. I'm Sofia, by the way.'

'Alex,' I said, shaking her hand. 'This is my first time on the beach.' After hesitating, I added, 'My mother came here a long time ago.'

'It's lovely, isn't it? We live in England but every summer four generations of our family get together. We come to stay with my grandmother and my uncle.'

Before we could talk some more, a strident screech shattered our pleasantries and I turned to see an old woman dressed head to toe in black shaking her fist, heading in my direction and shouting in heavily accented English. I went cold.

'Stay away, stay away. You no good for Costas. I hate you!'

Sofia's eyes widened in disbelief. 'YaYa, what on earth is the matter?' She held the old woman's arm firmly and started talking to her in Greek.

I was still trembling when Sofia came over to me. 'Standing there under the olive tree, I'm afraid you've reminded my grandmother of something that happened in the past. Something about a British girl who was here. Her dementia's got a lot worse since we visited her a few months ago. I can only apologise. I'm so, so sorry. I've never seen her like that.'

'I think I know what's happened,' I said but before I could explain more Sofia's sons came out of the water and joined us on the beach.

'What's the matter with YaYa?' the younger one asked.

'She's OK, boys. You know how she forgets things she's just done and then remembers things she did a long time ago. Can you take her back up to the house to Uncle Costas? Tell him I'll be up in a minute and I'll be bringing a guest.' Sofia smiled in my direction.

The old lady was now calm again and took the boys' hands, making her way back through the olive trees towards the house.

Sofia mentioned Uncle Costas. *C.* Could it be him? The whispering of the leaves on one side and the sound of the sea surf on the other reassured me that I would not be alone when I went up to the house. My heart was racing.

Sofia gathered up the children's towels from the beach and we started our walk through the garden. We came to a wooden archway where a familiar scent washed over me, causing me to stop in my tracks.

'Are you alright?' Sofia asked.

'It's just the jasmine. My mother's favourite shrub. It always reminds me of her.' I turned my head as if to smell the tiny pink-white flowers, not wanting Sofia to see the tears that were pricking below the surface of my eyelids.

It wasn't long before we reached the single-storey house with its bleached walls and terracotta tiled roof. Painted wooden shutters were closed to block out the sun and huge urns filled with tumbling scarlet geraniums lined the terrace.

Sofia invited me to sit down in the shade.

'Uncle Costas!' she called. 'I've brought someone up for a cup of tea. Come out and meet her.'

By now, my heart was thumping so loudly in my chest that I was sure that Sofia would notice. What if he didn't want to meet me? What if he wasn't who I thought he was? I didn't *know* that C. stood for Costas. It could be Christos or Constantine. There was a King Constantine, wasn't there? I didn't know many Greek names. All these thoughts were gathering speed in my head.

The older of the two boys came through the beaded curtain of the open doorway.

'He's not here. His car's gone.'

I could feel myself relaxing into the wickerwork chair, feeling both relief and disappointment.

'Milk or lemon in your tea,' Sofia said, going inside to make the tea..

'Lemon, please.'

'It's a shame you've missed my uncle,' she called. 'Never mind. I'm sure we can do this again if you'd like to. It's lovely to have some young female company for a change. It's quite lonely around here.' She placed the cups of tea on the table and smiled. 'You saw what YaYa was like earlier and the boys....well, enough said.'

We arranged to meet on the beach under the old olive tree the next morning and I left the house by the front driveway where there were no olive trees whispering and murmuring to me. The reflected heat from the pale lemon gravel was intense and I was grateful that, once on the road, I didn't have to wait long for the bus back to Ermione.

The guest house where I was staying nestled in a shady street of tavernas and shops close to the harbour where the ferries left for several of the islands. I lingered by a jeweller's window, admiring the familiar Greek key design on many of the pieces. Instinctively, I felt for my mother's silver ring on the third finger of my right hand and wondered if C. had bought it for her. As I turned to go, I heard a loud splat on the

pavement. I looked down at red watery juice dotted with black seeds seeping out of a plump water melon that had been dropped. A tall grey haired man appeared rooted to the spot and was staring in my direction, oblivious of what had just happened. I looked behind me following his gaze but quickly realised that his eyes were actually fixed on *me*. I felt a shiver tingle through me.

'I'm..I'm s-sorry,' he said, picking up the remains of the split water melon. He hurried away before I could speak to him. At this time of day, the street was full of shoppers and tourists and very soon he had disappeared into the crowds.

'Kalimera, Alex,' said Sofia. She was already waiting for me under the olive tree when I arrived on the beach.

'No boys today?' I asked.

'No, they're playing in the shade under the old tree. Uncle Costas said he'd keep an eye on them.'

At the sound of his name, I looked back at the face on the tree trunk and could have sworn it smiled.

Sofia and I spent the next hour or so swimming and chatting. We had so much in common that it was hard to believe that we'd just met. She was an only child like me and both our mothers had been left to raise their daughters on their own.

'Mama loved this beach. Uncle Costas said she was happiest here under the olive tree watching me play,' said Sofia, her eyes starting to mist with tears. I took her hand.

'You don't need to tell me any more if it upsets you,' I said. 'My mam has gone too and I suspect yours isn't with you anymore, either.'

She nodded. 'It was just Mama and me after Papa left. Come on, no good us getting maudlin. Let's go up to the house for a spot of lunch.'

'It'ssss today, it'ssss today,' whispered the olive trees as we walked towards them but, for some reason, the anxiety I'd felt on my first visit had lifted and I followed Sofia along the path with a spring in my step. In fact, I was looking forward to meeting the elusive Uncle Costas. When we got alongside the old tree, Sofia shouted to the boys to join us for lunch. They ran on ahead and disappeared into the house.

'Come on in,' she said, inviting me to enter her home.

'Uncle Costas, come and meet Alex. The girl I was telling you about. We're in the kitchen.'

Her uncle appeared in the door way.

'My God! It *was* you, yesterday. I was back...for a moment...back twenty years.'

'Uncle Costas? Whatever's wrong?'

'I don't have to ask who you are. Alex, you say?' He looked straight at my eyes and I knew exactly who *he* was. 'You are the image of your mother. The same pale green eyes. And the hair, that beautiful red colour. Unheard of in Greece.'

Sofia looked at me and then her uncle, opening her hands wide in disbelief.

'First, YaYa and now this. Will someone *please* tell me what's going on?'

I broke the awkward silence. 'I'm exactly the same age my mother was when she spent the summer here. Every one says I look just like my mam did at this age.'

I reached for my mother's diary out of my bag.

'I think Costas is my father, Sofia. The clues are all in here.'

I looked across to the man I'd seen in Ermione the previous day and tears were streaming down his cheeks. 'My mother died a few months ago and wanted me to find you through what she'd written in the diary.' I went over to him and put my arm around him for the first time.

'Oh, no, no. Dear, dear Elin. She was so beautiful,' he said, putting his fist to his mouth to stifle a sob.

'I can't believe it,' said Sofia. 'But why now, why after all these years?'

We went out onto the terrace and sat down together. Costas held my hand.

'We were sitting right here when Elin told me she thought she might be pregnant. Mama must have overheard us talking because she stormed out here shouting at Elin and telling her to go. It was horrible. We arranged to meet under the olive tree on the beach the next day. But your mother never showed, Alex.'

I turned to the entry page for July 18<sup>th</sup> and passed the diary over for Costas to read.

'So she *did* come,' he said looking up at me. 'I should have guessed. Mama had such a hold over me in those days. I just wasn't man enough to stand up to her and we've all paid the price.'

'Mam didn't want anything from you,' I said. 'I had a wonderful life with her, you know.'

'My beautiful Elin would never have just gone without saying goodbye. I can see that now. Mama insisted that she'd sent a message to say she couldn't make it. She'd got tickets for an earlier ferry. And I *believed* her.....I never saw Elin again.'

'Didn't you try to see her before she left, Uncle Costas?'

‘But that’s where I was, that morning, Sofia. Down by the harbour in Ermione, trying to get to that early ferry before it left but I was too late. I’d just missed it.’ He took his head in his hands.

‘You had no address or telephone number, so how could you keep in contact?’ I said trying to reassure him. ‘And Mam, well, she knew your mother’s feelings... Maybe she thought it for the best. She was a girl of the sixties, all right. Independent, she was.’

‘That explains YaYa’s outburst on the beach,’ said Sofia. ‘She thought you were Elin. She was like a mad woman, Uncle Costas. Poor Alex.’

‘Now you know why I never married, Sofia.’ He clenched his fists and his mouth formed a tight line across his tanned face. ‘To think I’ve spent my life looking after the very woman who cost me my happiness. And Elin’s. I’ll never forgive her, never!’

With that, the old lady who had caused so much heartache joined us on the terrace. She looked straight at me and smiled so that her wrinkles softened.

‘Welcome to our home,’ she said. There was no recollection of what had happened on the beach the day before. She was oblivious to the mix of emotions the rest of us was feeling.

‘Just look at her,’ Costas said, his eyes full of sadness. ‘I can’t make her pay for what she’s done. It’s too late. She’s in a different world now. But I can try to make it up to *you*, Alex. I’ve got years and years of catching up to do as your papa.’

Smiling, I looked at my father and knew that there wouldn’t be any more whispers in the olive trees and no face staring out from the bark of the solitary tree on the beach. In the sand, I would see no trace of the footprints with the familiar crook in the little toe. Rest in peace now, Mam.

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