

HALF MY LIFE

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CHAPTER 1

“He wants to go back to *Greece*?” I was so astonished I could barely speak.

My mother nodded. “He wants to see her. He says ... he says ...” She struggled for the words.

“But why right now? This is crazy. He’s never written to her; never talked about her. Most people don’t even know I *have* a Greek grandmother!”

We were in the kitchen. I was making a sandwich for my school lunch while my mother rattled the breakfast dishes in the sink and refused to meet my eyes.

“He leaves Greece when he’s seventeen and he never goes

back.” I flung open the door of the fridge and snatched a jar of mayo from the top shelf. “He doesn’t talk about his family, *ever*, and now we all have to drop everything and go – just like that!” I thumped the jar hard onto the bench. “Well, I’m *not* going, all right!”

“Stop bashing things around, Katie!”

“He won’t even tell me enough about Greece to help with a geography assignment!”

“It’s just for three weeks. Just for the holidays.”

“Er – no! It’s the holidays plus five days, and one of those days happens to be Luke’s ... look, you know I want to go to Greece. I’ve always wanted to meet Yiayia, but we could go any time.”

My mother slumped over the steaming water, her head drooping, her forearms resting heavily on the edge of the chipped enamel sink. Defeated. I hated myself for doing that to her. And I hated it most because he was to blame. My father was always the reason for the arguments in our house.

“Mum?”

“I *know* it means missing Luke’s formal, Katie. Do you really think I don’t know that? Have you any idea how hard this is for me?”

“But I already have my dress, my hair appointment. Luke has the tickets. Everything.”

“Some things are more important than ... Look, you’re 16. I don’t expect you to understand. I just want you to ...”

Please, I begged silently, please don’t let her say “trust me”. Please don’t let’s do the whole intimacy thing or I’ll puke right over my sandwich.

My arms were beginning to tingle. I had the overwhelming desire to reach beneath my beanie and tug strand after strand of hair from my scalp. All that was stopping me was the thought of turning up for my appointment at *Hair Raid* on the afternoon of the formal and having the stylist ask me why I had a bald patch.

As if sensing my urge, my mother pulled her hands from the water and spun round to stand guard. But this time she couldn’t say: “Don’t do that, Katie; think about the formal,” because there wasn’t going to be a formal. No hair appointment, no dress, no after-party ... just a big fat nothing.

“I’ve arranged for urgent passports,” she said, detergent bubbles shimmering on her fingers. “I’ll meet you outside school this afternoon and we’ll go and get our photos taken.”

“Tell me this isn’t happening.”

“Katie ...”

“I’m not saying I won’t go to Greece,” I said, trying to sound calm. “I will go. I’ve always wanted to go. But not until after the formal.”

Outside the window, the twigs of a birch tree scratched against the glass, a fraying bird’s nest rocking in its winter branches. Mum and Dad’s bedroom above our shop was right next to mine. I’d heard them the night before, talking, at times arguing. They were still going at midnight when I must have fallen asleep. There was something Mum wasn’t telling me.

“I’ll be waiting for you outside school. At three-fifteen. Sharp. Try not to be late.”

“What about my wrist corsage? Luke’s ordered it.”

Coffee mugs clattered into the water. She was hiding behind the dishes again. The mayo forgotten, I reached for a wrap and bound my sandwich together before the bean sprouts and tomato had a chance to escape.

“I have netball until 4:30.”

“That doesn’t give us enough time. You’ll have to miss the practice.”

“I can’t! Trials are on Saturday.”

“You won’t *be* here on Saturday!”

“I’m sorry, Mum, but I’m not going. Not until after the formal.”

“Katie!”

She may have been desperate but I had to make that netball practice and I *was* going to the formal.

I stuffed the sandwich into my bag and dashed downstairs into the shop. Through the back-to-front writing on the window that told Newtown, Wellington, New Zealand we were the Papahadjis Greek Fish and Chip shop, I saw the yellow streak of the downtown bus fly past. The lock on the front door was as jammed as ever but I didn’t panic – there was always a queue at the bus stop. The delay only meant I wouldn’t get a seat.

The lock finally flew open and I was outside, standing in the entranceway, ready to shut the door when Mum appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Katie?”

“The bus is here!” I shouted, knowing I had to leave before she said I absolutely *had* to meet her after school. “I have to go.”

“Katie, wait!”

“The bus is *here*, Mum!”

I left the door open and started running. Only a handful of people were left in the queue.

“Katie! Come back!”

I glanced behind me. Mum was on the street. She had on the long, blue, striped butcher’s apron she always wore in the shop. In the bright morning light her eyes glistened too much.

“I’ll text you at lunch time,” I shouted. “The bus is going without me.”

“Katie, *stop!* She trotted towards me along the footpath, her blue sheepskin slippers scuffing the asphalt. “Katie, it’s Grandma-in-Greece, it’s Yiayia. She’s ... dying.”

I stopped right where I was in the middle of the footpath with Coke cans and broken glass and cigarette packets lying in the gutter. Mum was staring at me, trying not to cry, and it seemed the whole of Newtown was suddenly frozen like a snatch of film on hold. I couldn’t hear the cars and the buses, the whining motorbikes, the hospital ventilation system that roars day and night across the road from our upstairs flat. I couldn’t hear the engine of the rubbish truck across the road or smell the traffic fumes that clogged the city air. Further up the street, Mrs Euoine from the fruit shop stood like a statue on the pavement, a box of bananas balanced on her hip.

“*What?*”

Mum’s words echoed in the empty space of my wondering if what I’d heard her say was true. My grandmother in Greece was dying. But that couldn’t be right. It *couldn’t* be.

I should have run back. If I’d been someone else and Mum had been someone else’s mother, I would have run back and hugged her. Together we would have waited at home for my father to come back from the fish market; made plans, decided when to leave. But that wasn’t the way we were, Mum and Dad and I. Even stringing our names together in the same sentence was enough to make me feel uncomfortable. We were a mess. ‘A *dysfunctional* family,’ as Mike-the-psych, who I went to see on Thursdays at 4:30, liked to remind me.

So I didn’t run back. I stood there with my mouth open until Sibs Jenson from my netball team started the film rolling by calling to me that the bus was leaving and the driver said he wouldn’t wait.

I ran the few metres to the stop, clambered aboard with my school pass held between my teeth, and worked my way to the back of the bus so I could see Mum out the window. She was gazing into nowhere with both hands on her cheeks like a stunned refugee from a war-blitzed village.

Sibs saw her, too.

“What’s wrong with your mum?” she asked.

I made my mouth open and shut like a puppet’s, and though I couldn’t hear myself speak, I knew the words came out because Sibs nodded, awkwardly, and pressed her lips together in concern.

“I won’t be at practice tonight,” I told her. “We have to go to Greece. We have to go in a hurry because my grandmother’s dying.”

Sitting in geography, first period, I didn’t hear a lot of what was being said. The class was sketching from a map, pencil-ing in the thin band of mountain ranges that run the length of the South Island.

I was trying to picture Yiayia’s face. In all my 16 years I’ve never seen a photo of her. I thought about the things she said in her letters to Mum and me, and I made her face from words. I drew in my mind an old woman, short and thickset like my father. I thought about Mrs Katsaros and the other old Greek women who were my father’s customers, and I gave to the picture deep creases in the swarthy skin of her face. I gave her dark clothing, too, and a black headscarf, because

Grandpa Papahadjis is dead and Mrs Katsaros wears a black scarf because her husband is dead.

Then, holding the picture in my mind like a delicate ornament that might break if it were dropped, I pushed my seat back and went to get the ancient atlas Mr Lyebrow keeps on his desk.

“You have the maps you need on your laptop, Kate,” he said, but I wanted something solid to touch, a piece of my grandmother I could hold; and perhaps he knew there was something wrong because when I reached for the atlas, he didn’t stop me.

I took the book back to my desk and found Greece near the back. Though I knew it was useless to look for Leonosos because it was too small to be on that sort of map, I ran my finger around the jagged coastline of the Adriatic. My eyes felt hot. They stung. I closed them and said softly to the picture in my mind, “Wait, Yiayia. Please don’t die. We’re coming. Please wait for us.”

“Mr Lyebrow? Mr Lyebrow?”

In the desk next to mine, Angie Hutane waved her hand in the air. “Mr Lyebrow, there’s something wrong with Katie Papahadjis.”

Everyone was looking at me. I tried to wipe away my tears with the back of my sleeve but it didn't work. They kept coming, and Mr Lyebrow asked if I wanted to go the counsellor. I shook my head and muttered, "Sickbay" and for the rest of the morning I lay there by myself, staring at the atlas I'd taken from class while I tugged strands of hair from my scalp and tried to figure out why I felt so angry as well as sad, and what I was going to tell Luke about the formal.

I've always known I had two grandmothers. Before she died five years ago, Nana Potter, Mum's mother, lived not far from Wellington. Her home was a tiny cottage with roses in the front garden and, out the back, silver beet and carrots and two gooseberry bushes growing beside a tin fence. Mum and I would go on the train to visit her. She would let me wind her cuckoo clock and change the slim bronze hands to the hour so that dancing Austrian figures would spin in and out of their tiny wooden chalet and twirl in time to the music. There was a budgie, too, blue and white, with a chipped yellow beak, that could recite its name and address.

Everything at my Nana Potter's was so comfortable, so familiar, that I would leave her house wrapped in her love for me; in the smell of her makeup and perfume, and believe that

my Grandma-in-Greece must love me like that, too, and want to have me close. When I was very little, before I understood that huge oceans divide the world, and that my day had already disappeared when Yiayia's was just beginning, I would ask my mother when we were going on the train to visit my 'Grandma-in-Greece'. I never asked my father. Not once. Even then, I knew he didn't want to talk about her.

He never wrote to her. It was always Mum who did that – and me. I started writing to Yiayia when I was five, and though half the time it was only a scribble and a drawing, she said she loved my letters. She said she kept them in a special box by her bed.

She wrote in Greek of course, in strange letters that looked more like the symbols I used in algebra than anything from an alphabet. I always knew Dad didn't like translating for us – that Mum was nervous as she handed him the grey sheets of paper. His shoulders would stiffen and the muscles in his face tighten as he held Yiayia's letters. The tension was like something tangible that filled the room – a dark black cloud that tried to hide her loving words.

When I was little, the tension would sometimes turn to argument. One night, while he was reading a letter, my father

flew into a rage. He screwed the grey sheets into a ball and threw the paper onto the floor. It was the first time I had heard my mother shout at him and I ran and hid under the table in the kitchen while they hurled words about the room.

“What do you expect?” my mother shouted. “Of course she wants to see you.”

“She should have thought of that when I was 17. She wants me when it suits her!”

“You can’t hold a grudge forever, George. You’re a man now, not a boy!”

“Grudge? *Grudge?* It’s much more than a grudge I hold. Here – these letters aren’t for me. If she wants to write, she writes to you – *you* read them for yourself!”

There was a lot more arguing and then my father began shouting in another language. I had never heard him speak in Greek before.

But he did read to us again. My father is a very private person and my mother said that if he refused to translate Grandma’s letters, she would give them to old Mr Drakos who comes on Friday nights to eat his fried salt cod and garlic sauce out the back of the shop. She would ask *him* to translate for us.

All morning in the sickbay, I thought about my father: his

remoteness, the bitterness that hung over him – over us all – like an oppressive, grey shadow, and of how my mother ducked and dived and contorted herself like an acrobat as she tried to hide it from me. I wished I knew why he was so angry with my yiayia, and why he would never speak of her or the place where he grew up. I would never have the courage to ask him but my secret hope was that now we were going to Greece, the answer might be there – waiting for me in my grandmother’s village.

Cold rain began falling on the sickbay skylight above my head, and I hugged the atlas close to me as if it was a doll. I wished I could talk about everything with Mike-the-psych but my next appointment wasn’t until Thursday. Instead, I tried to imagine his face which remained, as it always did, frustratingly out of reach.