

Chapter 1

1 May 1942

A low rumble thundered across the valley, threatening rain. The dark clouds hovered menacingly over the mountains overlooking the small farming town of Larissa. The once thriving agricultural community, located in between Athens and Thessaloniki, 150 kilometres to the north, was now in the ironclad grip of the Third Reich.

A slender woman strode purposefully up the slight incline. She glanced at the fields; fields that had once been sown with wheat or cotton but were now sadly neglected. Not that Helena Lambros wanted it that way, but the war had made life in Larissa overwhelmingly oppressive. Helena was not a farmer and she struggled without her beloved Nicholas to tend to the fields. She was an artist and sold her art in town to buy the meager food rations. She sold her work to the Germans or to the Italians who had been stationed in the town. Reluctantly, she had sold her favorite painting, one she painted for her Nicholas as a present. It was now enjoyed not by her husband, as she intended, but by the German commandant.

Helena stopped, lifted her head up to the heavens, and surveyed the coming storm. She shook her head and trudged up the hill to the small farmhouse she shared with her daughter, Zoe. As she walked, waves of memories swept over her, as they had every day of her life since the beginnings of this hated war.

Helena was a widow, just another casualty of the war. Though only in her mid-thirties, she looked far older, a legacy of the long war against first the Italians and then the Germans. Both enemies had exacted their price from her family and her community.

Helena's chestnut-colored hair had started to gray prematurely. She was a strong woman with firm beliefs and a faith in God that gave her the strength to continue after the death of her beloved husband Nicholas, and sons Mihali, Thieri, and Lefteri. Her three beautiful sons, strapping young men, had died on the front lines defending Greece against the invading Italian Army; a sacrifice that no mother should ever endure.

When the Italian invaders had been defeated, great jubilation had resulted in a joyous celebration that stretched for days. In the town, the pride over the news that the Italians had been beaten back flourished amidst the sorrow for the fallen.

But after the euphoria of the victory against the Italian invaders had faded, the Greek government realized that the Axis powers had not been defeated, only stalled. The government stumbled from one crisis to another, trying to pull victory from the jaws of defeat. The inevitable happened in the spring of 1941, a day that many Greeks had been anticipating for months.

As the sun began its rise over Mount Ossa, the rumble of German tanks and the sounds of marching feet disturbed the short-lived peace. Nicholas joined in the fight to defend their town, but it was in vain, as the German Army moved through the Greek countryside like locusts.

The town lost a staggering number of its men, both young and old, in the first days of the invasion. Helena suffered her greatest loss; only her concern for the welfare of her surviving daughter prevented her from joining her departed husband and sons.

The men of the community who survived went underground to fight the Germans the way their forefathers fought against the might of the Ottoman Empire. The subversive opposition in the countryside grew and, although the Germans scoffed at the news of the Greek Resistance, their

numbers were bolstered with each passing day. For many Greeks, the notion of being an enslaved people was an abomination. The oppressive yoke of the Ottoman Empire had been overthrown in 1828, and many of the older men told tales of the heroic deeds of an earlier generation of Greeks that became part of the Modern Greek psyche.

The tragic deaths of her sons and her beloved husband left Helena alone with Zoe. She hoped her daughter would get married and then she might be able to have a man around the farm, although that prospect was severely limited. Zoe was fourteen years old and very capable of setting up a home of her own. Helena had seen to that. The girl knew how to sew and cook, to clean and take care of a household. Helena was very proud of her daughter and was sure that she would make a very capable wife. Standing in the way of that dream was Zoe's reluctance to accept any of the men who were suggested by the town's matchmaker.

Earlier in the day, the scenario had been repeated with Zoe, who once again dashed the hopes of her mother and the matchmaker. *Kiria* Maria Despina, the town's matchmaker, had made the trek to the Lambros farm to inquire about Zoe's availability. Once again *Kiria* Despina came away shaking her head and without a firm commitment. Helena was certain the older woman would tire of trying to find someone who Zoe would accept.

Helena smiled as she saw her daughter waiting for her at the gate. The teenager was a carbon copy of her mother, with long chestnut-colored hair that reached her waist and green eyes her father had said reminded him of emeralds in the sunlight. Zoe was barely five feet-four inches, with a slight frame that hid a steely resolve — some called it stubbornness — and an unbreakable strength of character.

"Have you finished your chores?" Helena asked, knowing full well Zoe hadn't. Zoe was perfectly capable of spending the whole day reading or sketching.

Zoe nodded. "Some," replied the young girl although not very convincingly since she got a stern look from her mother. "Did the krauts buy it?"

Helena sighed. "Yes," she said sadly. "*Kiria* Despina said they wanted it."

"How much?"

"Enough so we won't starve," Helena replied and ruffled her daughter's hair. "*Kiria* Maria is worried about you."

Zoe leaned against the fence and looked up into the dark heavens. "I don't care."

"Zoe, *Kiria* Maria is going to get tired of coming here and asking. She's running out of boys! What was wrong with Antonis?"

Zoe sighed. *What wasn't wrong with Antonis?* Zoe thought to herself. "He's too tall and he's old enough to be my grandfather," she said aloud.

Helena stared open mouthed at her daughter. "He's too tall?"

"Yes." Zoe smiled. "I don't like tall boys."

"You don't like tall boys," Helena repeated. "You don't like short boys, or boys with brown hair, or boys with black hair." Helena counted on her fingers the many variations of boys Zoe had rejected. "Child, are there any boys you do like?"

Zoe shrugged.

"Zoe, one day you will have to settle on a boy because you're going to be left alone and nothing is worse than being left on a shelf, especially for a young woman." Helena once again reminded her daughter although she knew there were worse things. But she needed her daughter to get married, for both their sakes.

"One day I'm going to meet someone who will be just right." Zoe smiled. "You'll see, Mama. *Kiria* Maria won't have to ask twice."

"I hope so, child, I certainly hope so." Helena shook her head and walked inside to start on dinner. "Go and feed the animals," she said as she entered the house leaving Zoe alone at the gate.

Several hours later, when Helena hadn't heard a word from her daughter, she walked outside to find her. "Zoe Lambros, where are you, child?" her mother's exasperated voice yelled.

Zoe was fed up with feeding the animals and cleaning the house. There were much more interesting things to do. All she wanted to do was go down to the river, take a book, and read. Mihali, her older brother, had given her a copy of *Oliver Twist* that he'd found in Athens. It was one of her most prized possessions, a well-read book with dog-eared pages. Zoe had gone behind the chicken shed for some quiet time; it had a tiny overhanging shingle that protected her from the rain. She groaned when she heard her mother's voice.

"Yes, Mama," Zoe muttered and got up from the ground, leaving the book behind in a small, safe cache so that her mother would not see it and yell even more. She rounded the corner to find her mother glaring at her.

"Zoe, you know you have to help me get these chores done! Were you reading again?"

"I'm going to see the world one day, Mama," Zoe mumbled, repeating what she had told her mother many times before, much to the older woman's annoyance.

"Zoe, the only place I want you to see right now is your room. Clean it up."

"But, Mama—"

"Zoe, please, don't argue with me." The older woman let out a frustrated sigh.

"I'm going to leave here one day. You'll see."

Her mother decided to humor the teenager. "Where would you go?"

"Away, far away from Larissa and Greece. I'm going to travel and see the world. I want to paint, learn and become somebody."

"You are somebody, little one," Helena said and put her arm around the youngster. "You are Zoe Lambros, a little too rebellious at the moment, but generally a good girl."

"I want to leave."

"And leave me alone?"

Zoe looked up into her mother's emerald-colored eyes. "You'll come with me." She smiled. "I want to see what's over there." Zoe indicated the mountains. "I want to know what's out there beyond Mount Ossa."

"What's out there, little one, are the Germans."

"I want us to leave," Zoe mumbled as she picked up a stone. She looked at it and threw it against the barn.

"Zoe..." Helena stopped as she caught sight of her nephew Stavros, his unruly black hair flying every which way. He braked his bicycle to a stop in front of the two and hopped off.

"Auntie! I've been told to come and get you. The bloody head kraut wants all the villagers to be at the plaza. I think we're getting a new one."

"Probably another one who likes to listen to his own voice," the older woman grumbled. "Come on, Zoe. The sooner we listen to that oaf, the quicker you can come back and finish those chores."

"Yes, Mama." Zoe sighed and dusted herself off.

The three started towards the town. As she looked around the small farming community, Zoe carefully watched her fellow countrymen walking quietly to the town center. They were subdued. Memories arose of balmy summer nights walking along with her friends, memories of carefree days when the worst that happened was a boy yanking her hair and was generally a nuisance. Those boys were no longer there; no longer part of her life. Zoe felt her throat constrict and tried

to swallow the lump in her throat but couldn't. Tears threatened to spill but were kept back with sheer will. She didn't want those German bastards to see her cry. She didn't want to show any weakness. It was also the last thing she wanted for her mama to see. Too many nights were spent crying over the deaths of her brothers and her father. Zoe mentally shook herself and glanced at her mother who was talking animatedly with her cousin.

Zoe's attention shifted as a patrol passed by. She wondered when the nightmare would end. To the Germans, the Greeks were a stubborn people who refused to surrender when all was lost. To the Greeks, the Germans were going to know that the country was not going to be subjugated without a struggle; without exacting a heavy price from the occupying force.

The town gathering had become a regular occurrence with the German commander. Major Gunter Bonhoffen was a sadistic man who took delight in torturing the populace. News of his transfer was met with muted excitement. Zoe wasn't sure why they were excited; she was certain he would be replaced with another demon as bad or worse.

Finally, the new commander emerged through the crowds, his pristine gray and black uniform neatly creased. Zoe looked at the mud, then back at the commander, and smiled. She was about to go down and collect some mud to welcome him properly but her mother's hand held her.

"Don't," Helena whispered. "You're going to get us killed."

Zoe rolled her eyes and clasped her hands together instead. A wry grin formed on her lips as she envisioned applying the mud herself. Zoe was abruptly brought out of her daydream when the sound of a gunshot pierced the air making her jump.

Major Bonhoffen brandished his pistol and smiled menacingly. Bonhoffen was a much-despised man, a violent and irrational German, or so many Greeks believed. They had witnessed his brutality first hand. Many had watched their families shot dead in retaliation for Resistance activities.

The Κομμουνιστικό Κομμα Ελλάδας, the Communist Party of Greece or KKE, had established a formidable Resistance group and was active in the countryside surrounding Larissa. The Communists had years of experience in working underground and thus formed the best Resistance to the German occupation. The extensive cave system in the hills was used by the KKE to escape and hide from the Germans. Once organized, they hit back at the invaders by blowing up train tracks and disrupting the German supply lines from Athens to Thessaloniki. Other attacks were made by small groups of men descending from the mountains and raiding German troops when they least expected it. The KKE was soon joined by other Greek Resistance groups such *Ethnikos Dimokratikos Ellinikos Stratos*— National Republican Greek League or EDES — and *Ethniki kai Koinoniki Apeleftherosis* — the National and Social Liberation or EKKA.

These attacks brought the wrath of the Germans on the civilians. The German policy of retaliation was to kill civilians and destroy their villages. Bonhoffen directed these retaliatory actions in Larissa and the surrounding areas.

"Now that I have your attention," Bonhoffen smirked, "this is Major Hans Muller, your new benevolent commander."

Major Muller was a golden-haired, blue-eyed poster boy for the Nazi war machine. Standing six feet tall with broad shoulders and a proud bearing, he was the epitome of the Aryan male. Muller was a career soldier who had tasted defeat in his twenties during the First World War. When the Nazi Party had offered the young man a chance of reversing that demoralizing defeat of the Fatherland, he had joined the Party with enthusiasm.

Standing next to him was a woman and, to Zoe's surprise, she was slightly taller than the new commander. She had a long black cane that she leaned on, and Zoe wondered why she was there.

German officers didn't normally have their wives with them. The woman's long black cloak covered most of her body and luckily for her, a soldier stood with an umbrella over her, shielding her from the rain that once again fell. Zoe shivered as the rain pelted her in the face. Her coat had long since been soaked. Zoe stared at the woman, whose angular face was barely visible in the gloom and shadow of the cloak and umbrella.

Zoe jumped again at the sound of the gun going off a second time. To her utter horror, this time the German's aim was not in the air but directed at a feeble old man. In the blink of an eye, the old man crumpled to the ground, the blood streaming down his face. His eyes gazed up into the sky, unseeing.

Zoe turned to see that it wasn't Bonhoffen who had fired but Muller. The major was brandishing his pistol and stamping his barbarous authority by death. There was no rhyme or reason to the execution and Zoe wanted to disappear, to hide from the utter senselessness.

The villagers panicked, but couldn't escape, as the village plaza was surrounded by German troops. Those that tried to flee either faced the gun of the major or the guns of his troops. Zoe watched in horror as the young and the elderly fell.

Then the unthinkable happened. The major stepped in front of Zoe and her mother and looked at them. Blue eyes met green for a very long moment. Helena put her arms around her daughter and held on tight. All Zoe could hear was the sound of the beating of her heart. All she could see was the look of utter hatred in the man's eyes.

"So you see, Greeks will die for the soul of every Aryan hero who is killed," Muller was saying but Zoe could barely discern what he was talking about, the sound of her heart was thundering so loudly in her ears.

Zoe wanted to hide her face from this madness. She held tight to her mother and closed her eyes, hoping against hope. But her will could not stifle the sound of the gun popping so close that she felt the bullet when it exploded in its next victim.

Mama.

Zoe felt her mother's arms release their grasp and she opened her eyes to see her beloved parent slump to the ground. A dark crimson stain spread across her chest. The madness continued around her as she held her dying mother to her chest, the blood mixing with the mud, caking her legs. *Oh dear God, Mama!*

Zoe's soul was shattered that very moment. Everything that was, everything that she was going to be, perished as her mother's life ebbed away. Zoe held her dying mother, who was talking to her, trying to tell her everything in that few seconds that they had left.

"Be brave," Helena whispered, unable to breathe as the pain in her chest was overwhelming.

"I will take care of her," Stavros vowed as he knelt beside his dying aunt.

Zoe was oblivious to everyone but her mother but then a sound, something so incongruous to the pain and death surrounding them, made Zoe look up. To her utter horror the cloaked woman that Zoe had noticed earlier was chuckling as she walked away from the carnage along with the German butcher.

In that instant between life and death, Zoe's purpose in life crystallized. She looked down at her mother's face and rocked her back and forth. "I promise I will kill them. I will," she repeated, over and over. Nothing else had meaning any more. She was going to exact her revenge for her mother's death and kill the woman that laughed as her mother lay dying. "I promise you, Mama, I will kill them. I promise," Zoe kept repeating as the woman she held in her arms passed away.

"Zoe."

Zoe opened her eyes to find Father Panayiotis Haralambos, the town's priest, his black robes covered in crimson stains, looking at her. "You can let go now," he said gently as he tried to pry the dead woman from Zoe's arms.

"No." Zoe shook her head. "No," she murmured while the cleric gently separated her from her mother's body. He picked her up, cradling her in his arms. Zoe curled up against Father Haralambos' chest. She buried her head against his neck and cried and cried. The priest looked back at the young man who was kneeling next to the limp, bloodied form and nodded before walking away from the carnage.

Stavros crossed himself, said a private prayer, and picked up his aunt's body. He closed his eyes for a moment before he stood and followed Father Haralambos, while thunder boomed overhead.

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