



# 1

## Yiannis

**O**NE DAY, NISHA VANISHED AND turned to gold. She turned to gold in the eyes of the creature that stood before me. She turned to gold in the morning sky and in the music of the birds. Later, in the shimmering melody of the maid from Vietnam who sang at Theo's restaurant. Later still, in the faces and voices of all the maids that flowed along the streets like a turbulent river of anger, demanding to be seen and heard. This is where Nisha exists. But let's go back. We need to go back.



## 2

# Petra

**T**HE DAY NISHA DISAPPEARED WE went to the mountains. The three of us put on our hiking boots and waited for the bus that goes up to Troodos, which comes just twice a day. Nisha would normally go out on her own on Sundays but this time, for the first time, she decided to come along with Alik and me.

Oh, it was beautiful up there! The autumn mist mingled with the ferns and pines and twisted oaks. These mountains rose from the sea when the African and European tectonic plates collided. You can even see the Earth's oceanic crust. The rock formations, with their veins and lava pillows, look like they are wearing snake skins.

I love thinking about beginnings. Like that story my aunt used to tell in the back garden: *When the Creator finished his creation of the world – Petra, are you listening?! – he shook the*

*remaining clumps of clay from his hands and they fell to the sea and formed this island.*

Yes, I love thinking about beginnings. I don't like endings, though I suppose I'm like most people in that. An ending can be staring you right in the face without your knowing it. Like the last cup of coffee you have with someone when you thought there would be many more.

Aliki played with leaves as Nisha and I sat beneath the heater at one of the small taverns on the trail we were taking, and drank coffee. I remember the conversation we had.

Nisha had been unusually quiet, stirring her coffee for some time without drinking it. 'Madam,' she said, suddenly, 'I have a question to ask.'

I nodded and waited while she shifted in her seat.

'I would like to take tonight off to—'

'But Nisha, you had the whole day off!'

She didn't speak again for a while. Aliki was gathering armfuls of the leaves and placing them on a bench. We both watched her.

Nisha had decided to spend her free day with us, to join Aliki and me on this trip. I shouldn't be expected to give her more time off.

'Nisha,' I said, 'you have all day off on Sunday. In the evening, you have things to do. You need to help Aliki get her bag ready for school, and then put her to bed.'

'Madam, many of the other women have Sunday night off too.' She said this slowly.

'I know for a fact that other women are not allowed to go gallivanting around at night.'

She acted like she hadn't heard this and said, 'And I don't think madam has plans tonight,' giving me a sly look before returning her gaze to the coffee. 'So maybe madam could put Aliko to bed just for tonight? I will do extra duties next Sunday to make up for it.'

I was about to ask her where she intended to go; what was so important that she was willing to disrupt our routine. Perhaps she saw the disapproving look in my eyes, but there was no time for either of us to say anything because at that moment an avalanche of leaves was released over our heads. Nisha screeched, making a pantomime of it, waving her hands in the air and chasing Aliko, who was slipping away down a path that led into the woods. I could hear them after a while in the forest, like two children, laughing and playing, while I drank my coffee.

By the time we got home that evening, Nisha hadn't mentioned again taking the night off. She made dhal curry, and the house filled with the smell of onions and green chillies, cumin, turmeric, fenugreek and curry leaves. I looked over her shoulder as she sautéed the onions and combined the spices with the split red lentils, finally adding a splash of coconut milk. My mouth was watering. Nisha knew this was my favourite dish. I lit the fire in the living room. It had rained earlier that afternoon and from the living-room window I could see that Yiakoumi opposite had his canopy open, and the cobbled streets glimmered beneath the warm lights of his antique shop.

We do not have central heating, so we sat as close as we could to the flames with the bowls of dhal curry on our laps. Nisha bought me a glass of sweet *zivania* – the aromatic type with caramel and muscat, so warming on this chilly night – and tested Aliko on the nine times table.

‘Seven times nine?’ Nisha said.

‘Sixty-three!’

‘Good. Nine times nine?’

‘Eighty-one! And there’s no point in doing this.’

‘Why not?’

‘I know them.’

‘But you haven’t practised.’

‘I don’t need to. You just have to see the pattern. If you ask me what seven times nine is, I will know that the answer begins with a six. I know that the second number is always one lower than the previous one. So, eight times nine is seventy-two.’

‘You’re too cheeky for your own good, you know? I’m going to test you anyway.’

‘Go ahead. If it helps you.’ Aliko sighed and shrugged as if she had resigned herself to this pointless fate of learning something that she already knew. She had every bit the spunk of a nine-year-old girl.

Yes, I remember it all very well, the way that Aliko was munching and yawning and shouting out the answers, the way that Nisha kept her attention on my daughter, saying hardly a word to me. The TV flickered in the background. The news was on with the volume turned low: footage of refugees rescued by coastguards off one of the Greek islands. An image of a child being carried to the shore.

I would have forgotten all of this, but I have been over it again and again, like retracing footsteps on the sand when you have lost something precious.

Aliki lay on her back and kicked her legs up in the air.

‘Sit up,’ Nisha scolded, ‘or you will be sick in your mouth. You’ve just eaten.’ Aliki made a face but she listened: she perched on the sofa and watched TV, her eyes moving over the faces of people as they trudged out of the water.

Nisha refilled my glass for the third time, and I was starting to get sleepy. I looked at my daughter then; a monster of a child, she’s always been too big for me, even her curly hair is too thick for me to get my hands around. Curls so thick, like the tentacles of an octopus; they seem to defy gravity, as if she lives in an underwater world.

In the light of the fire, I noticed that Nisha’s face was pale, like one of those figs blanched in syrup that have lost their true colour. She caught my eye and smiled, a small, sweet smile. I shifted my gaze over to Aliki.

‘Do you have your bag ready for school?’ I asked.

Aliki’s attention was on the screen.

‘We are doing it now, madam.’ Nisha got up hastily, gathering the bowls from the coffee table.

My daughter never really spoke to me anymore. She never called me Mum, never addressed me. At some point a seed of silence had been sowed between us and it had grown up and around and between us until it became almost impossible to say anything. Most of the time, she would talk to me through Nisha. Our few conversations were functional.

I watched Nisha as she licked a handkerchief and wiped

a stain off Alikı's jeans and then took the bowls and spoons to the kitchen. Maybe it was the alcohol, or the trip up to Troodos, but I was feeling more tired than usual, a heaviness in my mind and my limbs. I announced that I was going to bed early. I fell asleep straightaway and didn't even hear Nisha putting Alikı to bed.



### 3

## Yiannis

**T**HE DAY THAT NISHA VANISHED, before I even realised she'd gone, I saw in the forest a mouflon ovis. I thought it was odd. These ancient sheep, native to the land, are wild and rare. With a yen for solitude, they usually roam secluded parts of the mountains. I'd never seen one on flat terrain, never this far east. In fact, if I told anyone that I saw a mouflon on the coast, nobody would believe me; it would make national news. I should have known at the time that something was wrong. A long time ago, I understood that sometimes the earth speaks to you, finds a way to pass on a message if only you look and listen with the eyes and ears of your childhood self. This was something my grandfather taught me. But that day in the woods, by the time I saw the golden ovis, I'd forgotten.

It began with a crunch of leaves and earth. A late October



morning. I'd returned to collect the songbirds. I'd driven out to the coast, west of Larnaca, near the villages of Alethriko and Agios Theodoros where there are wild olive and carob groves and plantations of orange and lemon trees. There is also a forest of dense acacia and eucalyptus trees – an excellent spot for poaching. In the small hours of the morning, I'd put out the lime sticks – a hundred of them strategically placed in the trees where the birds come to feed on berries. I'd also hidden amongst the leaves devices that played recordings of calling birds, to lure my prey. Then I found a secluded spot and lit a fire.

I used olive branches as skewers and toasted haloumi and bread. I had a flask of strong coffee in my backpack and a book to pass the time. I didn't want to think about Nisha, of the things she had said the night before, the stern look on her face when she left my flat, the tightness of the muscles in her jaw.

These thoughts fluttered around me with the bats and I waved them away, one by one. I warmed myself and ate and listened to the birdsong in the dark.

So far, it was a normal hunt.

I fell asleep by the fire and dreamt that Nisha was made of sand. She dissolved before me like a castle on the shore.

The rising sun was my calling. I had a last shot of coffee to wake myself fully and threw the rest on the fire, then stamped out the remaining flames and forgot about the dream. The thick woods began to stir, to wake. I usually make more than 2,000 euros for each hanging, and this one was a good one – there were around two hundred blackcaps stuck on the lime sticks. They are worth more than their weight in gold. Tiny songbirds migrating from Europe to Africa to escape

the winter. They fly in from the west, over the mountains, stopping here on our island before heading out to sea, towards Egypt. In the spring, they make the return journey, coming from the southern coast. They are so small that we can't shoot them. They're also endangered, a protected species.

I was always frightened at this point, looking over my shoulder, expecting that this time I would be caught and thrown in jail. I'd be totally screwed. This was always my weakness – the fear, the anxiety I felt before killing the birds. But the woods were quiet, no sound of footsteps. Just the birdsong and the breeze through the tree branches.

I removed one of the attached birds from the stick, gently prying its feathers from the glue. This one had tried hard to free itself, it seemed. The more they try to escape, the more stuck they get. I held it in my palms and felt its tiny heart racing. I bit into its neck to end its suffering, and dropped it, lifeless, into a large, black bin-liner. This is the most humane way to kill them – a quick, deep bite to the neck.

I'd filled up the first bag and begun to remove the feathers and berries from the lime sticks with my lips so I could reuse them, when I heard the crunch of leaves.

*Shit.* I froze for a moment and held my breath. I scanned the surroundings and there it was, in a clearing between the bushes. The mouflon was calmly staring at me. It stood in the long shadows of the trees and it wasn't until the light shifted that I saw the most extraordinary thing: instead of the usual red and brown, its short-haired coat was gold; its curved horns, bronze. Its eyes were the exact colour of Nisha's – the eyes of a lion.

I thought I must be dreaming, that I must still be asleep by the fire.

I took a step forward and the golden mouflon took a small step back, but its posture remained straight and strong, its eyes fixed on mine. Moving slowly, I removed my backpack from my shoulders and took out a slice of fruit. The mouflon shuffled its feet and lowered its head so that its eyes now looked up at me, half-wary, half-threatening. I placed the slice of peach in my palm and held out my hand. I stayed like that, as still as a tree. I wanted it to come closer.

Seeing the beauty of its face, a memory came to me, sharp and clear. Last March, Nisha and I had gone to the Troodos mountains. She loved to go for long walks on Sunday mornings when she wasn't working. She'd often come with me into the forest to pick mushrooms, wild asparagus, blue mallow or to collect snails. On this day, I had wanted to see if we could spot a mouflon ovis. I hoped that we would see one in the depths of the woods or the verge of the mountains, at the threshold to the sky. We were so high up and she slipped her hand in mine.

'So, we're looking for a sheep?' she'd said.

'Technically, yes.'

'I've seen plenty of sheep.' There was a mocking smile in her eyes.

'I told you, it doesn't look like a sheep! It's a magnificent creature.'

'So. We're looking for a sheep that doesn't look like a sheep.' She was holding her hand over her eyes, scanning the area around us, pretending to look.

‘Yes,’ I said, matter-of-factly.

This made her laugh and her laughter escaped into the open sky. I felt in that moment that she had never been a stranger.

We’d been walking around for hours and were about to turn back, as the evening was closing in, when I suddenly spotted one standing at the edge of a steep cliff. I could tell it was female as it had smaller curved horns and no ruff of coarse hair beneath its neck. I pointed so that Nisha could see.

The mouflon saw us and faced us straight on.

Nisha stared at it in amazement. ‘It’s so pretty,’ she said. ‘It looks like a deer.’

‘I told you.’

‘Nothing like a sheep.’

‘See!’

‘Its fur is smooth and brown . . . and such a gentle look on its face. It’s like it’s going to speak to us. Doesn’t it look like it wants to say something?’

I didn’t reply and instead watched Nisha watch the animal, her face bright with curiosity.

There was a flash in her eyes, as if the colours of the forest shone through them, as if some secret energy, some nimble animal hiding amongst the trees, had suddenly come to life. She let go of my hand and took a few steps towards the mouflon. Strangely, it stepped away from the edge of the cliff and came slightly closer. I had never seen one approach a human before. Nisha was so gentle in the way she stretched out her hand, in the way she waited for the animal. But there was tension in her. This was all in her eyes: they burned with an emotion that I didn’t recognise.

In that moment, I felt such a distance from her and the animal, like they shared something I couldn't understand.

However, in the next moment she turned to kiss me. One soft kiss.

Now, dawn in the forest, and the memory of that day brought a sharp pain to my heart. The mouflon ovis gazed at me, transfixed, tilting its head slightly, making a sound which was like a question. A question of a single word.

'I won't hurt you,' I said, and realised suddenly how loud my voice was in the woods, how it disturbed the peace. The Ovis shook its head and took another step back.

'Sorry,' I said to it, this time softly.

For the first time, it broke its gaze. It seemed to rest its eyes on the bucket of birds beside me.

'Sure,' I said. 'I don't blame you. I'm basically a murderer offering you a peach.' I laughed a bit, at the irony of it, as if the Ovis might share the joke.

I threw the slice of fruit on the ground, and this time I walked backwards, retreating into the shadows and the trees. I continued to watch the mouflon from there for a while, this incredible animal, strong and beautiful. It was very still, then it looked at something over to the left and turned its back to me and walked away, into the forest.

I removed the rest of the birds from the lime sticks as quickly as I could, so I could return home and find Nisha. I couldn't wait to tell her what I'd seen. I was hoping that perhaps this story about the mouflon would make her shine again.



## 4

### Petra

**I** WOKE UP IN THE MIDDLE of the night because something broke. I heard a crashing noise, loud and clear, like a window smashing or a glass dashed on the floor with force. The sound had come from the garden, I was sure about that. The clock on my bedside cabinet showed 12 a.m. Could it be the wind? But the night was still and apart from the sound I had heard, there was a deep silence. Maybe it had been a cat?

I put on my slippers and opened the shutters, then the long glass doors to the garden. It was a clear night with a full moon. My house is a three-storey Venetian property in the old part of the city, east of Ledra and Onasagorou, leading to the Green Line that has divided the island since 1974. Sitting in the crystal blue waters of the eastern Mediterranean, our small island has long felt the influence of both Europe

and the Middle East. We have been occupied by the Ottomans. We have been colonised by the British. And then we became a battleground between the Greeks and the Turks, our population split, until peacekeeping forces stepped in and, literally, drew the line. This partition continues to hold our island in a tentative peace, although missives about reunification are constantly in the news. Our city of Nicosia, on the Greek side, brushes the Green Line right where I live. When I was a little girl, I thought the end of our street reached the end of the world. There is no violence today with our Turkish Cypriot neighbors in the north, but it is an uneasy peace, to be sure.

We live only on the ground floor, each of our bedrooms looking out onto the garden. Two years ago, I rented out the storey above me to a man called Yiannis, who made a living by collecting mushrooms and wild greens from the forests. A bit reclusive, but he was a good tenant, always paid his rent on time. The top floor is empty, or full of ghosts, as my mother used to say, which would make my father scoff at her and respond always with the same words: *Ghosts are memories. Nothing more, nothing less.*

In the garden, there is boat. There were times in the past, on long nights when I couldn't sleep, that I would see Nisha sitting out in my father's tiny fishing boat, *The Sea Above the Sky* painted in pale blue on its hull. The paint is peeling, and the wood is crumbling. It's a boat that has made so many journeys. Nisha would sit in it and stare out into the darkness. The boat has one oar – the other has been missing for as long as I can remember – but someone placed an olive tree

branch in its place. Because my bed is next to the window, I would watch her for a while through the slits of the shutters, and wonder what was going through her mind, alone like that, in the middle of the night.

But on this night, she wasn't there. I looked around to try to determine the cause of the crashing noise. I was half expecting the crunch of glass beneath my feet. But there didn't seem to be anything broken or out of place.

The moon illuminated the pumpkins, the winding jasmine and vines, the cactus and fig tree to the far right, near the glass doors of Alik's room, and, in the middle, on a slightly raised patch of earth, where the roots have cracked through the concrete, the orange tree – like a queen on her throne. I always felt, growing up, that this tree quietly commanded the garden.

Everything was so still. Still and quiet. Hardly a leaf moved. I walked around the garden. Near the steps that lead up to Yiannis's flat, I finally discovered the source of the noise: a ceramic money-box that I'd had since I was a child – it had smashed on the ground, its white shell broken and hundreds of old lira scattered about, making tiny pools of gold.

It was the kind of money-box that you have to break in order to get to the treasure inside. I remembered dropping in the coins, imagining a day when I would retrieve them. My aunt Kalomira had made it for me in the village of Lefkara, where she lived with her husband, who used to eat the balls of a goat or the brain and eyes of a lamb with lemon and salt. I had watched her spinning the clay on the wheel. Her husband offered me an eye. I refused. Later, she had



painted the pot white and added a funny sketch of a dog. It was ready for me and waiting on a shelf when I returned with my mother to see her many weeks later.

I had never broken it; the time was never right. So, I had left the coins safely inside, like wishes or secret dreams collected from childhood.

But who had broken it now? How had it fallen from the garden table?

I decided to go back to bed and ask Nisha to deal with it in the morning.

I pulled the covers over me and in the dark and quiet of my room, I remembered my mother by my side.

‘What will you do with all that money?’ she had asked.

‘I will buy wings!’

‘Like the wings of a bird.’

‘No, more like the wings of a firefly. They will be transparent and when I wear them, I will fly around the garden at night and glow in the dark.’

She had laughed and kissed me on the cheek. ‘You will be beautiful as always.’

The memory faded and I suddenly felt a deep pang of guilt for the absence of words and dreams and laughter with my own daughter. How had I lost her?

Or had she lost me?



## 5

### Yiannis

**W**HEN I GOT BACK FROM hunting it was still early afternoon. I couldn't wait to tell Nisha about the mouflon ovis I'd seen in the woods. I wanted to describe its incredible beauty, how unusual its golden fur had been and how, oddly, it had had the eyes of a lion.

The more I said these things in my head, however, the crazier they sounded. I knew that Nisha would listen to me. She would look at me like I was bat-shit crazy, humour me with that slow nod of her head, but she would also suggest we return later that afternoon so that she could see it for herself.

I knocked on the glass doors of her bedroom and waited. I usually heard her flip-flops on the marble floor, but this time there was silence. I knocked again and waited a few

minutes, then again and waited a further five. Maybe she had walked down to the grocery store, or she could have gone to the church. Although she wasn't Christian, she liked to light a candle and appreciate the peace and quiet. In church there were no demands of her, no tuts, no shaking heads. Nobody disturbed her. The locals just saw a good Christian woman praying amongst other good Christians. In there, she'd said, everyone was equal as long as you were one of them.

I decided to head upstairs and start cleaning the birds. I sat on a stool in the spare room and, one by one, I plucked out their feathers and threw the birds into a large basin. This was a task that took some time, and one that I never looked forward to. It was tedious work I did automatically, and left my hands covered in feathers and sticky blood. Once this task was complete, I would soak them in water or pickle them in vinegar, place them in various sized containers depending on the order, and take them out to various restaurants, hotels and venues around the island.

As I held one of the birds in my left hand, about to pluck its feathers with my right, I felt an unexpected vibration on my palm. I paused and looked down and noticed that the soft brown feathers on the bird's chest rose; its right wing twitched. It suddenly felt heavy on my palm, as if I was holding a paperweight, and the vibration seemed to travel through me – along my arteries, up my arm, until I felt a terrible sensation, a deep tremble in my chest.

I felt nauseous. I dropped the bird onto the table and shifted on the stool, taking long, deep breaths. The bird

lay there, breathing, its chest rising and falling more visibly now.

I was four or five years old, walking with my dad in the wild fields of the mountains. He stopped to pick some hawthorn berries. On the ground something bright caught my eye: a yellow wagtail. Even at this age, I knew the names of some of the bird species, migratory and native, because my grandfather had taught me. I loved the birds. I watched them building their lives high up in the trees and sky. I was desperate to catch them, hold them in my hands, to look closely at their feathers and decipher their amazing colours.

Here was my opportunity! This yellow wagtail was motionless amongst the brambles. Even as I approached, it didn't move. I picked it up and nestled it in my palms – it was so dead that it was dry. I examined it: its small, silver-grey bill, brown tail and brown primary feathers; while its chin and breast, belly and under-feathers were the brightest yellow I'd ever seen. Its crown, shoulder and back were a darker yellow, greyish in tone. I examined its eyeline and eyestripe, its open blank eyes, its wing-bars and lores, its twiglike feet.

I imagined I was holding gold. In my hands I held pure gold.

I lived simply and saved money so that I could stop the poaching. All my neighbours thought that I made a living picking and selling wild asparagus and mushrooms, wild greens, artichokes and snails – depending on the season. I mean, of course, that kind of foraging was my day job and

provided pocket money. But I would never have been able to build a future for myself relying on the measly income of selling vegetables and snails. Not after what had happened. It was a risk I couldn't take.

I hated lying to Nisha. I'd managed to keep the poaching a secret for so long: it wasn't difficult – when I came back with bulging bin bags, people would assume I'd collected other things from the forest. People didn't question much around here, and many of the houses were empty because so few wanted to live so close to the Green Line. It reminded them of the war, of division, of abandoned homes and lost lives. This isn't something one wants to be reminded of on a daily basis.

I had my reasons for choosing to rent a flat there. It was reasonably quiet, most of the residents were old, and I knew I could get away with more. And besides, I enjoyed sitting on the balcony in the evening, listening to the bouzouki from Theo's restaurant, and watching the old men eating, drinking and playing cards. I joined them sometimes, but mostly I kept my distance. In this part of old Nicosia there were brothel-type bars, and when the men finished eating and drinking at the restaurant, they usually made their way to them.

There was one such bar at the end of our street, called Maria's. Its windows were frosted, and through the old wooden door wafted the heavy scent of sweat mingled with cigarette smoke and old beer. The barmaid, in tight black clothing, served sliced apples and peanuts, olives and hummus. I have been there twice, on both occasions to meet Seraphim.

I watched the bird on the counter now, the way its beak opened and closed, the way its matted feathers twitched. I checked its neck and saw that the wound I had made wasn't that deep. It looked up at me, straight into my eyes, and seemed to be saying, 'You sick prick, I can see you.'

I put some water on my finger and brought it to its beak. At first it didn't drink but I kept my hand there for a while, and, after a few minutes, it dipped its bill into the droplet of water and tilted its head to swallow it. I decided to line a small container with a clean towel and I put the bird in there to rest. I sat there and watched it for a while. It was suspicious of me, kept giving me that look.

Some time later, I had filled a whole bin-liner with feathers. The little bird was lying still in the container, breathing steadily. The naked birds were piled up in the basin by my side.

*I thought you were a different person,* Nisha had said.

I put some water in the basin, using a hose, and left the birds in there for a while to soak. Then, I dipped my finger into a glass of water and brought it to the little bird's beak again. This time, it dropped its bill immediately into the water and tilted its head so that it could swallow. It seemed to be treating me less like a killer and this was reassuring. I did it a few more times until it didn't want any more.

*I thought you were a different person.*

After I had finished cleaning the birds, I made myself some supper and sat on the balcony, eagerly awaiting Nisha's knock

at the door. Most evenings, she would wait for Petra to go to bed before sneaking out into the garden. The staircase was on the far left, behind a large fig tree, so Petra wasn't able to see it from her window. Nisha didn't want Petra to know. She wasn't allowed to have a boyfriend. Nisha would slip out at around 11 p.m., unnoticed. She would stay with me for a few hours – we would talk for a while and make love and fall asleep. Then her alarm would go off at 4 a.m., and she would unfurl herself from my arms, go out into the garden and sit in the boat while the sun rose. I was never sure why she didn't just go straight to her room, but the time she spent alone in the old fishing boat seemed to be important, and I didn't question it. I would turn off the light and go back to sleep for a few hours.

When she came last night, things felt different. We sat by the open doors of the balcony, overlooking the street below, with the sound of the bouzouki and a sky full of stars. It was chilly and she had a throw wrapped around her. She was quieter than usual, as if there was something on her mind, but then she started telling me a story about her grandfather and how he'd ended up with a glass eye.

Nisha was in the middle of saying, '... and then he chased him with a baseball bat ...' when I placed the ring in front of her on the table.

She looked down at it, then picked it up and put it, not on her finger, but on her open palm. She was gazing down at it so I couldn't see her eyes, just the soft darkness of her lids and lashes.

'Will you marry me, Nisha?' I asked.

She said nothing.

'I've had the ring for a while. I wanted to ask you this summer . . .' I paused there, as I couldn't finish the sentence: I couldn't bring myself to remind her of what had happened just two short months earlier. '. . . and then you were so heartbroken.'

She nodded.

'But I meant everything I said.'

She looked up at me. Straight lips. Hard eyes.

She didn't believe me.

'We can still do all of the things we were going to do. We can still go together to Sri Lanka, back to your home. You can be with Kumari. We can have a family.'

'I fell in love with you as soon as I saw you.' Her voice was barely a whisper.

I tried to remember the first time she'd seen me. What had I been doing? What had she seen in me in that moment?

'But I loved my husband too.' Then the muscles of her jaw clenched, her shoulders and body stiffened. She closed her fingers around the ring, tightening her fist, possessing it.

Without a further word, without a yes or a no, she walked towards the back door that led to the stone staircase.

'What was I doing when you first saw me?' I asked.

She stopped in her tracks, but did not turn around. 'Feeding the chickens.'

'Feeding the chickens?'

She didn't reply. Instead, she turned and looked at me over her shoulder, and then said, 'You see, I thought you were a different person.'



She didn't sit in the boat that night; she went straight to bed.

Around 11 p.m. I expected to hear Nisha's gentle tapping on the back door, but it didn't come. Sunday was one of the nights she usually called Kumari, so I was sure she would appear. She always spoke to her daughter in the middle of the night because of the time difference, and she liked to do it at my place due to the fact that I had a tablet and she wanted to be able to see Kumari while she spoke to her. Before she met me, she had talked to Kumari on the phone. To give her some privacy, I would sit out on the balcony and wait for her to finish.

However, she told me once that it was also her way of keeping the two worlds of her life apart, separate but in harmony at the same time.

'What did you mean by that?' I'd asked her one night, when she'd finished the call with Kumari. I came back inside and she crawled into bed with me.

'Well,' she'd replied, 'downstairs at Petra's I am nanny to Alik. But when I come up here – and everyone is asleep and there are no demands of me – I remember who I really am. I can be a real mother to my own daughter.'

Now, I made myself a coffee and sat on the balcony and listened to the sound of the bouzouki. I took the little bird from the container and sat holding it in my palms. It took a bit of convincing to get it to stay there, but then it slept, breathing slowly, steadily, its tiny body expanding and

releasing. When it woke up, I gave it water, drop by drop, until it didn't want any more.

An hour passed and still there was no sign of her. At midnight, I decided to go downstairs and knock on her bedroom door.

On the last step, something got tangled in my feet – one of the stray cats, the black one, the one with the different-coloured eyes. I lost my balance and grabbed on to a small garden table to stop myself from falling. The table tipped and from it fell an old ceramic money-box that belonged to Petra. It smashed on the ground, the coins spilling out, and when I saw the light of Petra's room turn on, I rushed back up the stairs, closing the door gently.

I couldn't sleep that night. I couldn't stop thinking about Nisha.

Where had she disappeared to?

Had I scared her away?

*You see, I thought you were a different person.*

I sat on the balcony with the bird for the rest of the night, until the sun began to rise behind the buildings to the east. Far away, I imagined the sun's rays lighting up the sea. And the little bird filled its lungs and began to sing.