



THE BLACK EARTH

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CHAPTER ONE

Smyrna, Asia Minor, 18th September 1922

All night long she lies in the bow of the *Thetis* and listens to the water beneath her. Curled into the sharp angle between the low gunwales and the varnished pole of the bowsprit, chin propped on the shiny wood, the jib sail creaking just above her head, she stares out into the darkness of the great bay. There is hardly any wind and the yacht is gliding smoothly across low, even waves. She is wearing her favourite white sailor suit, freshly laundered and smelling comfortingly of sunshine and soap. Perhaps she'll see a flying fish. She hopes she will – or are they sleeping? Is she passing over shoals of dreaming fish, suspended on outspread silver wings? She strains her eyes into the night but there is nothing. The fish won't fly tonight, she realises. The air is too thick. Why would they throw themselves up out of their cool world into this dense, stinking air?

She stares into the west, where the sun went down huge and deep magenta red, the colour of wild gladiolus flowers. West towards . . . she doesn't know. There is nothing to the east. Nothing to the north and south. *Thetis* can't fly up. So they are sliding out beyond the bay, out to the edge of the world. Ever since she can remember, which seems like an eternity, although she is only six, she has stared out of her bedroom window towards that line, which swallows up the sun every night, where ships appear and disappear. But she has never been further

than Uzunada, the long island, sailing out for parties with their friends, while the flying fish skip like mercury across the blue water. Beyond that, the open sea.

If she could just ask her father . . . She can hear him behind her, whispering to Mama as he holds the wheel steady. But she doesn't dare turn round. Mama and Papa have forbidden it: as they had settled her down in the prow of the *Thetis* – Papa's yacht, his pride and joy – they had told her that, whatever happened, she mustn't look back. She had asked why, and they had just shaken their heads – so calm and sensible in spite of all the commotion on the dock, those two heads. There's nothing behind us, *kopella mou*. Everything is ahead. Just keep looking ahead, little darling, little bird. And when the sun comes up, it will all be fine.

Why couldn't she bring Rosie, her pony? Why isn't Cook with them, or Miss Butland? Why had they had to bundle all their things into Papa's motor car and drive to Cordelio through crowds of people, Mama sitting beside her in the back, murmuring, 'Don't worry, don't worry,' like a prayer while Papa's hands gripped the steering wheel so hard that she could see the shape of his finger bones? Papa, who never drove, but always sat behind Murat the chauffeur. When they had gone aboard the *Thetis*, Papa had kissed her and said, 'It's just like the holidays, isn't it, my little angel?' But it hadn't been. No one had said why they'd had to leave home so quickly. *Papa is always right, but this doesn't seem like a holiday*. She curls up more tightly on the bed she has claimed for herself, the big rug from the drawing room, folded into the angle of the prow, and closes her eyes. Home is there, pretty as an iced cake: her own house, safe inside its railings. Pink plaster, fretwork gables, chimneys. Lots of chimneys – she loves them. She counts them now inside her head, and it makes her feel better. What else does she love? The front gate. The tree with blossoms like stars. Their wide, clean street. From the front gate you can see the church; if you wait, you'll hear the shrill, jolly whistle of the train. Mountains behind; in front, quite far off, the blue sea.

Something in the air is making her feel sick. She presses her face into the scratchy, salty rug and tries to go home again. The street swims back into her head, the iron railings, the trees, whitewashed stones lining the swept gravel

of the roadway, the whistle of the train . . . A voice, calling through the carved marble frame of a doorway. Clipped, high-pitched.

‘Zoë!’

‘Yes, Miss Butland!’

A short figure in pleats and lace, a shadow over by the old fig tree, the buzz of wasps in the figs, the green, resinous scent of fig . . . The shadow ripples, shifts to reveal a face, not young but not old either: tight skin; sharp, upturned nose; round chin; mouth that looks as if it doesn’t know how to smile, but when it does . . . She’ll do anything to tease out that smile.

‘*Érchomai*, Miss Butland!’

‘In *English*, Zoë!’

‘I’m coming, Miss Butland . . .’

Tea and cakes inside, English tea, English chocolate biscuits from Xenopoulo on Rue des Franques. Running up the path, taking care not to land on the gaps between the paving stones, because she doesn’t want to invite the evil eye. Skipping up the front steps, brushing past Miss Butland, breathing in the smell of sunlight on freshly ironed linen, clean heat and rosewater. Looking up to catch the smile as they both pass into the cool house. Inside, the ticking of many clocks, the soft voice of Mama and her friends coming from an inner room. A ribbon of sweet tobacco smoke. The train whistle again, telling her that Papa is on his way back from the city, from Smyrna, bringing her a little present as he always does: a box of loukoumi from Orisdiback, tied up with a pretty ribbon; a wooden dancing bear from the Turkish man on the corner of Trassa Street.

Until this summer, the biscuits were always from Xenopoulo and the cakes from Portier, but now those things are gone, and when she thinks of them they are slipping past her, slipping past like a carriage of the little train that always whistles as it pulls into Bournabat Station. It has been days since the train last whistled. She went every day to listen for it, and then one day . . . She hugs herself tightly, but the memory still comes.

‘Zoë! Come here at once!’

Outside the painted black iron of the garden gate, a man lying on his face, half on, half off the line of whitewashed stones. There is a smear of dark red on the whitewash, and flies are buzzing. A Greek man. She can tell by his clothes. There is a hole in his back.

Miss Butland ran down the path and swept her up in her arms, carried her back to Cook, and there was a submarine to make her feel better: ice-cold water in a misted glass, and submerged in it, a spoon of thick grape jam to lick. It was going to be all right, everyone was saying. They told her that, and then Mama told Cook. But the train never whistled again, and then Cook went off into Smyrna and never came back. The next day she found out, from Aleko the groom, that the Greek soldiers had eaten Rosie. And then Papa took Miss Butland to the British Consulate when the Greek soldiers had left and the Turkish soldiers arrived. 'She will be quite safe. They've put her on a battleship,' he told them when he returned, looking ruffled, more out of sorts than she had ever seen him. But Cook won't be safe, and nor will the other servants. No safer than Rosie. But she can't think about Rosie. She has decided she will never think of her, ever again.

She can hear something else behind her, above her parents' soft voices. A low growl, like thunder rolling behind Nymph Dagh, but so low and powerful that she can feel it in her insides. And now it is louder. The wind has shifted slightly: she feels the boat jump forward. The sail above her snaps and ropes creak against wood. Her eyes begin to sting. There is a terrifying smell: burning, but not the friendly smell of a bonfire or a kitchen fire.

The girl sits up. She wants Mama to send the smoke and the noise away, so she turns around and, though she knows she shouldn't, she looks behind her. She sees her father, arms spread across the spokes of the wheel, the faint glimmer of his smart white captain's cap. And there is Mama, beside him, wearing her shooting clothes, a scarf tied around her head. But behind her parents, something else. Where the lights of the city should be is dense blackness slashed open to reveal a pulsing wound, dirty orange-red, almost too bright to look at. It throbs. It roars. She opens her mouth to scream. Perhaps she does scream. As the light pulses she

sees other boats all around them, each one filled with shadows, and from them comes a sound, a thin wail that rises and falls, made up of whispers and sobbing.

She calls out again, and this time Mama hears her. For a moment the girl is frightened, because she has been disobedient. She has looked back. But Mama leans and whispers something to Papa, and then she makes her way along the rail to where the girl is sitting, hugging her knees, on the damp rug. 'My poor little bird,' she says, gathering up her skirts and sitting down. She takes her daughter in her arms and pulls her close. The girl smells salty tweed and perfume, Coty powder. One of Mama's fair ringlets has come loose and the girl winds it around her fingers and holds it against her face. 'Are you frightened?'

'Mmm hmm.' The girl nods, letting the rough cloth scratch her forehead. It feels so ordinary; it feels like home. A little spark of bravery ignites inside her. 'A little bit.'

'Everything is going to be absolutely fine, my dearest one.' Mama is speaking English, which is their special language; Papa talks to her in Greek, though his English is as perfect as Mama's. So many languages at home: English, French and Turkish; Greek, of course. 'Do you know where we're going?' The girl shakes her head. 'To Athens. Isn't that exciting? Papa is moving his shop there.'

'Can you move a shop?' The girl rubs her eyes, thinking. 'What about the windows?'

Mama laughs and ruffles the girl's hair. 'He's left the windows. But all the precious things, all the lovely things are on board with us. He'll find another shop in Athens, and we'll find another house.'

'But what's wrong with our house?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all. But sometimes one has to do something . . . something new. And exciting! An adventure!'

'An adventure?' The girl sniffs. She takes her mother's hand and, out of long habit, takes the big gold ring Mama always wears, the ring with the old ruby from India, and puts it gently between her teeth. *This does feel like an*

adventure, all of a sudden, she thinks, catching the faint, lemony taste of the gold. She lifts her head and looks over the rail. They are sailing past big ships, all lit up in the night like ghostly ballrooms. There are lights high up in the distance, the little villages on the mountains that surround the bay. Suddenly there is a whirring of wings and a flock of cormorants shoots past the end of the bowsprit, black necks outstretched, wings beating frenziedly. Their eyes reflect the fire behind them, glowing like the gems in a garnet necklace she had watched Papa lay out for a customer the last time he had taken her to the shop, his business: G. Haggitiris et Cie, Goldsmiths. The most beautiful shop on Frank Street, where all the shops are beautiful. But now there will be a new shop, in Athens. ‘Do they have Xenopoulo in Athens?’ she asks Mama. Whenever Papa takes her to work with him, they always go to the department store, the most wonderful place she has ever been, and ride up and down on the escalators. Then they go to the Cafe Trieste, where she eats ice cream and listens to the singers. The singers, with their kohl-ringed eyes and languid movements and their sad, lovely songs. ‘Why are the songs so unhappy?’ she once asked Papa, and he laughed. ‘Well, my little empress, they are so very, very sad that they’ve gone all the way around again and become happy. Can’t you feel it, here?’ And he put his finger, very gently, over her heart.

‘I’m sure they have somewhere like Xenopoulo. It’s a very lovely city,’ Mama is saying. She takes a deep breath and the girl senses that she is not quite sure. ‘We shall buy a house in . . . I don’t know, perhaps Kolonaki. And then I am going to take you to Paris, and London. My goodness! What fun we’re going to have!’ Mama’s voice sounds as if she is making a face, though she is still smiling in the dirty red light, staring back towards Papa at the wheel. The girl wonders if the garnet necklace – the woman hadn’t bought it – is somewhere on *Thetis*, in one of the big, heavy boxes the men on the dock at Cordelio had carried on board. They had been angry, and Papa had given them a lot of money before they had done what he asked. There are so many boxes – from the shop and from the house – that the cabin is full. But it makes her feel safer to know that all those precious

things are here with her. She looks back at Papa and waves. He grins and sweeps off his neat white cap and waves it at her. She laughs, delighted, but then the line of glowing red in the distance pulses and she snuggles closer to Mama.

‘It looks like a monster,’ she says. ‘Maybe a giant . . . a giant’s mouth.’

‘Then don’t look, dearest. Go to sleep. And when you wake up, there won’t be any giant.’

‘Papa? When will we get there?’ the girl calls out, her voice muffled by the thick air. But he grins and pats the varnished wheel.

‘We’ll be in Piraeus in time for tea, little Zoë. I promise.’

The yacht slides on. Long before dawn, she is still awake, shivering under a blanket, when she hears a voice: a woman, crying. Then the soft splash of oars, far away through the drifting smoke. The voice comes a little closer and the girl hears that it isn’t sobbing but singing. She stares out towards the sound but there is nothing to be seen. Just the voice, and its song.

*A person must give some thought to the hour of his death;
when he will go down into the black earth
and his name will be erased.*

The girl opens her eyes to a faintly glowing whiteness: milky, suffused with pink and orange, like the opal brooch Papa had once let her wear to the Cafe Trieste. When she breathes in, the air is clean, damp and salty. The thick, dirty stench from last night has all gone. Above her, the sails are hanging almost empty. Mama is sitting next to her on the rug, winding a bright silk scarf, yellow roses on a field of black and red, around the crown of her broad-brimmed hat. ‘What do you think?’ she asks as she puts on the hat, pins it into place and ties the ends of the scarf under her chin with a flouncy bow.

‘I like that one,’ says the girl, nodding. ‘Mama, where has the sea gone?’

‘It’s just mist, darling. It will blow away soon. And the sun is rising. Isn’t it beautiful?’

‘Where are we?’

‘I don’t quite know,’ Mama says. She stands up and brushes down her tweed skirt. ‘Somewhere near Andros, I think. I shall go and ask Papa.’

‘And ask him about Athens,’ the girl says. She reaches out for Mama but her fingers only catch a tiny fold of cloth and it twitches out of her grasp. ‘Do they have singers there? Do they have ice cream?’

‘Of course they have ice cream, *koukla!*’ Mama makes her way around the cabin to where Papa stands behind the wheel. *He hasn’t moved at all while I’ve been asleep*, she thinks. Morning seems to have sent away the horrors of last night. The soft mist that surrounds them muffles their voices and makes *Thetis* seem like a funny sort of long, whitewashed room. Dew shines on polished brass and varnished wood. The girl yawns loudly and stretches. She sees Mama lean against Papa and put her arm around his waist. Beyond the rail, there is a narrow strip of water, as slick and shimmery as blue glass, across which *Thetis* is moving so slowly that she is barely leaving a wake, and then white mist, a soft, undulating wall. She hears the clink of china, the sound deadened by the mist. Mama is coming back towards her, edging along the narrow walkway between the cabin and the rail. She is carrying a pink plate. On the plate is a white napkin, folded crisply into a square, and on the cloth rests a piece of sweet milk pudding. The girl sees it all with perfect clarity: the knife-sharp corners of the napkin, the pale yellow custard held between two layers of brown, crisp pastry.

‘Breakfast!’ Mama calls.

‘Mary?’ There is something sharp in Papa’s voice. He is looking over his left shoulder, staring intently into the mist. ‘Can you hear something?’

‘What, darling?’

‘There.’ Papa pushes his cap back on his head and frowns. ‘There! Engines!’

‘I don’t . . . Yes, yes, there is something!’

As Mama says the words, the girl hears it: a low thrum, a deep pulse inside the glowing mist. ‘Too near,’ Papa says. He stoops behind the binnacle, and when he stands up again he is holding something that the girl has never seen

before: a large black pistol. The pulse has suddenly become much louder. The girl thinks of the sound she heard last night: the roar of the monster.

‘George . . .’ Mama says. Papa thrusts his arm into the air and there is a deafening bang. The girl sees smoke, and another flash, and then the bang comes again. Mama is still holding the plate and as Papa fires again and shouts at the top of his voice, the girl is staring at the square of milk pudding so she only sees, out of the corner of her eye, a shape, an angle with no top and no bottom, black and sharp, slicing through the opal glow of the mist. She opens her mouth and then she is looking at a black wall that hisses as it moves effortlessly through the wood and brass and canvas of *Thetis*. She has just enough time to realise that Mama and Papa are on the other side of the wall when the yacht seems to tumble. Green water, no longer glassy but roiling and lacy with foam, is above her, all around her. There is water in her eyes, in her mouth, freezing, stifling. A deafening throb beats at her ears. *It’s the monster*, she thinks. *It found us after all.*

She is rolling, weightless one moment, heavy as a stone the next. Through the sizzle of panic she can see her arms stretched out in front of her, hands clawing at nothing. They look colourless, dead. She can’t feel them, though her head is bursting. She needs to breathe: the pain in her chest is worse than anything she has ever known. If she opens her mouth, the pain will go away. If she opens her mouth . . . She is sinking, through strings of bubbles and bright things whirling past her. A porthole from the cabin glides by, going down. She reaches, reaches. And then something touches her hand. A yellow rose. She clutches at it in a frenzy, sinking her hand into red silk and undulating flowers, and as she does so something takes hold of her. She is no longer falling, but rising up, towards gauzy light. She sees a hand clutching the front of her sailor suit, and on one finger, surely, a gold ring with a blood-red stone. Everything has become still and calm. The girl reaches for the hand, because the only thing she wants to do, the only thing left to do, is to put the ring between her teeth, taste the sour gold and the sweetness of her mother’s skin, sweet as love itself.

What her fingers find is something hard and slippery, and though she doesn’t

want to, she grabs on with all her might and lets herself be carried, faster and faster, up towards the light, to where she doesn't want to go. She doesn't want to leave, now. She wants to stay down there, to take the hand and let it take her home. But instead she is thrown into the air. She gasps, retches, breathes. The thing she is clutching is a long piece of smooth, varnished wood: part of a mast. She watches her hands scabble like small, white creatures. They can't be hers. Then she sees, just beyond her fingers, a piece of filmy cloth. A ripple catches it, and the girl sees a yellow rose and a swirl of red, but it is already blackening in the water, fluttering out of sight like a drowning butterfly.

She screams. One word: Mama. The mist takes her little voice and smothers it like a wet pillow pressed across her face. But she fights it. Panic makes her fight. She screams because of the hand that had pushed her up towards the shifting roof of the sea. She screams at her own hands, alien as crabs, that grip the slippery wood with a strength she doesn't understand. She screams again, and again, at the empty sea.

Time must pass, because the mist melts into the sea and the sun rises to show the girl that she is a speck on a vast mirror. The light flashes off the water and blinds her. The sun burns a line into her scalp while the water turns her legs numb. She screams until she can taste blood in her mouth. When she closes her eyes she sees the plate, the napkin and the square of pie, Mama's hand with its ring curved around the white china. She can't really think but if she has a thought, it is that the world can't end as long as she keeps calling for Mama, that she can't be lost as long as Mama can hear her voice. Because Mama can hear her. Mama and Papa are somewhere behind the flash and shear of sunlight, waiting for her.

When the ship rises up out of the orange morning light, the girl has long since screamed herself into silence. It appears behind her, a low cliff of white paint streaked with rust. She looks up to see faces, more than she can count, an endless line of noses and eyes and mouths, blinking and wailing like seagulls. A white circle floats towards her, hitting the water and splashing her so that she almost

lets go of the wood. 'Lifebelt!' someone shouts, and she flails herself into it. A couple of sailors haul her up and pull her out of the lifebelt as casually as if they are shucking an oyster. No one speaks to her and she is shaking too hard, and her throat is too raw, to say anything herself. After the sailors dry her off they ask her some half-hearted questions. She can't answer. *Are my mama and papa here?* she wants to ask, but something tells her that if she asks, the world will end. So they just push her into the packed mass of people which fill every inch of space on the boat, and she ends up trapped against the railing, a fat woman's legs pressing her hard into the sharp edges of the blistered paint. She is grateful, at first, for the warmth of the woman's doughy body. She can't think of anything except how cold she is: when she tries, her thoughts have no reality. Her mind drifts, febrile and raw, through an endless series of pictures flicking like a picture book in a breeze. Mama, smiling. Papa's hat. The pistol. A rose, sinking into darkness. Above her, the woman keeps up a whining litany of prayers for hours, muttering at the Holy Virgin as if she hopes that the Theotokos will give in out of sheer boredom. The endless wheedling voice, the throb of the engines, the groans, screams and prayers of the crowd fill air already thick with bad smells: smoke, oil, sweat, stale perfume, an overflowing lavatory. And all the time, the girl is forced to stare out at the sea, blue-green and calm. 'I'm going to see Mama and Papa,' she starts to whisper, in time to the fat woman's prayers. 'They're waiting for me.' And she tries to believe it, though she is too frightened to make that part of her do what she wants it to do: to make her feel like she does when she prays in church, or to the icon at home: that warm certainty that invisible things will help her. 'My every hope I place in you, Mother of God; keep me under your protection,' the woman mutters, but the girl can feel her flesh trembling through her damp skirt, and she knows that the words aren't helping the woman either.

The boat stops, once, at a tiny port, just a stone jetty flung out into the sea from a featureless brown island. The jetty is seething with people. The woman shifts, and more people crowd in on either side of the girl, trapping her arms at her sides. She has almost no strength after gripping the bowsprit in the

freezing cold, and though she struggles as hard as she can, she can't free them. She starts to cry, but no one notices. Her sobs are lost in the ceaseless babble of voices speaking Greek, Armenian, Turkish, Ladino. Desperate for the lavatory, as Mama had always insisted she call it, she stands in agony until her body takes over and a warm gush runs down her legs. Still, no one notices. Then they are among other ships, and she finds herself looking for *Thetis* among the masts, which makes her cry again. Islands pass by, and more ships, all of them as crowded as hers. Then they pass beneath some sort of cliff, a looming shadow, and the girl, who can only lift her head, looks up to see the prow of a gigantic ship, stark black, striped with white and painted with letters bigger than her: NARKUNDA. And high up, a little white figure . . . He catches her eye, even though the huge ship's rail is lined with nice-looking people, well dressed, well fed. Why? What has she seen? The bright white of his sailor suit? The flash of something shiny in his hands? She can just about tell that he is a boy, a little boy. Then he looks down, and sees their boat. Light flashes on glass around his face. And then he raises his hand. Is he waving at her? She wants so badly to wave back. It is her world, up there: clean clothes, light glinting off varnished wood and polished brass. Perhaps Mama and Papa . . . The big ship could have picked them up, couldn't it? That was where they belong. It had just been a mistake that this rusty old boat had found her before they had. These thoughts, vague and desperate, make her whimper. She tries to raise her arm, but it only moves enough for the sharp edges of the paint to cut into her. So she has to watch the great ship glide past as the tears stream down her face, the woman behind her still muttering fretfully at the Virgin. When she can't turn her head far enough to keep the boy in sight, she turns it the other way, and sees the harbour.