

## Sample Chapter One

## Voula Tsoflias

I know two facts for certain about my biological parents. Firstly, one of them has a big nose. Hopefully not my real mother. My adoptive Mum (who I love with all my heart, by the way) thinks my beak gives my face unique character, without which I'd be too beautiful for this world. Only a mother would say that.

It's probably true that one of my parents is clever, as I was hailed as a child prodigy, spontaneously starting to read at the age of two. Although on my remote Greek Island it didn't take much to be considered extraordinary, my hair alone qualified me for legendary status. I expect both my real parents have white hair: mine surely wouldn't be this pale otherwise.

Their eye colour is a complicated business: I have grey eyes, the rarest pigment. Once I qualify as a geneticist, I'll be able to figure out the possible options. Today, I moved one step nearer to that goal: I've been offered a place on a Master's Degree in Genetics at Athens University, starting September. I wish I could squeeze someone for sheer joy, but nobody knows apart from Stephan and he's hours away, on the mainland.

My parents will be shocked. They definitely won't be offering celebratory hugs. I can see the bewildered expression on my mother's face, the wrinkling of her nose almost colliding with the two deep vertical grooves of worry between her eyes. "You're a Doctor," she'll say. "You've been at University for seven years already. Why do more?" Though she knows why: so that I can find my biological parents. What she'll truly be thinking is: don't leave again; stay here, with us. I know they won't try to stop me: they're still haunted by the shattering disappointment of my eighteenth birthday. As am I, now that we know there's something we can never know.

So, between them my parents have one big nose, and probably one sharp brain, and at least one head of shimmering white hair. Maybe just one parent has them all, like me.

When I was sixteen, I found out a second vital fact, a breakthrough in my mission. My persistent yet unfruitful questioning over many years had made me realise the near impossibility of discovering *who* I had come from, so I turned my attention to *where* I had come from. A place I could visit and stand in the street to see if anyone looked like me or recognised me.

I knew I was probably of Nordic stock, the only possible explanation for my hair, which was the reason my parents told me I was adopted, when I was five years old and starting school. They had no choice: I stood out like a bottle of milk amongst the swarthy inhabitants of Chios.

I caught Mum when she was concentrating on cooking a complicated new take on pastitso for Anastasia's Kitchen, hellbent on finding a new dish to knockout the branch of McDonald's that opened in the port a few years ago. Unable to

believe the shocking discovery that most Chiotis would prefer a big Mac and fries to her fragrant kleftico or kefte, she continued to search for new ways of preparing her traditional dishes to win back her disloyal clientele. Who's going to tell her she can never compete with that overdose of salt, sugar and fat? That day she was desperate to find some new refinement of the traditional menu.

"You must know something. Somebody brought me. Who handed me over?" I busily cleared away the cutlery, to avoid meeting her eyes.

"Nobody brought you. We collected you."

Casually, I said "Oh that's right, where was it you went again?"

That got her attention. She faced me, all hands on hips, and laser beam eye contact. "Polly, you think you'll trick me, do you? Me? You'll need to get up very early in the morning if you're going to do that. I can't even remember, it was long ago and far away, a strange land of people with hair like yours. Stop asking me. Taste this, what d'you think?"

She fed me a spoonful of her new pastitso with added chorizo.

"Yum," I said. (Though honestly? I prefer the original.)

I headed up to my room and logged on to Google. On our island, most men go to sea: Chios has one of the biggest ports in Greece. Dad used to be a ship's captain. My parents must have adopted me from somewhere he docked, so if I could discover the route he was on in nineteen ninety-two, *eureka!* My search took longer than I thought: let's face it, Greeks are not exactly famed for their record keeping, so I gave up on technology in favour of talking to Dad about his travels. Obviously, I waited till Mum was out, she would have spotted my cunning plan instantly. Dad loved talking about his glory days, especially after a couple of shots of his home-made Ouzo. They were the days of his life, he said, apart from having me, his angel, as he still calls me, even though I'm practically an adult. In rare moments of intense pride, Dad calls me by my full name, Polyxeni, which feels like a caress.

Dad retired from the sea to help Mum with the restaurant, back in the days when it was the busiest eatery in the port, and would have been number one on Trip Advisor, as she frequently reminds anyone who will listen. Also, anyone who won't. Now, she can barely cover the overheads thanks to McDonalds.

"What about Norway, Dad? Did you ever go there? I'd love to see the Northern Lights."

His eyes bright, he started a long monologue about the Fjords.

I swallowed a yawn. "When was that Dad? What year roughly?"

He counted on his fingers, muttering. "Let me think. Maybe around the time we got you? Ana stopped sailing with me after that."

"Nineteen ninety-two, then?"

He squinted into the distance, still calculating, then sat up straight. "Yes, that's it, it was early that year. We sailed to Norway then flew to Iceland to get you."

My heart lurched, but I stayed calm, not wanting to alert him to what he'd given away. "Which country that you've been to in all the world is your favourite Dad? That you'd like to go to again?"

"Fiji," he said.

"Tell me about it." His voice faded to background, as my mind clamoured joyously: I'm from Iceland. I'm from Iceland. I'm from Iceland. Only another adopted person would understand how I felt to know my birthplace.