
THE ODYSSEY OF
PHOEBE
QUILLIAM
ANNELISE GRAY

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Also by Annelise Gray

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For my brother, Justin,

who knows about dread pirates and storybook stories.



1



My name is Phoebe Quilliam and this is the story of how I defeated a monster and found my way home, with help from a golden sail, an invisible horse, a kite-flying king, a bewildered fisherman and a boy who could see dolphins swimming in the clouds.

It might seem strange to tell you the ending before I've told you the beginning. Believe me, I'm the last person to spoil a story. My nan would have words if I did.

'There's only one suitable punishment for people who give away what happens before you've finished a book,' she told me once when we were reading together. 'It involves a close encounter with the sharp end of a pencil and it hurts a lot.'

Lately, though, I've learned endings aren't always as important as you expect. It's the same with beginnings, although of course you have to start somewhere. I've chosen a Friday, shortly before teatime, in a seaside town called St Samuel's in Cornwall. Two artists – one

old, one young – are in a glass-walled studio filled with light and a sweet, pastry-like scent. For both, it's their favourite smell, their favourite place in the world and there's nobody in whose company they'd rather be.

The young artist is me, the other is my nan. We're quite similar in appearance even though we're almost seventy years apart. Both of us have freckled skin and red-gold hair, threaded with silver in Nan's case. We wear painting smocks over our clothes – baggy shirt and trousers for Nan, school uniform for me. Nan stands at her easel, mixing linseed oil into her paint, which is what gives the studio its delicious smell. I'm sitting at the big worktable which has scabs of dried paint spattered across it like a million melted sweets. Between us, in a patch of sun, Nan's grey lurcher Claude is half asleep on his beanbag.

'How's it coming along?' Nan's voice is strong for someone her age. Rich and deep, with a husky edge.

'It's difficult,' I say, looking doubtfully at my reflection in the mirror Nan's given me and then at the painting of my eye on a rectangle of canvas. 'I can't get the tones right.'

'Persevere, my love. Eyes are the window to the soul. If an artist can capture them, they capture the person.'

Nan finishes combining two tints of white with her palette knife, whipping the mix until it's like butter. Then

she pads towards me, the studio floorboards creaking under her bare feet. She never wears shoes if she can help it, even in winter when the studio's freezing.

'You're doing very well, you know,' she says, squinting at my artwork. 'Try to bring out that darker halo around your iris.'

Following her direction, I add indigo and a touch of violet to the acrylic mix on my palette. As soon as I apply it, I can see Nan's right.

'That's excellent,' she says, and her words give me that feeling you get when you're launching a kite and the wind lifts it. It's my dream to be an artist like Nan. On the walls around us are posters from her many exhibitions, showing seascapes and strange creatures from the myths and legends that inspire her. I picture my own name on posters alongside hers one day.

'What are *you* working on, Nan?' I ask.

'Just having another go at my Ithaca painting.'

'Can I look?'

'If you like. I'm battling to capture the light the way I remember it.'

I follow her to the huge canvas, which I know well. Sometimes, after school, when I arrive at the studio I find Nan adding something new to the picture, so absorbed she doesn't hear me come in. It's a seascape but not the kind she normally paints in the grey blue tones

of the surf around St Samuel's. The water in this picture is indigo, almost purple, with clear green patches so that you can see the sand in the shallows. It ripples across a cove under an evening sky, lapping at a beach fringed with pebbles. When I look at it, I'm certain I can actually hear the pulse of the tide washing through the stones.

'You've moved Hattie,' I say, pointing to a tiny dark-haired figure clambering up the cliff. 'She was down on those rocks before.'

'Always on the move, old Hats. Never likes to be in the same place.' Nan adds a drop more linseed to her whites, then mixes them again. 'Fetch me that house, will you?'

She gestures to a cardboard box on the worktable.

'House?' I laugh. 'You mean "box"?'

'That's the one.'

Nan's been doing this a lot lately. Saying the wrong words for things. It's because she's getting old, she tells me.

'What's in it?' I ask, passing her the box.

'Postcards from Hattie. I found them when I was digging through some stuff. Thought they'd been lost. Can't seem to keep track of anything these days.'

Nan pulls a photograph from the box, holding it by the edge so as not to mark it with her paint-covered fingers.

'This was mixed up with them,' she says, handing it to me. 'Look at the pair of us.'

Two girls smile at me from the photo, arm-in-arm and waving for the camera. It's not the first time I've seen their faces together. There's another black and white snap, in Nan's albums. Here, though, I can see the bright pattern on the girls' swimsuits and the colour of their hair. Dark curls for Hattie, red-gold bob for Nan. I turn the picture over and read the writing on the back.

'*Christina Hatzidkis and Cassandra James, August 1960, Ithaca, Greece.* So you were both…' I do the sum in my head. 'Twelve?'

'Sounds about right. Not much older than you, my love.'

'Was this the last time you saw her?'

Nan nods and I glance from the tiny figure scaling the cliff in the painting to the face in the photo. Hattie looks full of life and fun. It's hard to believe she died of a fever within a year of the photograph being taken.

'It's nice that you still remember her,' I say.

'She's hard to forget, old Hats,' says Nan with a smile. 'Packed a lot into that short life of hers.'

She takes the photograph and studies it before putting it carefully back in the box.

'Do you think you'll ever finish the Ithaca painting?' I ask. 'Or sell it?'

'Oh, I doubt it. I made a promise, you see.'

I want to ask what the promise was but the single chime of the clock on the wall distracts me.

'It's four-thirty, Nan.'

'Is it? Extraordinary. Barely got a thing done today.'

'Yes, but Mum will be here in an hour and it's Friday. You know what that means.'

I perch on the edge of the worktable, swinging my legs in anticipation. The only thing Nan might actually be better at than painting is telling stories and the Greek myths are our favourites. She tells me a new one at the end of every week.

'Can we have the myth you promised, about the boy whose father makes him a pair of wings? Or I don't mind hearing about the Minotaur again. Nan?'

She's using a piece of wire wool to smooth the picture's surface, so that it's ready for a new layer of paint, and seems lost in concentration.

'Have I told you the story of the *Odyssey*?' she asks, after a long pause.

'No.'

'Really? Haven't I? It's the greatest myth of them all. The story of King Odysseus, who sails to a far-off city called Troy to fight and help rescue a kidnapped queen. The *real* tale, though, is what happens to Odysseus as he's trying to get back to his homeland

of Ithaca, across the wine-dark sea, after ten years of battle.'

'Ithaca?' I glance at the painting. Nan smiles.

'That's right. Hattie and Odysseus came from the same place. As a matter of fact, this is the very beach on Ithaca from where Odysseus and his ships set sail for Troy. At least, that's what Hattie told me, though she did have quite an imagination.'

Claude whines. Nan peers at the clock.

'I suppose you're right,' she says, as Claude springs up and wags his tail. 'Do me a favour and feed him, would you, Phoebe? You can make us both another mug of tea while you're at it, and then we'll start the *Odyssey* and carry on until Sandra comes.'

'Who's Sandra?'

Nan hesitates. 'Your mother.'

'Mum's name's Rachel.'

Nan waves a hand. 'You know what I mean, darling.'

Claude trots ahead as I walk across the garden to the kitchen door of Saltspray, Nan's cottage. She's lived here almost fifty years and even though the heating's broken and there are leaks everywhere, she refuses to move. While I wait for the kettle to boil, I study the corkboard where she pins reminders to herself. *Pay electric bill. Tuesday bins. Take pills.* There's a plastic-covered newspaper clipping alongside them that's been there for years, with

a picture of Dad in his yellow rescue gear. I've read the caption a million times.

> Coxswain Jonas Quilliam, who has been awarded the Royal National Lifeboat Institution's Silver Medal for Gallantry for his part in the daring rescue of a stricken fishing crew off St Samuel's. After distress flares were spotted, Mr Quilliam skippered the vessel that went out in storm force winds and brought all six men to safety.

Dad's smiling for the photographer, his fox-coloured hair flopping messily over his forehead as usual. There are laughter lines around his eyes. I think I still remember his laugh, though whether it's my memory or imagination, I'm not sure.

Leaving Claude with his bowl of food, I go back to the studio.

'Here's your tea, Nan.'

She's sitting in front of the Ithaca painting and doesn't answer.

'Nan?'

When she turns, her face freezes and so do I.

'Who are you?' There's fear in her voice. She looks as if she's seeing a ghost. I stay still, the hot tea burning my knuckles through the ceramic mug.

Slowly, Nan relaxes. The fog in her eyes clears.

'Lovely. Bring that over here.'

'What's wrong, Nan?'

'Nothing's wrong, darling. Why should anything be wrong?'

'You said… "Who are you?" You didn't recognise me.'

'Don't be silly. The sun's setting on the glass, I couldn't see you properly when you came in.'

Trying to let myself be reassured, I put the tea on the table beside her. She tweaks my hair.

'You're getting so tall, gorgeous girl. Like your darling pa.' For a moment, I glimpse the swirl of sadness in her eyes. 'Now, let's get started and discover how our hero Odysseus finds his way home.'

'Nan,' I protest.

'What?'

'You just gave away the ending. You always say you should never do that.'

Nan picks up her tea. She seems normal now.

'I haven't spoiled anything. Besides, the ending's not the important part. You'll see.'



For a long time, I looked back on that day in Nan's studio and worried that it was all my fault. I was the

one who spent more time with Nan than anyone. Why didn't I realise what was happening? Why didn't I say something sooner to Mum? Could I have delayed the ending, given us more time?

Now, though, I know Nan was right that day she first told me the story of Odysseus the Wanderer. The ending isn't the thing that matters. It's everything before the ending that counts.