Pursued by Love: A Greek Odyssey

A Story of a Man's Family, Faith, and Redemption

Early Access — Chapter One

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CHAPTER ONE

The Crossing

March 1907

Nicolaos Tsanakas stood at the rail of the *SS La Gascogne* and stared across the endless Atlantic.

Water.

Nothing but water.

Blue water beneath him.

Blue sky above him.

And somewhere beyond the horizon lay America.

The wind tugged at his dark hair and filled his lungs with the sharp scent of salt. Four days earlier, he had stood on a train platform in Greece. Now he was halfway across an ocean. He shook his head and smiled. Life could change quickly.

Behind him, the ship creaked and groaned as it pushed westward through the swells. Gulls that had followed them from the French coast had long since disappeared. There was nothing to see now except the sea and sky. Yet Nicolaos could not stop looking. Somewhere ahead of the horizon was the future. Somewhere behind lay everything he had ever known.

He thought of the hills surrounding Almyros, his small village, the stone houses and the sheep he had tended since boyhood, the narrow dirt roads winding through olive groves and the voices of family and friends. Would he ever see them again? Would he miss the Greek food, the music, and the family gatherings? The questions settled heavily on his heart.

"Nicolaos!"

He turned at the sound of his wife's voice. Anna stood a few feet away, wrapped in a shawl against the cold March wind. Even after all these years, her smile could still calm him.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

He laughed softly.

"The ocean."

Anna raised an eyebrow.

"Only the ocean?"

"Perhaps not," said Nicolaos.

She stepped beside him and slipped her arm through his.

"You are thinking about home."

It was not a question.

She knew him too well.

"Yes," he admitted.

For a moment, they stood in silence, watching the waves roll beneath the ship.

"I worry," he said quietly.

Anna leaned her head against his shoulder.

"I know."

"What if I cannot find work?"

"You will."

"What if we made a mistake?"

"We didn't."

"What if—"

Anna laughed, squeezed his arm, and kissed him on the cheek.

"You have asked me these same questions since we left Almyros."

Nicolaos smiled despite himself.

"And your answer is always the same."

"Because it is still true," said Anna.

She looked out across the water.

"My brothers have work."

"My sisters have homes."

"They wrote to us."

"They said there is opportunity."

She turned toward him.

"There is nothing left for us in Greece, Nick."

The words were gentle.

Not bitter.

Simply true.

The last few years had been hard.

Too hard.

The land could no longer support everyone who depended on it. Work was scarce. Money was scarcer still. The future seemed to shrink a little more each year. They had lost their first child, Themistocli. It had almost broken them. America offered something different.

Hope.

That single word had carried millions across the ocean. Now it carried them.

Anna smiled.

"In five days we'll see New York."

Nicolaos followed her gaze toward the western horizon.

Five days.

Five days until a new life.

Five days until family.

Five days until endless possibilities.

He slipped his hand into hers and kissed her on the cheek. The ocean stretched endlessly before them.

Neither of them knew what hardships awaited them.

Neither of them knew the joys.

For now, they were simply husband and wife, standing together at the edge of an unknown world, sailing toward a dream.

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Nick followed Anna down the narrow iron staircase that led below deck. With each step, the fresh ocean air faded. In its place came the familiar smells of steerage—damp clothing, coal smoke, stale food, and too many people crowded into too little space.

The large compartment buzzed with life. Children darted between rows of bunks while exhausted mothers called after them. Babies cried. Elderly men sat together smoking and talking quietly. Conversations drifted through the room in Greek, Italian, Polish, Russian, and languages Nick could not recognize. The entire world seemed packed into the lower deck of the *La Gascogne.* Anna smiled as she spotted several Greek women gathered near a row of bunks. One of them waved.

"Anna! Come sit with us."

Nick helped her lower herself onto a wooden bench.

"You rest," he said.

"And what will you do?"

"I'll see if I can find something to eat."

Anna laughed.

"Bring back something better than yesterday's soup."

"No promises," Nick replied.

Her smile followed him as he disappeared into the crowd. Despite the cramped quarters, friendships had already begun to form among the passengers. People shared bread, stories, dreams, and sometimes, even tears. Most had left everything behind. All of them were sailing toward uncertainty.

Nick stopped beside an older Greek man he had met during the first day of the voyage. The man sat carving a small piece of wood with a pocketknife. It looked like a fishing lure.

"Any luck catching fish out here?" Nick joked.

The old man chuckled.

"If I could catch fish in the middle of the Atlantic, I would be rich."

Nick laughed and sat beside him.

For a few minutes, they talked about home—the villages they had left behind, the olive groves, the mountains, the smell of bread baking in stone ovens, and the long family gatherings that stretched late into the evening. As they spoke, the old man reached into a cloth sack and handed Nick a piece of bread.

Nick hesitated.

The man pushed it toward him.

"Take it."

Nick accepted it gratefully.

"Thank you."

The old man smiled.

"In America, when you become rich, you can repay me."

The two men laughed.

Nearby, a young mother rocked a crying child. A group of Italian men sang softly while playing cards. Several children chased one another between the bunks until an elderly woman shooed them away. Life continued-crowded, noisy, imperfect, yet somehow comforting. Nick eventually returned to Anna, carrying a small piece of bread, an apple, and a cup of coffee.

Anna's eyes brightened.

"You found a feast."

"I have my ways," Nick said with a smile.

She broke the bread in half and handed him a piece.

Together, they ate while listening to the sounds around them. For a while, neither spoke. They simply sat shoulder to shoulder. Two ordinary people surrounded by strangers. Yet somehow no longer feeling alone.

As the evening settled over the Atlantic, lanterns cast a warm glow throughout the compartment. One by one, conversations quieted. Children fell asleep. Prayers were whispered in dozens of languages. Nick slipped his hand into Anna's. She squeezed it gently. No matter how crowded the ship became, no matter how uncertain the future seemed, one thing remained unchanged. They were together. For now, that was enough.

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That night, the Atlantic was calm. The steady throb of the ship's engines echoed through the hull as passengers settled into their bunks. Some slept. Others whispered in the darkness. A baby cried somewhere down the aisle before finally drifting off.

Nick lay on his narrow bunk, staring at the steel ceiling above him. Sleep would not come. Too many thoughts crowded his mind. Beside him, Anna shifted beneath her blanket.

"You're still awake," she whispered.

"So are you," said Nick.

Anna smiled in the darkness.

"I think that's because I'm married to a man who worries too much."

Nick laughed softly.

"Perhaps."

For a moment, neither spoke. The ship groaned as it rose and fell with the gentle swells.

"Anna?"

"Yes," smiled Anna.

"What do you think America will be like?"

She was silent for a moment. Then she answered honestly.

"I don't know."

Nick turned toward her.

"Not even a little?"

"Maybe a little," said Anna.

He smiled.

"Tell me."

Anna stared upward as though she could somehow see through the decks above them to the stars.

"I think there will be more people than we can imagine."

"There probably will be," said Nick.

"And buildings taller than church steeples."

Nick chuckled.

"I've heard stories."

"I think there will be noise everywhere," Anna said.

"That sounds terrible," Nick replied.

Anna laughed softly.

"Maybe."

The sound of her laughter warmed him. Even after all their years together, hearing her laugh still eased his fears.

"What do you hope for?" she asked.

Nick thought for a long moment before answering.

"A house."

Anna nodded.

"A small house."

"With a garden," said Nick.

"Of course."

"And perhaps a few fruit trees."

Anna smiled.

"You always think about fruit trees."

"They remind me of home," Nick replied.

For a moment, his smile faded.

"And children, Anna. Most of all, children."

Neither of them spoke. The memory of losing Themistocli still lingered between them. Not every wound heals quickly. Some never heal completely.

After a moment, Anna reached for his hand.

"I know, Nick. I know," she said softly.

They lay quietly for a time, imagining a future neither could see.

Then Anna spoke again.

"I want our children to have choices."

Nick turned toward her. The seriousness in her voice caught his attention.

"Choices?"

She nodded.

"I don't want them to struggle the way we have struggled."

The words hung in the darkness.

"I want them to go to school," she continued. "I want them to learn to read and write better than we ever could. I want them to have opportunities."

Nick listened carefully.

The hope in her voice sounded almost like a prayer.

"Our children will know Greek," he said.

Anna smiled.

"Yes."

"They will know where they came from."

"Yes."

"They will know our stories."

"They must."

Nick reached across the narrow space between their bunks and found her hand.

Anna squeezed it gently and kissed it.

"Do you think they'll love America?" she asked.

"I hope and pray so," said Nick.

"And Greece?"

Nick smiled.

"I hope they'll love both."

He paused.

"We will tell them about Greece. Perhaps one day they will even visit."

The ship rolled gently beneath them. Around them, hundreds of immigrants slept—men and women carrying dreams across an ocean.

Dreams of homes.

Dreams of work.

Dreams of family.

Dreams of tomorrow.

Dreams of choices.

Some of those dreams would come true.

Others would not.

Such was life. But somewhere beyond the darkness, beyond the ocean, and beyond the years waiting to unfold, a future was quietly taking shape. And somewhere beyond the fear, Nick felt something stronger.

Hope.

At last, sleep came.

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The storm arrived shortly after midnight. At first, it was only the wind. A low whistle against the steel hull. Then came the rain. Then the waves.

Nick woke suddenly as the ship lurched beneath him. Around him, passengers stirred from their sleep. A baby began crying. Someone shouted in a language he did not understand. The *La Gascogne* groaned as another wave slammed against her side. Nick sat upright. The bunk creaked beneath him. The ship rolled again, harder this time—a nervous knot formed in his stomach. Across from him,

Anna opened her eyes.

"Nick?"

"I'm awake," said Nick.

"Yes, I can see that," said Anna.

Another wave crashed against the hull. Several passengers gasped. A few hurried toward the washbasins. The familiar sounds of seasickness soon followed. Nick swallowed hard. As the storm worsened, he wondered if they had made a terrible mistake. The ship pitched upward. Then it dropped sharply. A young child began screaming. The lanterns overhead swayed back and forth, casting strange shadows across the compartment. The storm seemed alive. Nick rose from his bunk and glanced upward. Above them stretched thousands of tons of black Atlantic water. For the first time in his life, he felt very small.

Another violent roll sent loose belongings sliding across the floor. A woman cried out. An older man began praying softly in Greek. Others joined him, their voices weaving together in the darkness. Ancient prayers carried across a modern ocean.

Anna sat up and pulled her blanket around her shoulders.

"Are you frightened?"

Nick tried to smile.

"No."

She folded her arms.

"That is a lie."

Despite everything, he laughed.

"Perhaps a small lie," said Nick.

Anna reached for his hand.

The moment their fingers touched, some of the tension left his body.

"The ship is strong," she said.

"I know. It has crossed this ocean many times."

"And God is still watching over us."

Nick looked at her. The lantern light danced across her face. She looked tired. She looked seasick. She looked cold. Yet somehow, she seemed calmer than anyone else in the compartment.

"What if something happens?" he asked quietly.

Anna squeezed his hand.

"Then we face it together."

A powerful wave struck the ship. The deck tilted sharply. Several passengers cried out. But Anna never released his hand. For a long moment, Nick listened to the storm raging outside.

The wind.

The rain.

The crashing waves.

Then he looked at his wife.

And he realized something.

The ocean no longer frightened him nearly as much as the thought of losing her. The realization surprised him because it was so true. Without her, what would he do? The storm raged for hours. Yet little by little, the fear inside him faded. Not because the waves grew smaller. Not because the wind weakened. But because Anna remained beside him. She was always beside him.

Steady.

Faithful.

Certain.

Near dawn, the storm finally began to pass. The ship still rolled, but more gently now. Passengers drifted back to sleep. The crying babies quieted. The prayers faded. Exhausted, Nick leaned back against his bunk. Anna rested her head against his shoulder. Together, they watched the first gray light of morning creep into the compartment.

"We're going to make it," Anna whispered.

Nick kissed the top of her head and held her close.

"Yes," he said. "We are."

At last, he believed it. Outside, the storm clouds were breaking apart. Beyond them, the rising sun waited.

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Three days later, a cry rang out across the deck.

"Land!"

The single word spread through the ship like wildfire. Passengers poured from every corner of the *La Gascogne*. Men hurried up the stairways. Women gathered children into their arms. Elderly travelers leaned on the railings, straining to see beyond the morning mist. Nick and Anna

emerged from steerage and joined the growing crowd. The air was cold and fresh. The sea was calm. Far ahead, barely visible through the haze, a dark line stretched across the horizon.

Land.

For a moment, neither spoke. After nine days of endless water, the sight seemed almost unreal.

Anna slipped her hand into Nick's.

"We made it," she whispered.

Nick nodded, unable to find words.

The shoreline slowly grew clearer as the ship pressed forward. Buildings appeared. Then docks. Then dozens of vessels moving in every direction. The harbor seemed alive. Nick had never seen so many ships gathered in one place.

"It's bigger than I imagined," he said.

Anna smiled.

"My brothers told us it would be."

Around them, passengers pointed excitedly. Some laughed. Others cried openly. Several knelt and offered prayers of thanksgiving. One elderly woman crossed herself repeatedly as tears streamed down her cheeks. For many aboard, the voyage had been the greatest journey of their lives. For all of them, it marked the end of one chapter and the beginning of another.

Suddenly, a young boy near the railing shouted and pointed.

"There!"

Heads turned as one. Through the thinning mist, a massive figure emerged. At first, it appeared almost ghostlike. Then the morning sun broke through the clouds. The torch glowed. The crown came into view. The great statue stood proudly above the harbor, welcoming the world. Anna's hand tightened around Nick's hand.

Neither moved.

Neither spoke.

The sight stole their breath.

For years, they had heard stories. Friends had described it. Family members had written about it. Yet nothing had prepared them for this moment.

"There she is," Anna whispered.

"The Statue of Liberty."

Nick stared in silence.

A shepherd from a small village in Thessaly. A man who had spent his life tending sheep among the hills of Greece. And now he stood before one of the greatest symbols of hope in the world. The realization overwhelmed him. His eyes filled with tears—not from sadness.

From gratitude.

From relief.

From the quiet realization that his life was changing forever. Anna rested her head against his shoulder.

"Do you think we will be happy here?" she asked softly.

Nick looked at the statue.

Then at the city rising beyond it.

Then at his wife.

The woman who had shared his life in Greece when they lost a son. The woman who had crossed an ocean beside him. The woman who believed in the future even when he doubted it. The woman he loved more than words could express.

"Yes," he said quietly.

"I think we will."

The ship's whistle echoed across the harbor.

Deep.

Strong.

Certain.

Nick wrapped his arm around Anna as the *La Gascogne* sailed toward New York.

Ahead lay family.

Work.

Children.

Joy.

Heartbreak.

Victories.

Losses.

A future neither of them could imagine. But at that moment, none of it mattered. They had arrived.

Together.

And for the first time since leaving Greece, America no longer felt like a dream. It felt like home.

Thank you for reading. Watch your email for more behind-the-story glimpses as we prepare for publication.

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