

## Chapter 2

So, finally, Costas cracked: he told Poly where she's from. She tricked me, he said, trying to hide the gleam of admiration in his eyes. That's not really difficult Costas, I said.

I also admire her for going after what she wants, but I don't show it. I've learned: everything she is, and everything she does, is a surprise, because we have no clue what to expect. I watch my sister, Athena, with her children; she assumes they will be similar to her and her husband, why wouldn't they be? She only remarks when they differ.

Poly, hoping to encourage me to reveal more, told me what her father had said, with no concern for the trouble she would cause him. Also admirable in my opinion; I like to think her determination might have come from watching me. If her biological mother had been like that, she might have found a way to keep her daughter.

My husband is a loveable man, but sometimes an idiot, with no thought for the possible consequences that are terrifying me now. I'm truly petrified. Has he forgotten that strange place? All those papers we signed, all those promises we made? The threats they made? Until Costas opened his mouth, I'd thought about it less. Poly is so much our child, I forget she's adopted. Now, that magical, mysterious time visits me, a sharp lit daydream, that I replay over and over again.

Costas' ship docked in Oslo, a familiar port to us. From there, we flew to Iceland and were met at Reykjavik airport by a uniformed chauffeur in a black limousine. His eyes lowered, silent, the driver handed us a sealed envelope, and gestured: open it. We were used to imperious written instructions, ever since the first thrilling call to tell us a new-born girl would be available for us to adopt in conditions of total secrecy. Free of charge. Yes, that's right: a baby, for no money. So it can't be crime Costas can it? I asked, fearing that the child might be stolen, trafficked. Costas hadn't even thought about that of course. But why would anyone simply give away a baby in such secret for nothing? The only reason I can think of is the deepest shame.

We were told that we must obey, absolutely and without question, all instructions given to us: if not, the arrangement would immediately be cancelled. One careless word, one tiny mistaken action, and we would lose our only chance of ever having a child. I would have to watch Costas every second. He had searched the world for a new born for us, registering our details wherever he went, but always, the same story: we were too old for a baby. Ridiculous; I'm only forty-two. I could still technically have my own, except that I'm barren. Now we've found the

one place in the world that has any sense in these matters. We are so close, yet still so precarious. I have never felt so excited or panicky.

The first page inside the envelope, shouted at us in red capital letters: Do not speak to the driver, or to each other, on the three-hour journey north. You will be taken to a hotel, where you should check in as Mr and Mrs Robertsson. New instructions will be provided early tomorrow morning.

Settling into the soft leather seats, we exchanged anxious glances. Costas reached for my hand and squeezed it. I frowned at him, shook my head; that might be considered communication. We must be extra careful. He settled back, closed his eyes and slept; when he's worried he sleeps deeply; when I'm worried, I stay stiffly awake; it's very annoying, this difference, though not for him.

We travelled over mountainous country side for a couple of hours, before arriving at a town. As soon as I had a reason to, I nudged Costas awake. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, opened his mouth, remembered that he wasn't to speak, and closed it again. I was making "look at that" faces at him. We were driving through a busy High Street of old buildings housing small shops, crowded with people, all of whom had creamy skin and white hair. Not white as in very pale blonde, or white like an old lady's hair; white like a fall of snowy satin. Young girls with silken tresses hanging to their waists in shining curtains, and older women and men, their white hair cut close to their scalps. With the sun behind them, they looked as though they were wearing glowing haloes. As our car slowed to give way to traffic, a woman, standing close, glanced through the window, showing extraordinary light grey eyes. The colouring of these people made the Norwegians look rather gaudy, with all their blue and yellow. Our daughter is going to look as different to us as it's possible to be. That answers one question: we'll definitely have to tell her she's adopted.

Our car pulled up outside a modest hotel and we were ushered inside. The staff all had the same eerie colouring. I felt too round, dark and clumsy, next to these slim, silver people.

"Welcome to Silfengel," said the receptionist. "Mr and Mrs Robertsson yes?"

Our hotel room, fully equipped with everything a new baby would need in the way of food and clothing, flooded me with the yearning I had suppressed for decades, to hold a child of my own in my arms. I had to stop myself from doubling over with the pain and the hope and the joy of it.

The next morning, we were driven to an isolated cottage in this small independent principality of Silfengel, at the farthest northern tip of Iceland, between the ocean and a mountain range. We had never heard of this place, until we read about it last night in a brochure, but then, why would we? It's so far from

our island, in every possible way.

We sat, holding hands tightly, in a small barely furnished room. I trembled with longing. Costas' lips were moving, beseeching the holy mother. I knew his prayer: that this would be the moment when I would at last be happy. It was the only thing he wanted: to give me a baby, by whatever means. Costas is a truly good man: perfectly able to have a child of his own, with a different woman, yet steadfast in his self-sacrifice and devotion. For that I thank God daily.

A nun entered, in a dark habit with a white wimple, her face concealed apart from her grey eyes. "Have you signed the confidentiality agreement?"

Costas nodded, handing her a large thick envelope: we had spent hours last night, reading through the documents, the pages of prohibitions on what we could do or say.

After checking our signatures, she gave us a folder. "All paperwork is here, including your daughter's birth certificate. Also, your travel documents. A car will collect you shortly. Speak to nobody, and do not deviate from your itinerary. If you fail to leave Iceland as the plan defines, this arrangement will be annulled instantly, and the baby will be returned to us. Do you understand?"

We nodded. I could feel Costas next to me like an electrical charge.

The nun left, returning almost immediately. I held out my arms, stifling a sob as the nun offered my daughter into my embrace. She kissed the child's forehead, glanced quickly around the room, then looked up at me and said, in an urgent whisper: "Tell nobody. They will find you. Say nothing, to anybody, ever." Then she hurried away.

Costas, weeping, wrapped his arms around us both.

During the journey to the hotel, we watched our sleeping daughter. She was a shock to my eyes: my niece and nephew whom I had helped to raise were plump bouncing babies, dark skinned and black haired. This pale delicate creature couldn't be more different. I realised that shame would never be enough for a woman to give up her baby. It would have to be brute force. I turned my mind from such a distressing thought and resolved not to mention my fears to Costas. Why upset him?

Back at our hotel, Polyxeni, named after Costas' late mother, awoke. I expected her eyes to be new born blue, but they were palest grey, with a navy rim around the iris. Strikingly beautiful. She was restless and whiney, so I fed her, then changed her. Removing her little vest, I found, attached inside, the smallest envelope of tissue. Astonished, I unpinned it. "Look Costas..." The message: *'to the parents of my daughter, I beseech you not to open this letter, but give it to her on her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.'*

We stared at each other, alarmed. I whispered "D'you think anyone's watching us? Is this a test?"

Costas looked around the room and whispered back: "We can't read it."

"No. They'll take her away. They could be watching."

"What d'you think it says?" Costas was still whispering, as though the room bristled with surveillance equipment. Maybe it did.

"God knows." A picture flashed through my mind, Poly's mother, a poor young girl, perhaps taken advantage of, unable to care for her child.

Costas stroked Polyxeni's forehead. "Imagine, Ana, having a baby and giving her away."

"Maybe she's young, ill perhaps, unable to care for her baby and wanting to do the best for her."

"Do you think so?" Costas looked stricken. Thankfully he didn't point out the obvious: surely money would have been involved in such a situation?

"I'm so happy. Costas, thank you for never giving up."

Costas held me tightly, surreptitiously wiping away a tear. "We must do exactly as they say. We'll keep it safe till she's eighteen. We won't tell a soul."

I didn't completely breathe out until our plane took off from Reykjavik, at lunch time. We would land at Oslo, then get a flight to Athens, then to Chios. A marathon of a journey, even without a new born. It would take us over nine hours. I'd always been a nervous flier, but now I had far greater fears. The nun's sinister words haunted me: *they will find you*. Thankfully, I had Polyxeni to distract me, which she did by crying without cease.

Rocking her, trying to soothe her, my thoughts turned again to her family. Maybe her mother was too ill to care for her. Or, no, this was probably it: a very sad situation of a young girl, slightly handicapped, unable to care for her child; and her wealthy family, unconcerned about money, decided to find a good home for her. (I ignored a faint voice saying: but why wouldn't the family keep the baby? And the alarming answer: what if there's something wrong with her?)

The passengers around us were patient at first, little tuts of sympathy and kind glances, for a clearly distressed infant. Not to mention her mother. Later, tempers frayed. Nobody actually said: "can't you keep your baby quiet?" but I knew that's what they were thinking. Costas slept, exhausted, despite the racket. It was a relief to change planes at Oslo and settle down for a five-hour flight. I hoped to get Poly to sleep for most of it. I rocked her, put her in every possible position, changed her, fed her. She cried pitifully. When I cared for my sister's babies, I could soothe them with the slightest caress, or even a word or two. My aunt used to say: see? babies know their own blood, they can smell it. Which I suppose means they also know *not* their own blood. My mood, usually full of cheer, faltered, as I faced the unthinkable: what if Poly didn't take to me? what would happen then?

When the young woman across the aisle leaned across and said: "Can I help? Maybe I could hold your granddaughter for a while, so you could rest?" I was cold.

"She's my daughter. She'll settle soon." I had no sympathy for the woman's mortification, why should I? I'm not that old, many women have babies in their forties, I'd hardly be the first. Very tactless.

Poly finally fell into an exhausted sleep, so I managed a couple of hours rest at last, before the final leg of our journey to Chios.

My brother-in-law Vangelis was a welcome sight at the airport. That's not something I would normally say, as he's not one of my favourite people; I've done my best, but I've never really taken to him. He glanced at Poly, winced, said God, so pale! then hurried us to collect our luggage. Athena would have welcomed us with balloons and posters, but she had a new born of her own to attend to. As we turned into our familiar street and up the hill, lined each side with white washed houses, I could see my sister standing at her front gate, next door to ours; waving wildly. We had lost our mother when I was fourteen and Athena four, so I'd been mother and sister to her. When she'd had two children of her own, in quick succession, I'd been their Auntie, Mum and Grandmother. As we unloaded the car, Athena called, "I'll be over now, I'll just get the baby."

The commotion woke Polyxeni, who screamed inconsolably and was still yelling when Athena arrived carrying her own serenely sleeping accidental third child: her new-born daughter Calliope. Athena cooed over Poly, who calmed slightly. "So pale, so pretty. I'll go and put Cally down, Ana, can I put her in Polyxeni's cot?"

Within minutes, Athena was back taking Polyxeni in her arms, rocking her gently and crooning an ancient Greek lullaby. I was relieved to escape to the kitchen to prepare a quick supper.

Athena joined me, whispering, "She's quieter now, shall I put her in with Cally? That might soothe her? Come, let's see our babies together."

We crept into the small room, that I had hurriedly made into a basic nursery, with borrowed equipment and donated baby clothes: with two weeks to prepare and very little money, I'd had to make do.

Athena carefully placed Polyxeni next to her sleeping cousin. "There. Polyxeni, meet Calliope." Poly stilled instantly, and silence reigned for the first time since we left Iceland. She curled herself around her cousin and fell into a deep sleep.

My sister and I looped our arms around each other.

"Look at them," Athena whispered. "Our two babies. Like sisters, like us."

"I can hardly believe my luck," I rested my forehead on Athena's shoulder.

"She's lucky too, to end up with you. Look how you raised my two already; it's like they had two Mums."

"My little one has two Mums too. Only one of them couldn't care for her and had to give her away." I resisted my impulse to tell Athena about the letter. The nun's words echoed in my mind: *say nothing to anybody ever.*

“And that’s lucky for you. Look at them: like photo negatives of each other.”  
I blew a kiss towards the cot. “Goodnight babies. Sweet dreams.”

These sharp memories of Poly’s early days came back to me as I went in search of my big mouthed husband. After the early months, I’d managed not to think too much about her origins. I’d never been able to think of an explanation that justified the secrecy or the nun’s final urgent advice to us.

“What were you thinking of Costas? To tell her that?” I looked down at him in his armchair, glass of ouzo in his hand. Of course, I already knew: he wasn’t thinking of anything. Warmed by his drink, his mind free of thought.

“Nobody will know, not now.” Costas tried an ingratiating smile, hoping to ward off my gathering wrath.

“We promised. We signed papers. Not a word, ever. How could you forget?” I flashed my Medusa look.

He flinched. “I do remember. We’re safe, we needn’t worry.”

I put my hand to my forehead. “Remember that blonde woman who was here a few years ago? Said she was a tourist, and asked all those questions about Poly? Someone was watching us.”

“She was a tourist Ana. Everybody asks about Poly. She’s sixteen now, what could anybody do, even if we were being watched?”

“Maybe it’ll be different once she’s eighteen – then she can make her own decisions... Unless they kidnap her....”

“She wants to know where she’s from. Is it cruel not to tell her? Does it hurt you Ana?”

“I’ve never forgotten the look on her face when we told her she was adopted. And she’s never stopped asking questions.”

“She loves us Ana. Especially you.”

“I’ve sometimes thought we should maybe tell her about the letter? If she knew she’d have some information in a couple of years, maybe that would give her some hope?”

“If only we knew what it says.” Costas swigged his ouzo, emptying the glass.

“Maybe something to help Poly find her.” This was my hope.

“Let’s tell her, it can’t hurt.”

Yes, it will give her hope. Though Costas doesn’t realise the true depth of Poly’s desire to find her biological mother. I’d never told him about the day I chanced, unseen, upon our daughter, aged eight, sitting on the floor of her bedroom in front of the full-length mirror, her right hand flat against her own

reflection. She was talking to herself: "I wish there were really two of me, another person with white hair. I'm so lonely."

Or about the diary that Poly had kept as a child, maybe still kept for all I knew: letters to her biological mother. It would have killed Costas to read them; it had very nearly broken me, when I came across the little notebook tucked under Poly's bed. Some of those messages were branded on my heart.

Mummy, can you come and get me?  
I dreamed of you Mummy, you look like me.  
Are you sad without me? I'm sad without you.  
I'm going to come and find you, I am.

So I protected Costas from Poly's anguish. As the years passed, soothed by her obvious love for us, my wish to help her find her biological mother rooted in my soul. I knew it was the only thing that would bring her peace.