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Opening Extract from...

The Island

Written by Victoria Hislop

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The island of Spinalonga, off the north coast of Crete, was Greece's main leper colony from 1903 until 1957.

Plaka, 1953

A cold wind whipped through the narrow streets of Plaka and the chill of the autumnal air encircled the woman, paralysing her body and mind with a numbness that almost blocked her senses but could do nothing to alleviate her grief. As she stumbled the last few metres to the jetty she leaned heavily on her father, her gait that of an old crone for whom every step brought a stab of pain. But her pain was not physical. Her body was as strong as any young woman who had spent her life breathing the pure Cretan air, and her skin was as youthful and her eyes as intensely brown and bright as those of any girl on this island.

The little boat, unstable with its cargo of oddly shaped bundles lashed together with string, bobbed and lurched on the sea. The elderly man lowered himself in slowly, and with one hand trying to hold the craft steady reached out with the other to help his daughter. Once she was safely on board he wrapped her protectively in a blanket to shield her from the elements. The only visible indication then that she was not simply another piece of cargo were the long strands of dark hair that flew and danced freely in the wind. He carefully released his vessel from its mooring – there was nothing more to be said or done – and their journey began. This was not the start of a short trip to deliver supplies. It was the beginning of a one-way journey to start a new life. Life on a leper colony. Life on Spinalonga.

Part 1

Chapter One

Plaka, 2001

UNFURLED FROM ITS mooring, the rope flew through the air and sprayed the woman's bare arms with droplets of seawater. They soon dried, and as the sun beat down on her from a cloudless sky she noticed that her skin sparkled with intricate patterns of salty crystals, like a tattoo in diamonds. Alexis was the only passenger in the small, battered boat, and as it chugged away from the quay in the direction of the lonely, unpeopled island ahead of them she shuddered, as she thought of all the men and women who had travelled there before her.

Spinalonga. She played with the word, rolling it around her tongue like an olive stone. The island lay directly ahead, and as the boat approached the great Venetian fortification which fronted the sea, she felt both the pull of its past and an overpowering sense of what it still meant in the present. This, she speculated, might be a place where history was still warm, not stone cold, where the inhabitants were real not mythical. How different that would make it from the ancient palaces and sites she had spent the past few weeks, months – even years – visiting.

Alexis could have spent another day clambering over the ruins of Knossos, conjuring up in her mind from those chunky fragments how life had been lived there over four thousand years before. Of late, however, she had begun to feel that this was a past so remote as to be almost beyond the reach of her imagination, and certainly beyond her caring. Though she had a degree in archaeology and a job in a museum, she felt her interest in the subject waning by the day. Her father was an academic with a passion for his subject, and in a childlike way she had simply grown up to believe she would follow in his dusty footsteps. To someone like Marcus Fielding there was no ancient civilisation too far in the past to arouse his interest, but for Alexis, now twenty-five, the bullock she had passed on the road earlier that day had considerably more reality and relevance to her life than the Minotaur at the centre of the legendary Cretan labyrinth ever could.

The direction her career was taking was not, currently, the burning issue in her life. More pressing was her dilemma over Ed. All the while they soaked up the steady warmth of the late summer rays on their Greek island holiday, a line was slowly being drawn under the era of a once promising love affair. Theirs was a relationship that had blossomed in the rarefied microcosm of a university, but in the outside world it had withered and, three years on, was like a sickly cutting that had failed to survive being transplanted from greenhouse to border.

Ed was handsome. This was a matter of fact rather than opinion. But it was his good looks that sometimes annoyed her as much as anything and she was certain that they added to his air of arrogance and his sometimes enviable self-belief.

They had gone together, in an 'opposites attract' sort of way, Alexis with her pale skin and dark hair and eyes and Ed with his blond, blue-eyed, almost Aryan looks. Sometimes, however, she felt her own wilder nature being bleached out by Ed's need for discipline and order and she knew this was not what she wanted; even the small measure of spontaneity she craved seemed anathema to him.

Many of his other good qualities, most of them regarded as assets by the world at large, had begun to madden her. An unshakeable confidence for a start. It was the inevitable result of his rock-solid certainty about what lay ahead and had always lain ahead from the moment of his birth. Ed was promised a lifetime job in a law firm and the years would unfold for him in a preordained pattern of career progression and homes in predictable locations. Alexis's only certainty was their growing incompatibility. As the holiday progressed, she had spent more and more time mulling over the future and did not picture Ed in it at all. Even domestically they did not match. The toothpaste was being squeezed from the wrong end. But it was she who was the culprit, not Ed. His reaction to her sloppiness was symptomatic of his approach to life in general, and she found his demands for things to be shipshape unpleasantly controlling. She tried to appreciate his need for tidiness but resented the unspoken criticism of the slightly chaotic way in which she lived her life, often recalling that it was in her father's dark, messy study that she felt at home, and that her parents' bedroom, her mother's choice of pale walls and tidy surfaces, made her shiver.

Everything had always gone Ed's way. He was one of life's golden boys: effortlessly top of the class and unchallenged

victor ludorum year after year. The perfect head boy. It would hurt to see his bubble burst. He had been brought up to believe that the world was his oyster, but Alexis had begun to see that she could not be enclosed within it. Could she really give up her independence to go and live with him, however obvious it might seem that she should? A slightly tatty rented flat in Crouch End versus a smart apartment in Kensington – was she insane to reject the latter? In spite of Ed's expectations that she would be moving in with him in the autumn, these were questions she had to ask herself: What was the point of living with him if their intention wasn't to marry? And was he the man she would want as father of her children, in any case? Such uncertainties had circled in her mind for weeks, even months now, and sooner or later she would have to be bold enough to do something about them. Ed did so much of the talking, the organising and the managing on this holiday he seemed scarcely to notice that her silences were getting longer by the day.

How different this trip was from the island-hopping holidays she had taken round the Greek islands in her student days when she and her friends were all free spirits and nothing but whim dictated the routine of their long, sun-drenched days; decisions on which bar to visit, what beach to bake on and how long to stay on any island had been made with the toss of a twenty-drachma coin. It was hard to believe that life had ever been so carefree. This trip was so full of conflict, argument and self-questioning; it was a struggle that had begun long before she had found herself on Cretan soil.

How can I be twenty-five and so *hopelessly* uncertain of the future? she had asked herself as she packed her bag for the

trip. Here I am, in a flat I don't own, about to take a holiday from a job I don't like with a man I hardly care about. What's wrong with me?

By the time her mother, Sofia, was Alexis's age, she had already been married for several years and had two children. What were the circumstances that had made her so mature at so young an age? How could she have been so settled when Alexis still felt such a child? If she knew more about how her mother had approached life, perhaps it would help her to make her own decisions.

Sofia had always been extremely guarded about her background, though, and over the years her secrecy had become a barrier between herself and her daughter. It seemed ironic to Alexis that the study and understanding of the past was so encouraged in her family and yet she was prevented from holding up a magnifying glass to her own history; this sense that Sofia was hiding something from her children cast a shadow of mistrust. Sofia Fielding appeared not just to have buried her roots but to have trodden down hard on the earth above them.

Alexis had only one clue to her mother's past: a faded wedding picture which had stood on Sofia's bedside table for as long as Alexis could remember, the ornate silver frame worn thin with polishing. In early childhood when Alexis used her parents' big lumpy bed as a trampoline, the image of the smiling but rather stiffly posed couple in the picture had floated up and down in front of her. Sometimes she asked her mother questions about the beautiful lady in lace and the chiselled platinum-haired man. What were their names? Why did he have grey hair? Where were they now? Sofia had given

the briefest of answers: that they were her Aunt Maria and Uncle Nikolaos, that they had lived in Crete and that they were now both dead. This information had satisfied Alexis then – but now she needed to know more. It was the status of this picture – the only framed photograph in the entire house apart from those of herself and her younger brother, Nick – that intrigued her as much as anything. This couple had clearly been significant in her mother's childhood and yet Sofia always seemed so reluctant to talk about them. It was more than reluctance, in fact; it was stubborn refusal. As Alexis grew into adolescence she had learned to respect her mother's desire for privacy – it was as keen as her own teenage instinct to lock herself away and avoid communication. But she had grown beyond all that now.

On the night before she was to leave for her holiday, she had gone to her parents' home, a Victorian terraced house in a quiet Battersea street. It had always been a family tradition to eat out at the local Greek taverna before either Alexis or Nick left for a new university term or a trip abroad, but this time Alexis had another motive for the visit. She wanted her mother's advice on what to do about Ed and, just as importantly, she planned to ask her a few questions about her past. Arriving a good hour early, Alexis had resolved to try and get her mother to lift the shutters. Even a little light would do.

She let herself into the house, dropped her heavy rucksack on to the tiled floor and tossed her key into the tarnished brass tray on the hall shelf. It landed with a loud clatter. Alexis knew there was nothing her mother hated more than being taken by surprise.

'Hi, Mum!' she called into the silent space of the hallway.

Guessing that her mother would be upstairs, she took the steps two at a time, and as she entered her parents' room she marvelled as usual at its extreme orderliness. A modest collection of beads was strung across the corner of the mirror and three bottles of perfume stood neatly lined up on Sofia's dressing table. Otherwise the room was entirely devoid of clutter. There were no clues to her mother's personality or past, not a picture on the wall, not a book by the bedside. Just the one framed photograph next to the bed. Even though she shared it with Marcus, this room was Sofia's space, and her need for tidiness dominated here. Every member of the family had his or her own place and each was entirely idiosyncratic.

If the sparse minimalism of the master bedroom made it Sofia's, Marcus's space was his study, where books were piled in columns on the floor. Sometimes these heavyweight towers would topple and the tomes would scatter across the room; the only way across to his desk then was to use the leather-bound volumes as stepping stones. Marcus enjoyed working in this ruined temple of books; it reminded him of being in the midst of an archaeological dig, where every stone had been carefully labelled even if they all looked to the untrained eye like so many bits of abandoned rubble. It was always warm in this room, and even when she was a child Alexis had often sneaked in to read a book, curling up on the soft leather chair that continually oozed stuffing but was somehow still the cosiest and most embracing seat in the house.

In spite of the fact that they had left home long ago, the children's rooms remained untouched. Alexis's was still painted in the rather oppressive purple that she had chosen when she was a sulky fifteen year old. The bedspread, rug

and wardrobe were in a matching shade of mauve, the colour of migraines and tantrums – even Alexis thought so now, though at the time she had insisted on having it. One day her parents might get round to repainting it, but in a house where interior design and soft furnishings took low priority it might be another decade before this happened. The colour of the walls in Nick's room had long since ceased to be relevant – not a square inch could be seen between the posters of Arsenal players, heavy metal bands and improbably busty blondes. The drawing room was a space shared by Alexis and Nick, who during two decades must have spent a million and one hours silently watching television in the semi-darkness. But the kitchen was for everyone. The round 1970s pine table – the first piece of furniture that Sofia and Marcus had ever bought together – was the focal point, the place where everyone came together, talked, played games, ate and, in spite of the heated debates and disagreements that often raged around it, became a family.

'Hello,' said Sofia, greeting her daughter's reflection in the mirror. She was simultaneously combing her short blonde-streaked hair and rummaging in a small jewellery box. 'I'm nearly ready,' she added, fastening some coral earrings that matched her blouse.

Though Alexis would never have known it, a knot tightened in Sofia's stomach as she prepared for this family ritual. The moment reminded her of all those nights before her daughter's university terms began when she feigned jollity but felt anguished that Alexis would soon be gone. Sofia's ability to hide her emotions seemed to strengthen in proportion to the feelings she was suppressing. She looked at her daughter's

mirrored image and at her own face next to it, and a shock wave passed through her. It was not the teenager's face that she always held in her mind's eye but the face of an adult, whose questioning eyes now engaged with her own.

'Hello, Mum,' Alexis said quietly. 'When's Dad back?'

'Quite soon, I hope. He knows you've got to be up early tomorrow so he promised not to be late.'

Alexis picked up the familiar photograph and took a deep breath. Even in her mid-twenties she still found herself having to summon up courage to force her way into the no-go region of her mother's past, as though she was ducking under the striped tape that cordoned off the scene of a crime. She needed to know what her mother thought. Sofia had married before she was twenty, so was she, Alexis, foolish to throw away the opportunity of spending the rest of her life with someone like Ed? Or might her mother think, as she did herself, that if these thoughts were even present in her head then he was, indeed, not the right person? Inwardly, she rehearsed her questions. How had her mother known with such certainty and at such an early age that the man she was to marry was 'the one'? How could she have known that she would be happy for the next fifty, sixty, perhaps even seventy years? Or had she not thought of it that way? Just at the moment when all these questions were to spill out, she demurred, suddenly fearful of rejection. There was, however, one question she *had* to ask.

'Could I . . .' asked Alexis, 'could I go and see where you grew up?' Apart from a Christian name that acknowledged her Greek blood, the only outward sign Alexis had of her maternal origins were her dark brown eyes, and that night

she used them to full effect, locking her mother in her gaze. 'We're going to Crete at the end of our trip and it would be such a waste to travel all that way and miss the chance.'

Sofia was a woman who found it hard to smile, to show her feelings, to embrace. Reticence was her natural state and her immediate response was to search for an excuse. Something stopped her, however. It was Marcus's often-repeated words to her that Alexis would always be their child, but not forever *a* child that came back to her. Even if she struggled against the notion, she knew it was true, and seeing in front of her this independent young woman finally confirmed it. Instead of clamming up as she usually did when the subject of the past even hovered over a conversation, Sofia responded with unexpected warmth, recognising for the first time that her daughter's curiosity to know more about her roots was not only natural; it was possibly even a right.

'Yes . . .' she said hesitantly. 'I suppose you could.'

Alexis tried to hide her amazement, hardly daring to breathe in case her mother changed her mind.

Then, more certainly, Sofia said: 'Yes, it would be a good opportunity. I'll write a note for you to take to Fotini Davaras. She knew my family. She must be quite elderly now but she's lived in the village where I was born for her whole life and married the owner of the local taverna – so you might even get a good meal.'

Alexis shone with excitement. 'Thanks, Mum . . . Where exactly is the village?' she added. 'In relation to Hania?'

'It's about two hours' east of Iraklion,' Sofia said. 'So from Hania it might take you four or five hours – it's quite a distance for a day. Dad will be home any minute, but when we get

back from dinner I'll write that letter for Fotini and show you exactly where Plaka is on a map.'

The careless bang of the front door announced Marcus's return from the university library. His worn leather briefcase stood, bulging, in the middle of the hallway, stray scraps of paper protruding through gaps in every seam. A bespectacled bear of a man with thick silvery hair who probably weighed as much as his wife and daughter combined, he greeted Alexis with a huge smile as she ran down from her mother's room and took off from the final stair, flying into his arms in just the way she had done since she was three years old.

'Dad!' said Alexis simply, and even that was superfluous.

'My beautiful girl,' he said, enveloping her in the sort of warm and comfortable embrace that only fathers of such generous proportions can offer.

They left for the restaurant soon after, a five-minute walk from the house. Nestling in the row of glossy wine bars, over-priced patisseries and trendy fusion restaurants, Taverna Loukakis was the constant. It had opened not long after the Fieldings had bought their house and in the meantime had seen a hundred other shops and eating places come and go. The owner, Gregorio, greeted the trio as the old friends they were, and so ritualistic were their visits that he knew even before they sat down what they would order. As ever, they listened politely to the day's specials, and then Gregorio pointed to each of them in turn and recited: '*Meze* of the day, moussaka, stifado, kalamari, a bottle of retsina and a large sparkling water.' They nodded and all of them laughed as he turned away in mock disgust at their rejection of his chef's more innovative dishes.

Alexis (moussaka) did most of the talking. She described her projected trip with Ed, and her father (kalamari) occasionally interjected with suggestions on archaeological sites they might visit.

'But Dad,' Alexis groaned despairingly, 'you *know* Ed's not really interested in looking at ruins!'

'I know, I know,' he replied patiently. 'But only a philistine would go to Crete without visiting Knossos. It would be like going to Paris and not bothering with the Louvre. Even Ed should realise that.'

They all knew perfectly well that Ed was more than capable of bypassing anything if there was a whiff of high culture about it, and as usual there was a subtle hint of disdain in Marcus's voice when Ed came into the conversation. It was not that he disliked him, or even really disapproved of him. Ed was exactly the sort that a father was meant to hope for as a son-in-law, but Marcus could not help his feelings of disappointment whenever he pictured this well-connected boy becoming his daughter's future. Sofia, on the other hand, adored Ed. He was the embodiment of all that she aspired to for her daughter: respectability, certainty and a family tree that lent him the confidence of someone linked (albeit extremely tenuously) with English aristocracy.

It was a light-hearted evening. The three of them had not been together for several months and Alexis had much to catch up on, not least all the tales of Nick's love life. In Manchester doing postgraduate work, Alexis's brother was in no hurry to grow up and his family were constantly amazed at the complexity of his relationships.

Alexis and her father then began to exchange anecdotes

about their work and Sofia found her mind wandering back to when they had first come to this restaurant and Gregorio had stacked up a pile of cushions so that Alexis could reach the table. By the time Nick was born, the taverna had invested in a highchair and soon the children had learned to love the strong tastes of taramasalata and tzatziki that the waiters brought out for them on tiny plates. For more than twenty years almost every landmark of their lives had been celebrated there, with the same tape of popular Greek tunes playing on a loop in the background. The realisation that Alexis was no longer a child struck Sofia more strongly than ever and she began to think of Plaka and the letter she was soon to write. For many years she had corresponded quite regularly with Fotini and over a quarter of a century earlier had described the arrival of her first child; within a few weeks, a small, perfectly embroidered dress had arrived in which Sofia had dressed the baby for her christening, in the absence of a traditional robe. The two women had stopped writing a while back, but Sofia was certain that Fotini's husband would have let her know if anything had happened to his wife. Sofia wondered what Plaka would be like now, and tried to block out an image of the little village overrun with noisy pubs selling English beer; she very much hoped Alexis would find it just as it was when she had left.

As the evening progressed Alexis felt a growing excitement that at last she was to delve further into her family history. In spite of the tensions she knew would have to be faced on her holiday, at least the visit to her mother's birthplace was something she could look forward to. Alexis and Sofia exchanged smiles and Marcus found himself wondering

whether his days of playing mediator and truce-maker between his wife and daughter were drawing to a close. He was warmed by the thought and basked in the company of the two women he loved most in the world.

They finished their meal, politely drank the complimentary raki to the halfway mark and left for home. Alexis would sleep in her old room tonight, and she looked forward to those few hours in her childhood bed before she had to get up and take the underground to Heathrow in the morning. She felt strangely contented in spite of the fact that she had singularly failed to ask her mother's advice. It seemed much more important at this very moment that she was going, with her mother's full co-operation, to visit Sofia's birthplace. All her pressing anxieties over the more distant future were, for a moment, put aside.

When they returned from the restaurant, Alexis made her mother some coffee and Sofia sat at the kitchen table composing the letter to Fotini, rejecting three drafts before finally sealing an envelope and passing it across the table to her daughter. The whole process was conducted in silence, absorbing Sofia completely. Alexis had sensed that if she spoke the spell might be broken and her mother might have a change of heart after all.

For two and a half weeks now, Sofia's letter had sat in the safe inner pocket of Alexis's bag, as precious as her passport. Indeed, it was a passport in its own right, since it would be her way of gaining access to her mother's past. It had travelled with her from Athens and onwards on the fume-filled, sometimes storm-tossed ferries to Paros, Santorini and now

Crete. They had arrived on the island a few days earlier and found a room to rent on the seafront in Hania – an easy task at this stage of the season when most holidaymakers had already departed.

These were the last days of their vacation, and having reluctantly visited Knossos and the archaeological museum at Iraklion, Ed was keen to spend the few days before their long boat journey back to Piraeus on the beach. Alexis, however, had other plans.

'I'm going to visit an old friend of my mother's tomorrow,' she announced as they sat in a harbourside taverna waiting to give their order. 'She lives the other side of Iraklion, so I'll be gone most of the day.'

It was the first time she had mentioned her pilgrimage to Ed and she braced herself for his reaction.

'That's terrific!' he snapped, adding resentfully: 'Presumably you're taking the car?'

'Yes, I will if that's okay. It's a good hundred and fifty miles and it'll take me days if I have to go on local buses.'

'Well I suppose I don't really have a choice, do I? And I certainly don't want to come with you.'

Ed's angry eyes flashed at her like sapphires as his suntanned face disappeared behind his menu. He would sulk for the rest of the evening but Alexis could take that given that she had rather sprung this on him. What was harder to cope with, even though it was equally typical of him, was his total lack of interest in her plan. He did not even ask the name of the person she was going to visit.

Not long after the sun had risen over the hills the following morning, she crept out of bed and left their hotel.