

THE CRIMSON THREAD by Kate Forsyth

EXCERPT

*The opening pages of **The Crimson Thread** by Kate Forsyth, introducing the novel's heroine Alenka, a young Cretan woman facing the imminent invasion of her homeland by the Nazis. In time she will join the Greek resistance and fight for freedom, sewing messages written in secret code on to her wedding quilt and passing on top-secret information to undercover British agents right under the noses of the Nazis.*

I

25 April 1941

‘Red thread bound,
in the spinning wheel round, kick the wheel
and let it spin, so the tale can begin.’

Alenka's grandmother chanted those words to her every night as she told her a story, sewing as she spoke, each stitch as tiny as if set by a fairy.

Yia-Yia knew many stories of gods and heroes, giants and nymphs, and the Three Fates who spun and measured and cut the thread of life. Many of Yia-Yia's tales were strange and terrible. A girl who was turned into a tree. A woman cursed with snakes for hair. Another whose tongue was cut out and who could only tell her story by embroidering it upon a cloth. The story Yia-Yia told most often, though, was that of the minotaur in the labyrinth, for it was the *mythos* of Alenka's home, the ruins of the palace of Knossos in the island of Crete.

Once, a long time ago, her grandmother would say, a princess lived here. Her name was Ariadne, and she was the mistress of the labyrinth, for she held the key to the puzzle of paths where the minotaur was hidden. Half-man, half-bull, the minotaur was fed every seven years on the blood of seven young men and seven maidens. One day a hero named Theseus came, determined to defeat the monster, and Ariadne showed him the way into the labyrinth and gave him a sword and a spool of blood-red thread so he could find his way out again.

‘Is it true, Yia-Yia?’ Alenka once asked. ‘Did a monster really once live here?’

Yia-Yia had smiled, sighed, shrugged. ‘*Po-po-po*, who knows? Lies and truths, that is how tales are. Perhaps there was no minotaur. Perhaps bulls were sacred to the people who once lived here, and that is why they painted or sculpted them so often. Maybe it was just a sport, like bullfighting, young men and women risking their lives to leap over the bull’s horns. Maybe all of it is true, or maybe none of it. Now close your eyes and go to sleep.’

Alenka liked to think it was true. One of her greatest treasures was an ancient coin she had found in the ruins, with a labyrinth of seven circuits engraved upon one side and a woman’s crowned head on the other. She wore the coin hanging around her neck with a little golden cross and a blue bead, a charm against the evil eye her godparents had given her at her christening.

Every year, in early spring, Alenka’s grandmother had woven together red and white thread to make her a *martis* bracelet, a talisman against harm. Alenka would wear it about her wrist until the almond tree in the village square began to blossom and the first swallow swooped in the sky. Then she and the other villagers would tie their bracelets to a branch of the tree to encourage a good harvest that year.

But Yia-Yia had died that winter, so Alenka had to weave her own *martis* bracelet. It seemed the magic had failed with her grandmother’s death. The coming of spring brought terrible danger. The German army was marching down the flanks of Mount Olympus towards Athens.

Soon, Greece would fall to the Nazis, as every other country had done. Only the British fought valiantly on.

It was hard not to lose hope. Why, the King of the Hellenes had already fled. He was here in Crete, at the Ariadne Villa in Knossos, along with Emmanouil Tsouderos, the newly appointed prime minister. His predecessor had shot himself just a week earlier. The official report said he had died of a heart attack, but everyone knew that was a lie.

Alenka worked as a translator and guide for the curator of the archaeological dig at Knossos. He lived in a small cottage in the garden of the villa, which had been built by Sir Arthur Evans, the British archaeologist who had discovered the ruins of the ancient palace. Alenka’s mother was the housekeeper at the villa, so Alenka had grown up playing in the ruins, listening to the stories of the archaeologists, and typing up their articles and books. It was her dream, though, to go to Oxford and study history and languages. In her secret heart, she wanted to solve the riddle of the ancient hieroglyphs found on Crete. No-one had ever been able to crack the code, though an Australian

classicist named Florence Stawell had come close. Alenka had been studying hard for her university entrance exams, but the war had changed everything.

She sighed. Carefully she set a stitch in the white linen of her *sindoni*, the embroidered sheet that would be pinned to her wedding quilt, as if that act of needlework would keep her family safe against the coming danger. Alenka was sewing a constellation of seven red knots above the dancing figures of a boy and a girl and their mother. Her family.

As she sewed, she silently chanted the charm her grandmother had taught her:

By knot of one, the spell's begun.

By knot of two, it cometh true.

By knot of three, make it be.

By knot of four, this power I store.

By knot of five, the spell's alive.

By knot of six, this spell I fix

By knot of seven, angel of heaven.

She snipped the red thread with her stork-shaped scissors, muttering a familiar prayer, 'O holy angel, deliver us from evil!'