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Opening extract from

Aftershock

Written by

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For Spiros, Makis, Dimitris and Poppy Karaviotis,
Gerasimos Razis-Galiatsatos and Anna-Maria Simpson

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AFTERSHOCK

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FRANCES LINCOLN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS



Chapter One

Shakings and tremblings beneath his feet were as normal a part of life as the hot sun in the summer, goats on the hillside, and shoals of silver *atherina* in the sea. Makis had always known the rumble of the earth, when for a few seconds the land would move like a slight swell under his father's boat. He was used to getting out of his mother's way when he heard a pot crash because someone had put it too close to the edge of a shelf. Whenever he felt the ground begin to shake, he knew how to stand firm, with his feet apart; and if it went on for more than a few seconds, he knew to run outside – or if he couldn't, to get beneath a door frame, or crawl under a bed. He knew that the walls wouldn't wobble all that much, and that while one village had its walnuts shaken from the trees,

another village might feel nothing at all. This was life. People on his Greek island of Kefalonia still talked of the horrors of the two wars they had lived through – World War II, and the Greek civil war – but no one talked much about the perpetual war between two tectonic plates deep beneath the Ionian Sea.

So when the earthquake struck that August morning, he wasn't too bothered. At first.

The village of Alekata was made up of ten or so one-storey houses, a small church, and a *kafenío* where the men drank coffee, the buildings all lying along a narrow road above St Thomas's Bay, between the ferry at Pesada and the wide beach at Lourdháta. It was ten kilometres on Makis's father's motorbike from the island capital, Argostoli, where he moored his fishing boat; and with the goats, the olive grove, the walnut trees and the constant sound of the sea, it was home to Spiros, Sophia, and Makis Magriotis. The house might tremble a bit, but it never suffered more than cracked plaster or a fallen vase. It had walls of local rock fifteen centimetres thick, with strong oak beams and a roof of solid, interlocked red tile.

But there had been rumbles for a couple of days, as if a restless underground giant was shifting in his sleep. Adults had begun looking at one other with

knowing faces, nodding seriously as they talked in low voices. Makis and his friends knew what all that was about. So many small tremors so close together could be the giant Poseidon waking up to a wall-shaker. His father knew a song about it, which Makis and his mother used to sing with him, sitting under an olive tree at sunset: Sofia mending clothes, Makis reading a book, his father Spiros plucking the strings of his mandolin.

'When the ground beneath begins to shake
Beware, beware, beware:
The giant below has stomach-ache
Beware, beware, beware.'

The first word of something more serious came from Sami, the ferry port on the east coast. In Alekata the tremors had been slight, but buildings had fallen in the east – and the faces of the adults began to look the way they had during the wartime troubles. Things could be working up to something big.

That Tuesday morning, Makis's father brought in his Monday night catch to the Argostoli quayside. There weren't many boxes of fish to unload, not even of the common silver atherina. The sea had been

agitated the night before, the lantern at the boat's stern had twitched like a sprite, and the fish had been nervous.

It was a school holiday, so back at home Makis caught and milked the goats – but they were skittish, and somehow the milk seemed thin. In the kitchen, Sofia was mixing red wine with oil to sprinkle over a *horiátiki* salad. When Spiros was back from Argostoli the three of them would eat together.

But he never came.

Finished with the goats, Makis went through to his bedroom to find a towel for a swim in St Thomas's Bay, but as he grabbed it off the chair, his world suddenly collapsed on him. The earth went crazy, the wildly shaking floor threw him off his feet, a terrifying wind howled through the house, and deep beneath him a monstrous thundering roared. There was no time to run outside to the safest place. Shattering into mosaic pieces, the plastered walls fell in upon him, the blue shutters banged off their hinges, the beams lurched, and the ceiling disintegrated as the roof came crashing down.

Makis screamed and rolled frantically under his bed, shaking with fear for almost the full minute that the earth quaked, curled like a hedgehog, covering

his head with his arms. Then came a stillness, no sound but that terrifying wind, and no sight but a choking grey dust screening the sunlight coming in through the gaping roof.

Makis was fighting to breathe, drowning in dust. And again the ground shivered. Fallen doorways and broken furniture creaked, and from somewhere outside he heard his mother's voice: 'Makis! Makis!' It was muffled, as if she was far away.

'Mama!' he croaked.

'Lie still! Don't bring down more! I'll get to you…'

And Makis knew that lie still was all he could do. His bed was covered by wall and ceiling and roof. He'd have to tunnel out from here, or do as he was told and wait to be rescued. The dust seemed to be settling. A good coughing and spitting relieved the tops of his lungs; and in a new state of fear he prayed, and lay as still as he could.

At last he heard his mother coming, nearer and nearer, stone by lifted stone. Beams were shifted and tiles thrown. He heard a man's voice, too, but it was not his father's – it sounded more like the priest. They seemed to take forever getting to him. But Makis knew that they could easily bring more of the

building down. His father had told him that rescue from an earthquake had to be as planned and delicate as a hospital operation.

Finally, lifting the roof beam that was pressing hard down upon his bed, the priest gently but firmly pulled Makis out by his feet.

Still shielding his head, Makis coughed up powdered Kefalonian rock. He couldn't even get his breath to kiss his mother 'Thank-you!' But he was alive, and uninjured; and she was, too. Now they had to find out what injuries his father had sustained.

But Spiros Magriotis was dead. While Father Ioannis sent Makis and a village girl, Katarina, into the shade of the olive grove, Sofia ran to Argostoli, along the cleaved and cracking road that Spiros would be trying to ride on his motorbike. But he didn't come; and as she searched the waterfront and found his scuppered boat with no sign of him, she ran into the town that stood no more. Fine Venetian buildings were strewn across the roads and the main square; the sewers stank where they had burst, and rescue still went on for people trapped, and for the removal of bodies. It was a place of scream and wail and sudden silence when a whistle blew to listen for sounds of life.

Sofia ran inland to where Spiros usually went

delivering fish, to the Mandolino restaurant. But that had fared badly – and she was called by a shop-keeper she knew to a collapsed building in nearby Kabanas Square – to have a sheet lifted before her, and to see a terrible sight that she would never forget.



No village, no home – and no father any more. That Tuesday morning Makis's life changed from routine and security to an existence where nothing shocked him, and anything could happen. His father was dead. Three of his village friends were dead. The boat was in splinters on Argostoli waterfront and the house a pile of rubble. That night, he and his mother slept with the goats. But at least she was here. She had run outside when the first wind howled, not realising that Makis was in the house. And thank goodness she hadn't been cooking in her kitchen! A mother in the village had been burned alive when their gas cylinder exploded.

For the first few days they lived in what they'd been wearing when the earthquake struck. It was the same for everyone. They herded the scattered goats, drank their milk, and on the third night slaughtered

a ram to cook over a fire made from salvaged wood. It was August, so the nights weren't cold; but the chill Makis and his mother felt as they slept under the olives was the coldness of death: of Spiros, father and husband, claimed by what people called an act of God. To which Sofia shook her head, and spat, 'You mean an act of the Devil.'



Help came. A British ship in the area brought sailors and a field hospital and fresh food and water. This was quickly followed by other naval vessels, and villages of tents were set up for the thousands of homeless. Wheelbarrows and carts carried relief along the roads and the tracks where cracks and great holes stopped vehicles from driving; and the churches sanctified nearly six hundred burials, so that gradually their part of the island lost the sickening stench of the dead. But what were Makis and his mother to do with their lives? Makis's only grandparent – whom they rarely saw – lived away north in Fiskardo; she could not support them. Without the boat there could be no fishing. In any case, Sofia was no fisherman; and Makis was too young. Like thousands of others on the

island, their way of life had ended. Beautiful Venetian buildings had collapsed into the same common rubble as humble village homes, or stood like decayed teeth in the town's jaw. There was no government building or Mandolino restaurant in Argostoli because there was no Argostoli. There was no Alekata village, either, no church, and no *kafenio* where the men might drink coffee and plan for the future. And although Makis had learnt to play the mandolin from his father, he had no heart to sing Spiros's folk songs. Everything special about the island of Kefalonia had gone.

So it was no surprise to Makis when his mother told him she had taken up an offer from the Greek government to go abroad, to start life again in some other country. And because the first ship to help had been the *Daring* from England, when given the choice for this ship or that, she chose for them both to go to London. Some of Makis's friends went to New York, some to the Greek mainland. Instead, a month after the life-changing earthquake, Sofia and Makis Magriotis boarded the ship for England, and Tilbury Dock, and a Greek-speaking part of north London called Camden Town.