



The Isle of Khería

The Isle of Kheria

A NOVEL BY

ROBERT CABOT



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*To Penny
thank you*

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Part One

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Part Two

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Part Three

263

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Part One



Seas break against a rocky spit, tossing bits of rainbow to a setting sun. A man, naked in the rising wind, hurls himself into the sea. He strikes out, strong against the mounting waves. Far beyond, where the darkening sea and sky are one, an islet waits for him—black cliffs, twin peaks, hostile in a gathering storm.

Distant now, dim in the fading light, the swimmer is thrown high on a cresting wave. He raises a hand—defiant fist, a final curse torn free? An open hand, a gesture of farewell? And is gone.

On a ledge above the reach of spray, a figure in white looks out to that sea. A long dress presses against her. Sleeves of voile trimmed with lace at the wrists. With one hand she holds a broad straw hat to her head, its brim flattened against her cheek, hair escaping, flying in the cloudless meltemi gale. Her other hand reaches out to the empty sea, draws back to press for a moment against her breast. She picks up a basket, hurries off toward a whitewashed village, her dress streaming before her.

High on a headland a dark figure stands against the faint green twilight sky. He is dressed in a somber, conventional suit. One arm is raised to hold his black fedora against the rip of the wind. He too looks out to the empty sea. With a gesture of resignation, another job to be done—a lift of his shoulders, palm turned upward for a moment—he signs the Orthodox cross, three fingers joined. He turns to go—saddened, it seems, weary.

. . .

An empty sea. Drifting, sinking into black waters—a last few bubbles rise to the silvery surface, to floating embers of a dying sky. Your hair flows in curls above you, your lips are parted, your eyes look upward, smiling, eyes of deepest blue that I once knew well. That scar on your cheek—a sliver of a German grenade, or was it friendly fire? You would never say. You whom I held in my arms, in my heart, whatever the perils of our twisting paths.

Your fist raised from the heedless waves, your curse.

Drifting, sinking, gone.



I

I, Joel Brewster, here on this far side of my world. A mournful return to these islands of Greece. My son, my Andréas, came with me as far as Athens from our quiet life in Canada, our Twinflower Farm. We were taken to Aidan's grave by his daughter Persephóni, and her daughter, Mélantha. We stood there, the four of us, silently, then moved away together. We walked up Aidan's street, past his rough blue door, the one window shuttered, and on to a kapheneíon for coffee and baklavá.

Andréas insisted I come here without them to this Khería, this island, the village where Aidan, my friend of a saddest past, was drowned in a storming sea.

Drowned? His choice? His despair? For Greece, for his life, for me? I, had I failed him?

My private path, Andréas knew—I must find my way alone.

. . .

Twinflower Farm, our home. This cabin, we built it, she and I. My dearest Silda, she's there, that shelf above our cookstove, a simple stoneware cookie-jar urn. Warm, safe, always there. When I'm back from chores—the milking, the mucking out, the garlic-braiding, the oil change for our 1931 Ford tractor, the farm's books to update, a horse to shoe, potatoes to wheelbarrow to the root cellar, fruit trees to prune—she's waiting there for

me. Chores that never end, blessedly never end.

From my bed here in our cabin's loft I look across the room—she's there in the last flicker of embers through a crack in the stove top. When dawn finds its way through the stained-glass window—we'd found it in a junk yard—it wakens her ever so lovingly.

You others, often you drop in—a friendly call. My son Andréas too, back from college, living behind the barn in a yurt. A report on farm affairs, a loaf of bread just out of the communal oven, a bowl of yogurt. Excuses, friends, I know, you're here to check on Joel. He seems so solitary, obsessed. He'd dropped all interests. No lectures, no more ventures into citizen diplomacy, no articles to write, no mixing with neighbors, the farm's apprentices, even us. Only his chores and his Silda there above the stove.

Soto voce, —“Will he never let her go, let her return to the earth?” *Then to me*, —“She is gone, Joel, at peace, death has taken her, it is time, six, seven years, time to let her go.”

Death? Of course, of course, I'm no stranger to the word. So many. Parents, friends, colleagues, fellow soldiers, foes—I know. But Silda? No. It's been years you say? No matter, I cannot let her go. No, she must not go, nor I. This work—flowers, fruit, vegetables, honey, eggs, milk—Casilda's joy, it's also mine.

Here, I have something to show you, here beside Casilda on the shelf. This stone heart with a fossil starfish on one side, warm red, smooth, her special gift to me so long ago. She found it, a girl on a Dorset beach.

And here, this watch fob. A bronze coin of ancient Greece, thick leather to frame it, copper rivets. Aidan, my oldest, my dearest friend, he found the coin near the top of Mount Olympus, home of the gods of his Greece. He made this, he gave it to me long ago. I keep it there too, beside Casilda. Aidan, however different we may be, whatever his despair, he is my other partner. I cannot let him go.

—“Yes yes, Joel, you showed us often before.” And they mutter, I do hear well when I choose, —“A worry, his grip, he's losing it, right enough.”

It is time to bring in the cows. I'll go now. No, I'll leave the meetings, those decisions, all that I'll leave to you, my friends. Thank you for the visit, friends. Be well.

Losing it. The easy way, why not? And the doctors always said, the family genes can show up any time.

. . .

Alder branches, roots, rocks, mud, sod—a beaver dam to pull apart. This grapnel anchor from our skiff, set it well into the center of their dam. A line to our ancient tractor. There, that did the job, a rush of water through the gap, a corner of our hayfield reclaimed. I'll just keep at it—every few days, I guess—till our beavers get the message, relocate well upstream.

A drink of water, a munch on a bit of peppery watercress from the brook, a rest in the shade of the tractor. A cry, a figure waving from the far side of the field, is that Andréas? He's coming toward me. Andréas, tall and skinny, loping across the stubble, his ponytail swinging.

A letter, special delivery, urgent. Dog-eared, grubby, twice stamped Return to Sender, its earliest postmark nine weeks ago. It's from Persephóni.

My father. . . swimming off Khería, late afternoon, a meltémi. . . drowned. . . the funeral. . .

Drowned. I dig my fingers into the earth. A beaver slaps his tail against the dwindling surface of his pond. A jolt searing deep in my skull—a silent scream. I turn my face in the moss, a wave washes the mud bank. The crumpled envelope, the postmark ATHÉNA, Greece—I must leave, I must go, I must know.

. . .

Come with me, Andréas, please do come.

Goodbye, my Silda, I'll be away for a time. Wait for me, my dear. And here, I'll take my fossiled heart, the ancient coin too.

. . .

Andréas, my only child, glowing with his twenty years, there in that kapheneíon after our visit to Aidan's grave. On his right, Persephóni, a handsome woman, striking, a braid of white hair to crown her head. On his left, Mélantha, a girl, a young woman of a luminous Grecian beauty.

He was right, he should stay with them, I must go on alone.

My lookout, here in the fragrance of thyme and rosemary. A limestone ledge, worn, hollowed by time, padded with mosses and lichens. I lean against a bank of mint and lavender and dry grasses. Below me, a jumble of white, this island village, Khería.

Smoke rises from a dozen chimneys into the still evening air. Khería's tiny harbor is a half circle enclosed by the arms of a breakwater. In the twilight, the blues and whites of fishing boats moored to the stone quay are fading to grays. The green and red lights of the breakwater entrance are brighter against the darkening Aegean. On the strand outside the harbor two caíquia are winched up for the night, three, four men unloading their nets into a donkey cart. The murmur of their voices, the whisper of pebbles washed with each retreating wave, the mutterings of gulls settling down for the night, the low whistle of the scops owl. The donkey cart rattles up a cobbled alley.

. . .

They gave me a local newspaper, rumpled, already yellowing, Aidan's photo on an inside page. A naked corpse discretely fig-leafed with a towel, stretched on a blanket on the stones of the quay. They'd searched that sea for days—fisherfolk, the military, by plane too—they found nothing. His friend, Gióia, she saw him vanish, swimming far out toward Khímaera, a barren rock. A fist raised

against the cresting waves, a cry. A hand raised in farewell. Then nothing. In the end, a fisherman quite by accident caught him in his net. Rowing against the current, dragging him in.

Stories of his death came in flurries for a time—accident, murder, suicide? No answers. The police held Gióia for the inquest—a few days, then released. The funeral was properly Orthodox, I learned. A crowd, he had many friends, though a son, a daughter, a wife, they stayed away. One other daughter, Persephóni, and her Mélantha were there. There was no sign of Gióia at the funeral. I was absent, only hearing weeks too late.

This morning I sipped ouzo with the fisherman. He had found the body days after that evening when Gióia had hastened to the village to report the loss. He told of her tears, her distant look, her beauty.

He took me in his caíqui to show me where Gióia said Aidan had leapt into the sea. I walked out there later, imagining where they likely had picnicked—a shallow cave, a pool teeming with little crabs. I stood on the ledge of that final leap, looked out over the silver sea to his goal, Khímaera, a far-off islet rising from the sea, its two peaks piercing the sky—the horns of a goat, they say, a fearful place, a lion's roar, his breath flaming in the night, a serpent wrapping the cliffs.

A deadly monster, an illusory Chimera, was that your bitter goal, Aidan, was that your despairing choice? Your hand raised from the heedless waves, was it an angry fist, a

final defiance? Of your Greece, your Gioia, me? Answers, is that why I have left my Twinflower, torn from the comfort of quiet grief, a quest for answers? For sanity?

In my left pocket, Silda's blood-red fossiled stone, in my right your ancient coin, Aidan. Both hard against my flesh.

. . .

From my warm ledge, here, watching the evening enshroud the day, I can still see that finger of rocky promontory stretching out into the floating stars, pointing toward a speck of an island, lost in the uncaring sea. I would return to that fatal evening, I would rise, I would hover in the paling sky over that finger of no return. I would hear that final cry.

I close my eyes, time slips quietly away.

. . .

A flash of green on the horizon, the sun's farewell. Sea whipped by the rising gale. Three figures. Aidan, his shaggy head, his defiant fist, his cry. . . But no, I cannot make it out. Sinking now into the dancing sea, into flashing bits of voile torn from a crimson sky. A Jason, despairing, his golden fleece is lost. You, Mister Death, yes, Thánatos, I know you standing there on the cliff—you in your black fedora, conforming to the local Orthodoxy—resigned to yet another melancholy task. And a woman in white—a beauteous Aphrodite, some here say. I watch her closely. Holding her hat with her left hand, her gown blown in the gale, her right hand gestures out to the empty sea, beseeching, then is held for a moment

against her breast. She turns, picks up the picnic basket, hurries toward the village.

. . .

Aidan, Aidan. You of our shared brotherhood, shared loves, dreams. Whatever our bitter differences—your Hellenic resolve, my winding path, your anger and despair, my fossiled heart—were we not destined to return, always to return, to find each other?

. . .

Far piping of a floghéra—the goatherd has finished with the milking. The resinous scents of the maquis, the evening air flowing around us, settling to the sea. Sheep's bells of the last stragglers, the rush of a diving nighthawk. My ledge is warm from the sun. A down jacket, and the winter nights are mild. My bed at the inn can wait. I drift, I curl into dreams

. . .

Come, old friend, sit by me where we can look out over our lives. Yes, you'll need that shaggy sweater—its sour scent of goat's wool—the rock is warm, but the dew has come early. Your eyes, it's dark now, are they still that angry, stubborn blue?

AIDAN

The eyes, they are blue, but the anger is washed by the sea. Two, three days ago you came to the cemetery near my Athens home. I know, you stood by my grave ringed by the rough stones Persephóni and Mélantha had placed there. I saw them too, standing apart with your Andréas. Even in that sea of polished marble—cloying angels to perfume the nastiness, rotting roses, plastic flowers, sepia oval faces—they must have thought those stones were fitting, fitting for the man I sought to be, for the Greece that I had lost.

I shan't be there long—the unpaid rent, those hideous stones. They'll dump my bones in a common grave, a death pit, to be visited no more, my stones replaced, no doubt, by a shiny mausoleum, a monument to avarice.

Yes, you were there. You looked out over that snarling stink of a city through your tears, you whispered your goodbye. I saw, I heard.

You bear age well, Joel. Standing there by my grave, back straight, eyes still their own innocent blue. Graying, balding a bit, but. . . I saw you too, striding through the heather, sure of foot, down to the rocks of my lover's leap. Class, you have it still. Yes, I'm still impressed by bloodlines, mine being a tangle of deceptions.

You shake your head. You'd protest?