

Sing me a song, Doris.

Humming a Doris Day tune, I abandoned the body.

If he wasn't dead, he would soon enough die for lack of medical attention. In the Corfiot heat the corpse would desiccate like the mummified remains of St Spyridon, at rest on the golden isle. I wouldn't mourn for Dimitri Patrdis. If pushed into a witness box I would say it was accidental but a jury (and I have faced a few in my time) might argue differently.

Cross my heart and hope to make good my escape.

On that hot summer morning ten days earlier when my phone rang I had not expected it to end with a body. All I knew then was that Maggie, my younger sister, had been injured in a speedboat accident. That's what they said through a heavy Greek accent. The sting in the tail? She was on the island of Corfu. My details had been in her bag. Not exactly listed as next-of-kin but as her brother and the first number on a small business card in her satchel.

I barely had time to process my surprise that she was on Corfu before my plane tickets were booked and I was preparing to fly to the island from my home in Edinburgh. The one saving grace was that Maggie also lived in the city, though she was away across town. I stayed out west near to Murrayfield stadium; Maggie lived in on the east side, near Easter Road. Pure coincidence but she loved football and I loved rugby. The strange tricks that fate plays upon us.

Back in the present moment, I wasn't even thinking '*kill him*' as we fought. I was angry, feeling deceived and cheated, and I wanted to hurt him, but not that. Now as he lay crumpled on the rough concrete in a pool of congealing blood I knew I'd stepped over a line. I wasn't a killer. I was a Sunday anarchist. Shovelling propaganda and making angry noises on ineffective demonstrations. At six foot one, two-twenty pounds and an angry face beneath my snood I could be quite intimidating. But if we bumped shoulders in Costa, my handsomely tailored suit and engaging smile might charm you into believing otherwise. But I wasn't a killer. Not until now.

Dimitri, second son of Ari Patrdis, had pushed me beyond my known limits.

How else to explain smashing a man over the head with a piece of metal pipe? It wasn't something I thought I had in me, not until the moment was upon me. My friend Piet, now he is a different kettle of fish. He could do it and not blink. But the victim (though I hate to think of him like that) had mocked me, persistently. In the shade and privacy of the half-finished building I truly had regret only for myself.

Him? A sadistic bully. *Kokoretsi*. Offal.

What I had done was wrong, yet it felt *damn good*. Piet would understand that.

Just a few days earlier, I had solemnly promised the son and father in Ilana's presence that that they had one final opportunity to return my sister to me, or else. Truth? It was total bullshit, just bravado in my head spilling out from my tongue. I had no idea how to make good on a threat like that. On top of everything else I was a stranger in a strange land. I believed that Ilana, Dimitris' sister, had understood how tired I was of their lies and wicked games. There was something between the sister and I, we both felt it. I could not believe that killing her brother would help that relationship along.

Que sera sera.

I knew I could not linger. It was early as it was in the morning but in my short time here I had seen this island awaken early. Although the shell of the building was hidden behind a thick screen of olive and Cypress trees I could not be sure it wasn't a shortcut to somewhere else. I needed to get the hell out of there.

As I walked down the bare path, examining my crumpled navy linen suit and suede shoes for blood spatter, a large green snake slithered through the leaf litter and right across my path. It completely ignored me, not even a glance, but damn it, I didn't even know Corfu had snakes. To be honest, I didn't know much of anything about the island, despite Ilana's efforts and my Insight Guide. The '*green carpeted mountains*'; '*pinnacles of Cypress*'; '*azure seas*'; '*rocky coves*' and '*wonderful beaches*' held little interest for me. I wasn't a tourist. The Durrells were just a name in the tv listings.

Nothing had changed since my landing at Ioannis Kapodistrias airport (Corfu Town to anyone else) in the searing lunchtime heat. One goal. My sister. Maggie first, Maggie second, Maggie only. No time to smell the herbs upon the breeze, appreciate the azure seas, snorkel off the rocks, broil on the beach or admire the admittedly stunning history and Venetian architecture of Corfu Town.

The son's taunting words to me just twenty minutes earlier still rang in my ears. *She is dead*, he had said. *Go home*. As cold as ice and heartless with it. He didn't care for Maggie; he never had cared. She had been a toy and that I couldn't accept. It made a liar of Ilana and her promises to me on our final night together. I hadn't believed it was just pillow talk at the time, but now I had loads of doubt and suspicion. I was hovering on the brink of hate. It was a steep fall from grace, and where Ilana and I had been. Where I thought we had been. So wrong.

Just an hour prior to our fight, long before the translucent, peach sun rose over the spartan brown Albanian mountains, prompting the village to open like a summer flower, I was still optimistic. My overnight bag lay on the back seat of the hire car. I had disposed of my dirty laundry in a dumpster and had only the clothes I stood up in, my cherished I Pod, Ilana's gift, two passports and four one-way plane tickets. Two for Edinburgh. Two for Amsterdam. A choice of escape flights, one hour apart.

For the meeting with her brother I had suggested a café in the heart of Benitses village, a place and memory which Ilana and I now shared. Beneath the verdant, overhanging vines and trees in full leaf, near to the shops and restaurants, amongst the mélange of cooking smells, it offered the reassurance of witnesses for the return of my sister. The son had worryingly insisted upon meeting at a different place. He had called it the Minerva Hotel but when I reached the place I got a shock. Instantly I had smelled double-cross but had no option but to go on.

I took one last look back up the hill at the son's folly. The battered, yellow sign boasted an identical message to the sign at the roadside. Both signs were covered in a shroud of lichen and moss but were readable and belied the claim.

Minerva Hotel - coming soon'

Like so many Greek buildings I had seen littered around the countryside it was doomed to be eternally half finished, waiting for money or summer or the builders just to get off their arses. Ilana had mentioned the hotel project but hadn't admitted to me this project was dead. I assumed it had been bank-rolled by their father for his dissolute, over-indulged son. If it was another test, it was a test he had failed. He had run out of opportunities to impress his father now.

Banishing Dimitri from my thoughts, I reached the patch of almost-level hard standing deep in the mysterious cypress trees where both our cars were parked. After a slow, bumpy drive downhill, I propelled my hire car onto the main road. Apart from my own jitters and shaking hands the winding drive north to Benitses was unfussy, following the main east coast road which cut the village in half. Hotels to the west below the steep escarpment; ribbon beaches to the east, facing mainland Greece and Albania. I didn't want to think about Ilana. I needed a clear head, but in a few short days everything for us and between us had changed. What had started out as naked hostility borne out of her loyalty to family had been completely changed by our feelings for one another. They had arrived in a rush, not slowly and were barely controlled. I understood her confusion. Her primary responsibility had been to her father, not me just as my primary responsibility was to Maggie, not a Greek woman. But she wasn't just any Greek woman, she was Ilana, and I could believe I was in love.

On my fifth day on the island, Ilana had strong-armed me to attend the festival of Agia Marina, the patron Saint of the village. She called it an invitation but I didn't feel able to refuse. Just walking around Corfu Town on my first day in the hotel I quickly got the strong sense that the Greeks (and perhaps Corfiots more than most) do love their saints, their votive candles, their processions and their festivals.

She had been cunning. All she asked for was *one whole day. Set aside our pre-occupations and private responsibilities and allow me to show you my Corfu. In return I will ensure your sister comes back to you. Call it an act of faith. In us.*

Yeah go on heart – harden me against such temptation.

My heart had failed in its mission.

Her vivaciousness and seductive dark haired, olive skinned beauty had broken through my resistance and come so so close to thawing me out as no-one before. Such energy, such a passion for life, the island and I as was prepared to believe, me. She and the island tried so hard to melt my steely heart, but still I kept something back. Until Maggie was safe.

Ilana had driven us to Benitses in the middle of preparations for the annual two-day festival. She told me as we parked up beside some commercial bins at the south end of the village, *just say kalispera when greeted. When you accept a drink, say yamas or cheers.* As we walked hand in hand past the shops and restaurants of the beachside strip we side-stepped or bumped good naturedly against visitors and residents on the narrow single-sided pavement. In the main square, a place where the word community obviously meant something special, trees groaned under the burden of coloured lanterns and bunting stretched over our heads.

As if to say ‘there is never enough food or drink’ the established restaurants were supplemented with mobile units serving roast lamb, fowl and roasted corn alongside local Corfiot beers draught from large kegs. Surely, even the Greeks could not drink them dry. The pungent, sometimes astringent smoke from open coals drifted over the square, nipping at our eyes and engulfing the small children playing in front of the small stage where the musicians were setting up. For a vegan, which I was not, the smell of roasting meat and fat must have been hell. Rows of free-standing chairs had been colonized by the village’s ancient and wise ones, waiting patiently for the music and dancing while the young people dutifully served them with free drinks and food.

Duty to family. It had ensnared us all.

Between a taverna on one corner and a supermarket on the other, a narrow lane inclined in a shallow rise towards ‘old Benitses’. Off a pathway just wide enough for a motor bike, Ilana drew me to a house covered head to toe in red, yellow and orange blooms where a private party was already underway in the yard beneath a pergola heavy with centuries old grape vines and bunches of green fruit. I

felt my feet dragging, pulling slightly against her soft hand in mine. How could I party with so much unresolved? Ilana was not so blind as I might have imagined.

These are my friends, not my family Sam, she said.

Persistent and Gorgeous.

You agreed to relax for one day and night, for me. We have a lot of dancing to do.

My protests were futile and I knew it. I needed her help. I owed it to her to relax with her friends and be glad as long as none of her family joined us. They were never mentioned. Underneath the vines, after a few drinks in that small courtyard, she taught me some dance steps, much to the amusement of her friends. They had seen flat feet before. Later, in the square, oh how we danced. Arms looped together we danced their circular dances and I lost track of the time and myself. Was it the *Hasapiko* or the *Syrtos* or even the *Kalamatianos*? It did not seem to matter. We clapped along to local dancers in traditional costume dancing *the Zorba* through the flames and when the floor cleared Ilana left me with her friends, the beer, the Retsina and the Ouzo so that she might join in several leaping dances which were way out of my league. From tiny to ancient, the dancing appeared to bestow renewed joy and life. Perhaps this was what had drawn Maggie to Corfu? Around one a.m. we slipped away and drove back to her villa. I didn't know then if I would return to my taverna that night.

In her villa we went upstairs, no words necessary. If this was destined to be our last time together we both knew what we wanted. Afterwards we talked and she told me of many things I had not guessed.

My sister had come to Corfu to claim a husband and have the baby she had told me nothing of. She brought no dowry only as the father called it, ill-tempered stubbornness. Dimitri did not know how to handle her. He had fathered babies before but to girls who were happy to be paid off handsomely and walk away. Maggie didn't want money, she wanted a husband but the son did not want to be tied down by a baby or a wife. Their father had intervened, as he always did. He intended for Maggie to be brought to

the house in the north of the island until the baby was born. The boat accident was real. Maggie and Dimitri fought in the speed-boat, Ilana was driving. Maggie went overboard and hit the waves which at that speed was like hitting a concrete floor. She was taken from the hospital out of genuine concern. Ilana's father could afford the best doctors and privacy. Then I had arrived. The rest I either knew or didn't need to know.

The mood broken, we returned downstairs where she made coffee and we sat in silence, drinking. She handed me a small parcel, wrapped in brown paper and secured with red, stripey string. She kissed me and made me swear not to open it until I was on the plane home. After 15 minutes downstairs, as I searched for a way to leave gracefully, Dimitri arrived and the arguments started.

Ilana told me to leave, and I did.

Cross my heart and hope to die.

Just after seven a.m. I parked up at Benitses Marina for one last moment in a place where the memories were good. In the supermarket I bought three small bottles of chilled water, gulping some immediately to ease my parched throat and calm my shredded nerves. The chill down my throat helped a little to calm my temper and my nerves. Outside a taverna at the entrance to the village square the owner interrupted his task of sweeping up leaves and papers to greet me.

"Kalimera. Sam isn't it? Breakfast perhaps?"

Jesus, what a memory. I remembered his face but Ilana and I had taken only one drink there. Well, that I recalled.

"No, sorry. I have a meeting in Corfu Town today. Another time perhaps."

"Of course. You should not miss your breakfast. I think you must not be meeting a Greek. Have a good day. Bring Ilana back soon."

I smiled at his wrong assumption, waving as I hurried back to my car. Taking a deep breath, I hit the road once more, heading for my rendezvous with Ilana's father. My thoughts swirled, chaotically, remembering the conversation with Dimitri. Not for a moment had I figured for Maggie being dead.

Nothing in anything they had said had hinted at them wishing her harm, not that way, though in a sense kidnapping or detainment was harm whichever way you cut it. I took a deep breath and forced myself to think – to plan. I was starting to ad lib and that usually got me into more trouble.

The drive took twenty-five minutes, stuck behind a number six blue bus. My destination was the car park on the far side of the causeway over Lake Halikiopolous, linking Perama to Kanoni. Ilana and I had walked the causeway before breakfast on the morning after the night before, but to drive meant taking the longer way round Garitsa Bay and Mon Repos to the peninsula. On the Causeway an incoming jet had passed so low it felt like we could touch the undercarriage. Just like the opening scenes of “Easy Rider”, a film we argued over. She didn’t like the film or the music. I loved both. Our one and only big moment of discord after we realized we meant more to each other than we previously had admitted.

I parked up near to the Seaside Café overlooking the Vlacherna Monastery. Canopied tourist boats lined the jetty, offering short pleasure cruises. The cliff side behind me was a stunning carpet of green mottled with vermilion blooms, sliced through by the steep zig-zag pathway to the hilltop cafes and hotel.

Slightly early, there was no sign of the old man or his distinctive Bentley. Maybe it was too distinctive for a clandestine tryst, though he had given me no indication that he cared if people saw him or not. Money and power- a bulletproof vest for the rich. I strolled round the headland beneath the up-market hotel with its funicular between pool and beach. My conflicted thoughts dogged my footsteps, oscillating between the high spots with Ilana and the low spots with all their lies. I couldn’t forget that many of those early lies were Ilana’s and if I were taking a pessimistic view, might still be. I wanted to believe her and believe in her and if I could it would be a good and sufficient only reason to bring me back to Corfu. The only reason.

I re-traced my steps over the rocks towards the narrow jetty and little monastery which shone incandescently white in the sun. The family of cats still lazed in the shade of the lower roof; just as they had done on our earlier visit. As I was passing my car the old patriarch emerged onto the deck of one of the larger, passenger-carrying canopied boats.

“Mr. Thorpe, we meet again.” He stood four inches taller than me, bursting apart my stereotype of short, stocky, bow legged rich Greeks. In my head I had three pictures of Greeks – Marcello Mastroianni, Aristotle Onassis and Anthony Quinn – and one of those wasn’t even Greek. Thick grey wavy hair, nearly an Olympic athlete in his heyday. Greek to his core, from the start he had manipulated this whole affair; a Zeus for a modern world. “I was watching you. Please, come with me.”

As we walked towards another boat, similar to the first, he said,

“You met my son this morning?”

“No,” I lied. “He phoned me. Laughing. He told me that my sister is dead. Is it true?” I could sense aggression building in my voice despite my promise to self.

He stopped and turned to face me, stony faced. A hell of a poker player. Was he happy? Surprised? Disappointed? Perhaps my response wasn’t the response he expected.

“My son lied. It saddens me but he is young and cannot help himself. Dimitri sadly isn’t his older brother. Were my elder son not at University in the USA I would have asked him to deal with you.”

I didn’t press him on that thought. It didn’t sound to me as if he meant negotiate with me.

The boat we were approaching was a good deal bigger than its neighbours but at the same time it managed to be relatively anonymous with its ubiquitous blue and white livery. He stepped onto the prow and the boat seemed to bow before him. I followed. The boat bobbed this way then that. He led me into the captain’s cabin, which received much better daylight than I had imagined.

Inside the small cabin he revealed his surprise.

Against the back wall of the cabin a small bunk had been installed. Upon that rough bunk lay a lop-sided shape, as tousled as the blankets on the bunk beneath it. It was barely recognizable as a person though it looked like a woman. The flimsy summer dress which covered the shape was creased like a well-used dish rag and the sandals it wore were clearly not new and did not fit the small feet. A gym-sized holdall sagged half-empty by her side. Cropped hair, dyed auburn, dark roots showing untidily. I had seen better presented scarecrows. If it was a living person, all the muscle and energy had been sucked from

her. I made no move towards her even though the old man seemed to be stepping aside to allow me to do just that. Then the emaciated face lifted from the bunk.

I wanted to swear, out loud, but my vocal chords were paralysed.

Maggie looked at me pleadingly, though whether she really knew it was me was at that moment debatable. Then I moved and embraced my sister, feeling ribs through the dress and tracing with my eyes the new, deep runnels in her young face. I couldn't be sure she knew it was me and gently identified myself.

Her attempted smile failed quickly. It was a rictus of pain, tinged with utter desolation.

"Sam," she whispered, shivering in my arms, tears dribbling from the corners of her eyes. "Sam? Really, it's you?"

I nodded.

"Oh Sam, I had a baby. It died. A boy Sam."

Now that the moment had arrived I couldn't believe it. I held my tongue, not admitting to knowing and trembled in sync with Maggie.

For a moment I had all but forgotten the old man. I looked over my shoulder to him. His son had lied, and the effect of that lie was that I had killed him. I hoped that poker-face could not read mine.

"You are both free to leave," he interjected. "Kismet, Mr Thorpe," he said, coldly, but with an unexpected tremolo. "It appears to favour you and punish me. *My* daughter is dead."

The ambush was complete. I wobbled on my knees in a wave of nausea.

"Ilana? Dead? God, no." I could hardly stand myself far less support Maggie. His words fell upon me like a hammer on the skull, and it felt like an accusation. "Mr Patridis, I have done Ilana no harm."

This time I was telling the truth.

"A blue hire car was parked last evening near to my daughter's villa. Not yours?"

"Of course it was mine," I replied angrily. He nodded. He knew full well it was my car. Testing, always testing. It must be exhausting to be the old man.

“I was saying goodbye, expecting to be leaving Corfu today as I am booked to do,” I reminded him. “We were not expecting your son to turn up but he did, very late in the evening. I tried to stay out of the way but I couldn’t avoid hearing them argue – in Greek. I know no Greek. I cannot tell you what they were arguing about. After maybe fifteen minutes of arguing Ilana was insistent that I leave.”

His mood turned quickly. He had a demeanor like a Scottish summer – sunshine in one minute; thunderstorms two minutes later. Greeks and Scots had a lot in common.

“You accuse my son?”

I shook my head.

“Of what? I simply report. You say Ilana is dead. I had not linked the two things. Are you saying they are linked?” If they were, my regret over killing him would be short lived.

“Did you wonder why my son called you instead of meeting as arranged?”

At least he bought that part of the lie.

“Mr Patridis, he is a coward.”

He sighed, his eyes hooded like a cobra.

“Let us not trade insults Mr Thorpe. My good word is cradled in your arms.”

“Okay,” I countered. “I came here for Maggie. That’s all. I don’t know any other reason why he did not turn up. I was foolish to believe him – it was the first thing he ever said that I did believe.””

“I wonder. I think you are a more dangerous and devious man than I assumed.”

“Devious? Me? What about a baby? Your son is the father?”

The old man wasn’t too surprised that I guessed. He surely had no inkling that Ilana had told me all.

“Alas, my son is father to many babies, a problem which money usually solves. Do you know why they argued last evening?”

“No. I already said, I understood only the tone and the arm gestures.”

He nodded, sagely.

“He hated you and Ilana’s affection for you. Ilana said of you *tími, endēmios, kíríos*.

Loosely translated, honour, honesty and generosity. Excellent characteristics in a son in law, if he also speaks Greek you understand.”

I felt a lump in my throat and sweat trickling down my spine. The day was heating up, rapidly.

“Please, Mr Patridis. Not now. I can’t believe she is dead.”

“No matter Mr Thorpe. There is no place where the person who did this to Ilana can hide.”

“The baby?”

“Sadly, it died. The accident. Your sister is not strong, physically. You claim family honour, yet you did not know she was pregnant?”

That cut deep. He was right and I didn’t have any reply. A jet arriving low on its approach round the south of the island made enough noise to all but drown out my last words.

“Mr Patridis. I love Maggie. I loved Ilana.”

“Interestingly, Ilana said the same.” He offered his hand, which I accepted. He crushed, hard. I didn’t squeeze back. “Mr Thorpe, colleagues would say of me, I am *kalós ánthropos*. A good, honourable man. But not a forgiving man. My son is errant, but he is my son. My problem.”

I carried Maggie to my car; the old man brought her bag. I reversed to the cliffside, turned and headed for the airport, a few minutes away, my heart thumping.

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The Edinburgh flight took off to the northwest, banking over the old Fortress and Corfu Town. Through the tiny window I saw a little more of the history and beauty I had denied myself all week.

We powered up the west coast, over small golden beaches and water so deeply blue before we flirted with three small islands under the port wing. Over open sea, as Maggie dozed, with shaking hands and tears of my own splashing on the brown paper, I unwrapped Ilana's gift.

Two small books. The first, a collection of Corfu walks, with our Kanoni walk bookmarked. The second, an Emma Tennant, entitled "A House in Corfu". I could easily read it as a pledge we might have made. Tucked inside the Tennant there was a hand-written note.

Sam,
If you ever return we shall explore my beautiful island properly.
Polyaenus said 'in the midst of all these occupations
I found time for pleasure.
I found love.'
I know I did, and I think you did also.
If my father tells you the baby is dead, do not believe.
The boy is alive.
I am sorry I lied. Dimitris is not the father. The husband your sister sought was my father.
That could never be. Take her home. Help her to start afresh. Convince her never to return.
All my love
Ilana x

Oh shit.

I would have to tell Maggie. If she returned... *there was no 'if'*. She was my sister. She *would* return. I couldn't stop her even if I tried. That was our family through and through. Never give up, never give in.

But my chance for anything good or fulfilling on Corfu had gone.

Then it hit me, a ton of bricks encased in concrete. Total clarity. The son had said '*she*' is dead. He'd meant Ilana, not Maggie. He couldn't touch Maggie, the mother of his younger brother who was in the father's care and who knew exactly who had fathered the baby. I was worrying over nothing. The old man would not care if Dimitri was dead; he had a new son to bring up in his own image. A clean slate to draw upon. If Dimitri had killed Ilana I suspect the old man would have had him killed anyway, for the family. I would never know with any certainty but I was sure the old man knew and had let us go for a

different opportunity to secure an eye for an eye. Whatever he would have done to his second son, if he found him, Maggie's baby would take that place, to be reared a son worthy of the Patridis name.

Cunning old bastard.

We droned on over open sea towards the Alps and home. Under my breath I sang along to Doris, a tune I often hummed during trials as I defended some violent young Edinburgh troublemaker from the prospect of jail.

*“Que sera sera,
whatever will be will be,
the future's not ours to see,
que sera sera.*

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