

Chapter 3

Alex drove leisurely, making sure to absorb the beauty of the land before him. Acres of perfectly lined rows of corn occupied both sides of the main road. Roadside farm stands were crowded with shoppers searching for the freshest fruits and vegetables. He admired the hundred-year-old houses and the historic white churches with the high steeples, some dating back to the Revolutionary War. Although he took pleasure in the surroundings, Alex was looking forward to reaching his destination and tried to recall the last time he'd taken a few days to simply relax with friends.

The past few years he'd been driven, first to earn his PhD and then to search for a position as a college professor, leaving little time for socializing or for thinking of home. His heart would always be in Thessaloniki, though it had been broken there.

But in America he had a chance at a new beginning, and the promise of a future without pain. He'd been elated to land his first position at Morton Community College but, after a year and a half, he was anxious to come back to New York. When he was offered a position at a newly formed university on Long Island, he had packed his few belongings and, by January, he was settled into a full class schedule teaching philosophy and sociology.

Alex's mind drifted as he drove past the quaint towns of the North Fork. As he passed a sign for the Town of Riverhead, he noticed a smaller one below it. It read Polish Town, which brought to mind a heated debate in one of his sociology classes as to why neighborhoods such as Little Italy and Chinatown exist.

"It's only natural that people would gravitate to others that could speak their language and share common customs."

"But Professor, wouldn't it be wiser to assimilate by living amongst people who speak English?"

"Easier said than done. Go to China, Europe, or India and stay a while. Tell me you wouldn't be searching for people you could communicate with. Wouldn't you take comfort in finding others that understood your language and ways?"

Alex didn't have these obstacles when he arrived in America. Having learned English at Aristotle University in his home city, Alex spoke fluently, with just a hint of an accent. That, along with his clear, gray eyes rimmed with long, dark lashes, had female students hanging on his every word.

His mind wandered back to his own college days when he would meet Stavros and other Greek students who would gather for lunch several times a week.

Who was that girl that was always pulling him aside? Penny? No. Poppy. He stretched his mind to remember. He was too busy for pushy females. He was working on his dissertation. There was no time for dates. He laughed at the memory of that annoying, young woman. But then he'd seen Anastacia, and he'd made the time.

The first time he laid eyes on her was in Washington Square Park. She was a vision, impeccably dressed in a midnight blue A-line dress, which was belted at the waist to show off her very slim, feminine figure. But what captivated him was her easy smile, which seemed to radiate up to a set of expressive, brown eyes that somehow seemed familiar to him, as though at his first glance he'd known her his whole life.

He found a seat on a nearby bench. The park was filled with students, business people on lunch break, and mothers pushing strollers. He was just another unnoticeable face in the crowd. One who felt like his whole world had changed in an instant. He kept his textbook open, pretending to read, and snuck a glance in her direction when he could. Overhearing the laughter and the chatter, it seemed that her ability to speak English as well as she did was her friend's topic of conversation.

"How is it that you sound like you're from England and don't have a Greek accent?" inquired a freckled redhead.

"I learned to speak English at the British Institute in Athens. But if it makes you feel better," Ana teased, "I can try and tawk like a New Yorka."

"God, do I really sound like that? If I do, then don't let *me* influence you." They both laughed.

He heard them discuss an assignment that was due the next day. Then, looking at their watches they reluctantly got up from the park bench to head to the next class, unaware that Alex was inconspicuously watching Ana as she passed him.

The next day, he asked Stavros about her, and he gladly offered an introduction. Already swamped with work, Alex wasn't able to join them for lunch until three days later. Until then he found it impossible to concentrate. When they finally met, she was sweet and friendly and, although she had a grace and sophistication about her, she seemed a bit shy.

"It's nice to meet you, Alexandros." Anastacia extended her hand politely, but avoided eye contact.

"Stavros says you are also from Athens. Did you know him from your neighborhood?"

"No, we met here at university," she replied.

As the weeks went on, they spoke here and there, but mostly in general discussions with their entire group. Ana seemed focused and serious about her studies, yet from what he could gather, she left some room for social engagements. Alex was so inundated with his research that he had few opportunities to see Anastacia and, by the time he was a little more acquainted with her, she'd been dating the man she would later marry.

What did she see in that guy?

Alex thought of the night when Stavros had suggested he put his studies aside for one night and join him and their friends for an evening of Greek music and dancing. It didn't take much convincing once he learned Anastacia would be there. Disappointment washed over Alex when a man she introduced to everyone as her fiancé accompanied her.

"You look like a sick puppy. Stop moping," Stavros said, as the two of them sat alone nursing their drinks.

"I waited too long. Why didn't I just ask her out? Engaged—huh! A little soon, wouldn't you say? What does she know about him?"

"She knows she loves him, or she wouldn't be marrying him. She's a pretty sensible girl."

"He's a scoundrel. Look at him! I've been watching him and he looks at every woman that passes by. He should only have eyes for her. You're her friend. What do you know about him?"

"Only what she's told me. He's older than her, he was in the Army during the war and she said he makes a comfortable living. But she didn't say what he does."

"Oh, no. Here comes that Poppy again," Alex moaned.

"Dance with me, Alexandros," Poppy pleaded, attempting to pull him out of his seat. "You've been sitting all evening."

"I don't dance. I am sorry, but I respectfully decline." He looked past Poppy, to the couple on the dance floor and sighed. He would dance with Anastacia if he had the opportunity.

Oh yes, I remember Jimmy and he turned out to be just what I thought he was.

Now, in a twist of fate, he would see her again. He wasn't sure though, how her circumstances may have changed her. Would she be the sweet girl with the positive outlook that he remembered, or would she be bitter and jaded by the recent events of her life?

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When Alex arrived at the Drossos Motel, he quickly took his luggage to his room and then found Stavros and his family enjoying a picnic lunch under a tree on the motel grounds. Stavros spotted him and rose to greet him with a hug and kiss on both cheeks, a customary European greeting.

“Alex! So good to see you. This is my wife, Soula.”

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. Stavros has spoken of you and the children often. I feel as though I know you.”

“And, of course, you already know our Anastacia.” Stavros took Ana’s hand to help her up from the picnic blanket.

There she stood. The petite brown-eyed beauty he’d been taken with years ago. She was as cordial and sweet as she’d always been, and just as beautiful as he remembered her, if not more so. In her arms was a most adorable, doe-eyed little girl who was the very image of her. The four of them caught up on news about schoolmates and family, conversing with ease until the discussion took on a more serious tone.

“What do you think of the latest development back home, Alex?” Stavros asked.

Alex seemed a million miles away and glanced in Ana’s direction often, amused by the playful interaction between mother and daughter.

“Alex?”

“Oh. Which development would that be? There are so many lately.”

“I was thinking of the one that you would be most sensitive to. Karamanlis arresting Max Merton as a war criminal.”

Alex was no longer smiling. The mention of this man and the reminder of that war made his blood run cold.

“No matter what they charge him with or what they do to him, it will never make up for the evil and devastation he and the others like him caused. What they did cannot be erased—nor can the visions in my mind.” Alex became very solemn.

The German occupation during World War II had been devastating to all of Europe, but for some, more tragedy had fallen on their land than anyone should ever bear. Thessaloniki, or Salonika as some referred to the city, was home to a large population of Sephardic Jews. Prime Minister Karamanlis had requested that Max Merton, the German administrator of the area during the occupation, testify in a trial. As a result, Merton was arrested and charged with war crimes during the period of the deportation of Jews.

“Barbarians. They came and came, taking good citizens from their homes, loading them on those trains.” Lost in the memory, Alex shook his head, pain shadowing his eyes.

“I think it’s time to take the children in for their naps,” Soula stated. She gestured for Ana to follow her and, though she was listening with interest to what Alex had to say, Ana lifted Sophia and went inside with her friend.

Stavros' cousin, Alexandria, offered to watch the children that evening, leaving the two couples to dine without interruption or distraction. As she dressed for dinner, Ana wondered if this was a nice gesture or a conspiracy to create a double date. She wished her friends would stop trying to distract her from what was important. Sophia was thriving and the job with Uncle Tasso was better than she ever imagined. She had to admit, Alex was a handsome man—polite and intelligent too. She pursed her lips in annoyance at her attraction to him and shook it off, resolving that it meant nothing.

She tied a pale pink cardigan with pearl buttons over her shoulder, admiring how perfectly the color matched the peony floral print on her sundress. It was a beautiful evening, hot, but dry. Not humid like most summer nights in July.

At Claudio's by the pier, Ana ordered the grilled red snapper, as did Alex. Soula was craving the lobster tails and Stavros ate steak.

"I think I will eat steak every day this month. On August the first, the fast for the Feast of the Assumption begins and no more meat for me," Stavros said.

"Stavros, you are missing the point of the fast if you're a glutton beforehand," his wife scolded.

"Ba, technicalities." He winked at her.

Ana found Alex to be very interesting, and enjoyed speaking with him. He was a pleasant and intelligent man. Not as intense or serious as she expected him to be. He was certainly passionate when he discussed his work and his goals, very animated when describing the antics of his students, but he was also warm and easygoing when he asked of her interests and about Sophia. After dinner the four of them took a stroll on the pier, Soula making sure she walked ahead with Stavros.

"Stavros, walk faster."

"Why? What's the hurry?"

She pursed her lips and rolled her eyes. "I want Ana and Alex to be alone. You know, get to know each other."

"Always plotting," Stavros kissed his wife on the cheek.

"And you? You weren't plotting when you asked him here?"

Ana and Alex occasionally stopped to admire a boat, and then continued on. They were so close that Alex was tempted to reach over and take her hand in his. He would only need to extend his hand an inch, two at the most. He wondered if she was at all aware of the effect she was having on him. He was nervous. Heat was rising from the back of his neck and his heart was beating too fast. If only this shy woman would look at me instead of the wood planks on the pier, he thought.

The next day, Yanni and Alexandria threw a Fourth of July barbeque on the motel lawn. While the women set the tables and brought out the salads, Stavros and Alex put the girls on the seesaw, and Kostas

amused himself in the sand box. Ana was touched by the interaction between Alex and Sophia, and felt a moment of regret that her daughter would miss the presence of a father in her life.

When the sun had set, they grabbed a large blanket and walked down to the lawn near the docks to watch the fireworks. There was a band playing: people lounging on their boats, and others walking the pier trying to decide where the best view would be. Dozens of families sat on blankets, unable to contain the excitement of their children, who were anxiously awaiting the colorful display in the sky.

Soula and Stavros took Kostas for a walk to the candy store, leaving Demetra with Ana, who took the child upon her lap. Alex held Sophia and was pulling funny faces to make her giggle. An elderly couple passed by, smiled and stopped to speak to them.

“You are such a beautiful family,” the older woman commented. “Your girls are darling. Enjoy every minute with them. They grow up too fast.”

“Oh, we’re not—” Ana started to correct her but Alex cut her off politely.

“Thank you, we will,” he said smiling up at the woman. “Have a lovely evening.” When the couple moved on he said shyly, “I didn’t want to disappoint her.”

But in truth, the idea had appealed to him. This was how he pictured his life. He’d spent years on his education and establishing his career. Now he wanted the rest. He wanted a wife and children, a family of his own, and every time he looked at Ana his heart skipped a beat, just as it had the first time he saw her.

The weather cooled to a comfortable eighty degrees, with a breeze coming off the water. The fireworks were glorious, but the thunderous sounds scared Sophia and Demetra. Between the heat and the full day of activities they had no difficulty putting the children to sleep. Not feeling compelled to go inside on such a clear night, Ana took a seat on one of the chairs outside her door and stared up at the stars. She was deep in thought when Alex seemed to come out of nowhere, jolting her from her trance.

“I apologize. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“No, think nothing of it. I was daydreaming.” Ana smiled tentatively.

“May I join you? I won’t if you prefer to be alone.”

“No, of course, please.” She gestured for him to sit in the chair beside her.

“I overheard part of the discussion you had yesterday with Stavros about the war crimes trial,” she said when he’d sat down. “I missed most of the conversation when we took the children in for their naps, but I’ve read a little bit about it in the paper.”

“Does the subject interest you?” Alex inquired.

“Well, yes, of course I’m interested in what happens in my country. I worry about the direction of the politics and the future, but I sometimes think of the past too. I was a young girl during the war, and my parents protected me as much as they could from what was going on. But as little as I was, I knew something was different. I saw things I hadn’t before. People were standing in line for food, and many had no money. There were people starving and dying in the streets from hunger. My dad had money and he would buy food on the black market. He would give food to friends and neighbors, but the Germans were always watching. He had to be careful, and he found odd places to hide his money. The Germans seemed to think they were entitled to come into any home and take whatever they wanted.”

“Well, Anastacia, you were a lucky girl to have been so well protected. You were spared horrors that no young girl should have in her memory. I don’t know if Stavros told you, but I am from Thessaloniki, which had the largest population of Greek Jews. There, the Germans did not just occupy. They slaughtered. Before the war there were about fifty-six thousand Jews in the city. Now—well, there’s less than a thousand.”

He shook his head in disgust at the memory. “The Germans sent them off by the thousands to the death camps. The people of the city knew what was happening and we were for the most part powerless.” He stopped himself. “I’m sorry ... such heavy talk for such a beautiful night.”

“No ... please go on. I asked what you and Stavros were discussing.”

He nodded and gave a sad, haunted smile before he continued. “I came from a very moral and religious family. When a resistance was formed, my parents felt they had to join and do what they could to help as many people as possible. It was a huge risk to do this, as they knew they would be killed if they were caught. My two older brothers served in the army, but I was still young, not quite seventeen. My parents were worried for my safety, so information of their involvement or details of dangerous missions was kept from me. I tried to go about my days as normally as possible, but daily life had changed. The enemy was everywhere. In the streets, our stores, and down by the docks. One day, my mother sent me to the bakery to pick up bread. When I got there the door was locked. I didn’t understand. It wasn’t Saturday. He was open every day but Saturday. A woman called out to me, ‘they took him.’ I looked at her and ran to where I was afraid I might find him. There was a long line of people waiting to board the train, most holding a single suitcase. I tried to find his face in the crowd, but I didn’t see him.”

Alex hesitated. Thoughts and words were flowing from him in a way they never had. There was something about this lovely young woman that allowed him the courage to continue. “As I was about to leave, I

saw a friend, a classmate, and I tried to reach him, but I was stopped by a Nazi soldier and told to leave immediately. I wanted to fight for him, like I knew my parents were doing for so many others, but my friend looked at me with defeated eyes and shook his head. I shook my head back and tried to sneak through the line of soldiers for him before I was shoved aside and knocked to the ground.”

Ana’s eyes were glistening with tears that had welled up but not yet fallen.

Alex continued. “I ran home, hoping there was something my parents could do, not accepting it was too late and beyond their ability to help. The sound of the train whistle as it left the station was a final confirmation I would never see my friend again. I hated that whistle every time it pulled in or out of the station. It was not the sound of happy expectation of a journey as it had been in the past, but a hopeless promise of death. From that day on, I would sneak behind doors and listen to the secret meetings held in my home. I knew something important was about to happen. The resistance was planning an escape for a large group of people, and many diversions were organized to throw the Gestapo off track. My brothers were an integral part of the plan and were bringing passports and transport papers with them. A few days later my mother sent me on a long errand, one that would take me miles away and would keep me busy for hours. I had a hunch they wanted me out of the way.”

Ana was so engrossed at his recollection that she barely blinked, or breathed for that matter. Her heart was breaking at what she was afraid he might say next, as he sobbed through the next few sentences.

She reached for his hand as a gesture of empathy and support and, in a whisper, she told him, “You don’t have to. If it helps you, then please, go on, but you don’t have to.”

He nodded, put his other hand over hers for a second, and then lifted his hand to wipe a tear away from her cheek.

“When I got back home, I knew something was not right. There was an eerie silence in the house and an unfamiliar smell. I saw the blood on the wall first—splattered, and a bloodstained handprint. I thought I would choke from fear and ran through the house. And then I saw them. All of them. Face down in the bedroom. Dead. Gunned down. Executed. There was blood everywhere and there was nothing I could do. It was too late. My family was gone. I was alone. I tried to yell, scream or cry, but my voice betrayed me. I made no sound. I was in shock. I didn’t know what to do or where to go. Then, my mother’s voice came to me. Her instructions were clear, as I recalled hearing them many times. In case of an emergency I should go to her brother, a priest at St. Demetrios. It was from him I learned the whole truth. My parents had left me a letter, in my uncle’s care, explaining the dangerous missions they fought against the Gestapo, and their efforts

to hide and protect the Jews of our city. The last words I have from my parents are written on that paper, informing me that if I was reading the letter, the worst had happened and I was to follow the instructions they had left to protect me. They left my uncle enough money to get me to safety, and told me to leave at my first opportunity. They wanted me to know how much they loved me and, although they knew I would go through a difficult time, the sacrifices they made for all people would shape me as a moral and honorable human being. I asked my uncle to hold the letter and the money for me till a future time. I enlisted in the army to fight for my country and to fight the Nazis that murdered my family.”

“Oh, Alex,” Ana cried. “It’s all so awful. It’s too much for a young boy to see, to live through. And here I’m telling you about my minor brush with the war in Athens. I’ve been through nothing compared to you. I’ve heard about many horrors, but when you don’t see them for yourself or experience them firsthand ... well, I had no idea.”

“Don’t,” Alex said. “Everyone’s experience is unique to them. Don’t minimize it.”

Ana thought for a moment before speaking. “I was so young, and when you’re a child, you romanticize your childhood, thinking it was wonderful. Bad things happened around me, but my parents protected me. I always felt I had a happy childhood in spite of the war, but it feels so wrong to say that now.”

“No, no, sweet Anastacia. Your parents were right to give you a happy childhood, as mine were right to protect me from harm. I owe everything to my parents. They were wonderful people.”

He looked at her regretfully. “I didn’t mean to sadden you tonight after such a festive day. Maybe tomorrow you will allow me to spend the afternoon with you and prove I can lighten the conversation?”

“That would be nice,” she said, smiling. She got up to open the door to her motel room. “*Kalinihta*.”

When Alex wished her a good night as well, he turned and walked toward his room.

“Alex,” Ana called out to him and he turned to look her way. “Thank you for sharing such a difficult part of your life.”

Ana found it impossible to settle in for the night. Her mind was racing in so many directions and too many memories flooded it. There was so much more to Alexandros than she thought. She had always thought him to be intense, with his serious attitude and those piercing, gray eyes that were hard to read, but she knew now that she’d misread him. Those eyes were haunted with the pain of losing everyone he loved, and yet she saw a determination in him to make the most of his life in honor of his parents, who did everything to keep him from harm’s way. Her heart ached for the boy who lived through such tragedy, and the man who still carried the memories of finding the lifeless, mutilated bodies of his entire family.

She drifted to her own memories, a child's recollection. Trying to force her mind to translate those memories into an adult's perspective gave her pause. The conditions in Athens were probably worse than she remembered. She imagined her parents did not find it necessary to make her understand the reality of the war. She imagined her mother would have been frightened, but she protected her children, making everything seem as normal as possible. She would have to speak to her mother about this, she thought, as she drifted to sleep.

The next few days were easygoing and fun, with no talk of dreadful events. Ana was relieved to see that baring his soul seemed to lighten Alex, as she worried that dredging up the past would cause a melancholy mood. Now when their eyes met, it was with an unspoken understanding, and on her part an appreciation for his courage in speaking about something so painful and his ability to get past it, something she had yet to do with her own misfortune.

They went to the beach and then later took the ferry to Shelter Island. Alex purchased a small soccer ball for Kostas at a local general store. The two of them kicked the ball around as the other adults watched.

"You are very good with the children, Alexandros," Soula complimented.

"Your Kostas is a good boy. I enjoyed showing him how to play."

"And Sophia? You've caught her attention as well. I watched you take her by the shore and pick up seashells. It's unusual for a man with no children to be so comfortable with the little ones."

"She's a sweet child. I hope to have some of my own one day." Alexandros looked in Anastacia's direction, the corners of his mouth drawing up to a hopeful smile.

On the last day of their vacation, they went to a farm stand to buy freshly picked fruits and vegetables to bring back to the city. Then Stavros and Alex loaded up the cars while the women and children said their last good-byes to Yanni and Alexandria.

"We're ready to go, Stavros. Everything is in the car. Alex, don't be a stranger. Come see us soon. We are making dinner for Sophia's birthday. You should come. Sunday at three o'clock," Soula insisted.

"Um, I'd like that. Ana, is that okay with you? I don't want to impose," Alex said.

"Of course you should come," Ana said politely. "I should have asked you myself."

She wanted to kill Soula. Not because she didn't like Alex, but because she was so transparent.

An awkward moment hung in the air. But then Alex took her hand in both of his, looked her in the eyes and said, "I'll look forward to Sunday."

Usually too shy to make eye contact, Ana's eyes met his and held. The jolt that traveled from her hand through his as their skin touched

startled her. The sensation was foreign to her and so was the fluttering in her stomach. His hands felt safe, yet she was scared. Her chest tightened a bit as she released herself from his gentle hold. She looked down and nodded. "Yes, Sunday."

Ana got into the car and waved good-bye as they drove off. She remained quiet trying to make sense of what her body was doing, what it was saying to her.

"Soula, why did you invite Alexandros to Sophia's party?"

"Why not? He's a friend. He likes Sophia and we know he likes you."

"You should have asked me first. I don't think it's appropriate. He will get the wrong idea."

"Don't you like him?"

"He's a very nice man, but you need to stop trying to put us together."

"Dating. It's called dating. You can say the word."

"No, Soula, I can't."

"Stavros, help me," Soula pleaded.

"I'm just watching the road." Stavros drove the car and was smart enough to keep quiet.