

THE IKON

A Greek Island Thriller

by

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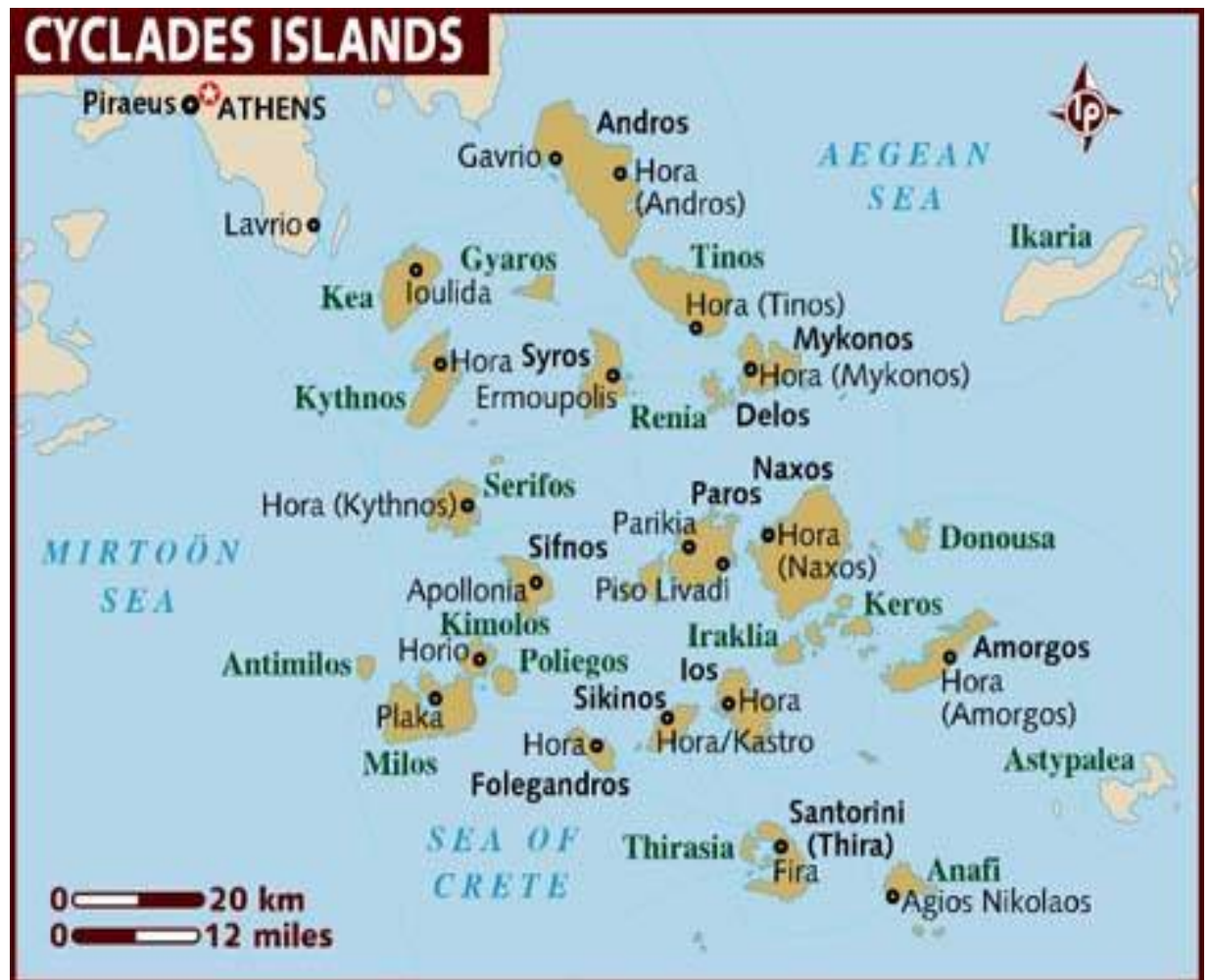
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A Murder Mystery on Mykonos

Written 10 Years before 'The DaVinci Code'

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MAP OF AEGEAN ISLANDS, GREECE

For Pavlina, Michelle and Isabella,
My three Muses.

Prologue

The sleek black Mercedes came to a screeching halt at the edge of the cliff. A harsh, faceless voice shouted, 'Get out!' The cold steel muzzle of a revolver pressed against Garth's temple and he did as he was instructed, the pounding of his heart echoing the sound of waves crashing against the rocks in the darkness below. He shouted something and tried to make a run for it, but stumbled and was yanked back. Then, without warning, a harsh blow struck the back of his skull and his brain exploded like a thousand kaleidoscopes breaking into sharp fragments of colored glass. The horrific image of an evil spirit appeared, pointing an accusing finger. Then the beatific vision of a saint appeared shining in all His glory, but as the vision grew nearer, he finally saw it ... It was the Ikon ... It was the damned Ikon!

Chapter One

BLADE MET BLADE in a flurry of scything steel, parries producing bright sparks, elegant in execution. The clashing sound of metal from agile thrusts accompanied the action, while sweat gleamed from opponents, silently focused in anticipation of one another's moves, waiting catlike ready for the kill.

Garth Hanson surveyed the scene, relishing the moment. The spacious fencing salon, converted from an old army gym on the US Army Presidio base was located at the foot of the Golden Gate Bridge. Here was where he worked out; fencing offered a salve to his worries, especially those creditors of his in Sausalito. The very thought of them added considerable thrust to his blade, much to the anguish of his opponents.

Once an affluent painter and gallery owner, debt had reduced his stature, although not his physical prowess. Years of fencing and love of sport and athletics had kept Garth's tall, medium-built physique supple and toned. He wore his dark brown hair long, because he liked it that way and maybe because there was still a bit of the rebel left in him. Lately, he noticed a few grey hairs sprouting at the temples and began contemplating his mortality. He tried not to worry about his looks, though he always had a ready smile for the ladies. In that arena he had no problems and there were several women whose company he enjoyed from time to time, but after two failed marriages, and by the grace of god no children, he considered himself fortunate.

The real problem was his eyesight; he had glaucoma and was experiencing blurred vision with blind spots; one thing an artist didn't need was to go blind. He was also an artist without an art gallery. The torrential storms which had struck California recently had ended in a deluge of landslides. Mud and water had been disastrous for the economy and he had lost his small art gallery in Sausalito. The fact was nobody was buying art any more; people were too busy trying to save their homes and businesses.

He was definitely in a slump, but hoped that he could somehow pull out of it. His headache from too much alcohol the night before wasn't helping.

Drinking seemed to ease his troubles, but he knew it was a temporary solution. Eventually he'd have to face his demons.

Despite his financial woes, he remained an active, esteemed member of the salon. Dues paid or not, he was allowed some reprieve thanks to the recognition he brought to the salon. As a past three-year Northern California Foil Champion, he had attained special privilege. Here at least, he could hold his head high apart from his own downward spiralling life.

Stepping down from the bleachers, he ran his fingers through his wavy hair. He was dressed in dazzling white fencing attire, vest fitted snugly over muscle and sinew, leather gauntlet and mask in one hand, foil in the other. Like the archetypal warrior of an age long forgotten, he cleaned his blade meticulously with an oilcloth. His right hand gently gripped the hilt with his calloused fingers and thumb. His turn was up at the *pieste*. He reached down into his equipment bag and touched the small black leather-bound Bible for good luck.

Upon hearing the shout of *touché* to his left, he paused and turned to investigate. The claim of victory was not one of polite triumph. As he looked he saw a boisterous young man in his late twenties with cropped blonde hair and acne-marred face. After berating the judges on their call, he pulled down his mask and continued the play. Bystanders around him watched, quietly betting money on the match.

Garth studied his moves; he was agile and assertive in approach. His attacks were unrelenting and lightening fast, at times catching his opponent off balance, and his defensive parries staid and confident. With more practice he could have been a contender to his own title. Within seconds his foil had found its mark. He shouted jubilantly, flinging his mask in the air carelessly, nearly hitting a bystander. The bout was his!

After the match there was a brief handshake, but the young man appeared unaware that he was still wearing his gauntlet. Hanson wandered over to him to be greeted by a smile of recognition. The man extended his gloved hand in friendship. Eyeing him curiously, Garth didn't offer his hand in return. The fellow looked confused for a moment and tried to retain a cheerful demeanour.

‘Hanson, isn’t it? Foil, first division last year?’ he said in a loud voice as portentous as his attitude.

‘Do I know you; you the guy who left the message?’

‘I’ve heard a lot about you. The name’s Andersen – Richard W. Andersen
II. Care to go a quick *bout*?’

‘Why not.’

‘Let’s say for a hundred bucks to make it interesting?’ Andersen suggested.

‘Why not five? to make it really interesting.’

Andersen shook his head with a smirk, nodded and then extended his gloved hand to seal the bargain. ‘You’re on. It’s a good day to fucking die, isn’t it? Maybe you can teach me something, hotshot.’

Garth glanced down at Andersen’s gloved hand. ‘Well, the first thing I can teach you, Rick, is that you never shake with your glove on. It’s an insult to your opponent, but you should know that already.’

Andersen glared back indignantly but removed his glove. ‘Okay, we going to fence or fucking play etiquette games? You on for the five or what?’ he extended his bare hand, but Garth’s attention turned to a small group of onlookers, who began laying down new bets on them. They knew it was going to be a spirited match and Garth usually came out on top. Gambling had slowly become an integral part of the salon and as many times as the judges had ruled against it, no one seemed to pay attention.

‘Well, are you going to shake?’ Andersen said with his hand extended.

Garth smiled, pulled on his mask and stepped onto the 10 meter length of playing strip. ‘Let’s go, hotshot.’ He saluted the judges and then Andersen.

Garth studied his adversary momentarily; he had the look of a young urban professional that coined a new word in the dictionary – hair neatly styled, fingers manicured, body toned and trim. Garth outweighed him by maybe 30 pounds, but Andersen’s menacing, irresolute energy made up for it.

Andersen stepped onto the *pieste* fencing strip, pulled his visor down, raised his foil in salute and then crouched into *en-garde* position. The two

judges looked at one another overseeing the match, the abiding judge nodded and their blades touched. The play was in motion.

Andersen's initial attack was fierce but somewhat predictable. Garth parried several feeble lunges, eyes like lasers on the blade's chromium bell-cup. He knew the bell-cup post indicated the blade's direction and he knew how to read his opponent's body language signalling incoming *reposts*. In no time at all, Garth had scored first point. Andersen scored second point and more points were scored in similar fashion until they were tied, four points each.

On the fifth and last point, Garth switched stance, parrying calmly and defensively, making no visible attempt to strike. He wanted to draw him in, watch Andersen sweat for a while and then take him out in two swift moves – fifth position parry, followed by straight-on lunge for the final hit. With teeth clenched, Andersen's breathing laboured, renewing attacks, unmanaged aggression had gotten the better of him, throwing him off balance.

The last play lasted maybe six to seven minutes, until Andersen charged in, ramming the blade point hard into Garth's wire-mesh face mask and nearly missing his eye by an inch. The presiding judge immediately halted the match. 'Fault! No score.'

Andersen snickered with delight at the blade sticking through Garth's mask. The spectators looked on gravely concerned.

Garth gave Andersen a hard stare as he pulled the blade from his mask. 'Time to teach this asshole a lesson,' he muttered. From the corner of his eye he noticed the crowd had grown around him and in the bleachers there was a woman with two whining kids. Screaming kids had no place in a fencing salon, but he was too occupied with what he was doing to care.

The presiding judge signalled for the bout to continue and both fencers took up positions again, facing one another with blade-tips crossed. The judge tapped his foil blade to theirs and the play was swiftly in motion again.

Garth instinctively switched to offence, parrying Andersen's blade away, looking for an opening. Andersen thrust forwards into a straightforward lunge but missed his mark. Garth moved back, drawing him in until Andersen found

himself at the end of the mat with nowhere to go. He was sure he had him now and was about to strike when his eyes blurred and the brat in the bleachers screamed loudly, diverting his attention. Andersen seized on the opportunity and without warning, jumped up unexpectedly, spun in the air, turning in a 180-degree twist, raising his foil over Garth's back and ran the blade down to his exposed shoulder, scoring the final point.

'Five and bout!' cried the judge, halting the match.

A murmur of displeasure rose up from the crowd. They had expected Garth to win.

Hanson pulled back his mask and dropped his foil to the floor, disappointed. He took a deep breath and tried to regain his composure.

Andersen pulled off his glove and walked mid-strip towards him laughing. 'How'd you like that one, hotshot?' he said, savouring his win.

'That was a 180-preen manoeuvre,' Garth said, shaking his head. 'I haven't seen that one played in years.' He tried to remain upbeat despite the loss and the gloomy mood of the crowd.

Andersen held his palm out for the five hundred dollars owed him.

'Ah, look, I'm a little short,' Garth fumbled. 'Guess I'm down five for now. We'll have to settle up later.'

'Later?' Andersen questioned. 'There *is* no later.'

'Is this why you called me and left the message for me to meet you here, so you could fucking set me up?'

Andersen's face twisted into a sneer, 'You don't have the money? Maybe we can settle it another way ...'

Rick reached down into his duffel bag and produced a fat, rolled wad of about five thousand in hundred-dollar bills. He removed the rubber band and opened the roll. A hush fell over everyone, impressed by the sight of all the cash.

Andersen calmly peeled off a hundred and tucked it into Garth's lapel, 'I'm not here to take your money. I'm here to make you an offer. But we can talk

about that later.' Then he peeled off two more hundreds, one for each of the judges. 'Here, go buy some glasses, grandpa.'

The elderly judge's face was impassive as he took the money and stuffed it in his pocket.

'You talk to people like they're dirt,' Garth said.

'Ah, most people will do anything for a buck.' Rick calmly put the rubber band back around the bills and stuffed it in his brown leather duffel bag.

'You know, you could get hurt carrying that kind of cash around.'

Andersen looked up at him dismissing the notion. He quickly flashed a small silver pistol in his fencing bag. 'I'm not worried about it. Hey, what say we go have a drink somewhere?'

The sight of all the money had aroused Garth's curiosity. Sure, Andersen was a creep, but the guy obviously had a lot of money. Whatever the case, he'd play it out and see where the money trail led.

'Okay, let's have a drink,' Garth said, patting Andersen on the back amicably. 'Why not, since you're paying.'

Andersen chuckled and they packed their gear to leave.

Outside, the sky was dark and overcast and there was a light drizzle. They walked down the short flight of steps fronting the gymnasium carrying shoulder-strap duffel bags. The concrete pavement was wet as a bellows fog rolled in from the bay bringing in a fresh scent of cool sea breeze.

Garth was casually dressed, wearing a tan leather jacket and a pair of well-worn Levi's, faded in color, while Andersen was more conspicuous in a pressed beige silk shirt and brown aviator jacket with tan Armani tweed wool slacks. He looked sleek and stylish, yet his acne pockmarked face betrayed the illusion of sophistication.

Garth prodded the key into the lock of his 2006 steel blue Ford Mustang Shelby. The old Shelby *GT500* with its powerful Cobra 500 horse engine seemed less desirable in lieu of its impending repossession and every time he got into it he found himself glancing over his shoulder for the repo-man.

‘I was thinking about Vanessi’s on Broadway,’ Garth suggested. ‘They have a great view and the Linguine Alfredo is out of this world.’

‘Got a better idea,’ said Andersen. ‘I heard you’ve got a nice little gallery at your place in Sausalito. I’m looking for some pieces. Why don’t we pick up some booze and head up for a look?’

‘You’re on,’ Garth said as he slid behind the wheel, considering for a split second the possibility of Andersen being a homosexual. But what the hell, why not have a friendly drink? Maybe he’d end up buying a painting or two. He figured he could always get rid of him if things turned strange.

Garth snapped his seat belt in as Andersen climbed into the passenger side. The Shelby pulled away spinning rubber and flinging loose gravel in its wake. Moving into third gear in the traffic, he flicked on the wiper switch against the rain coming down.

‘You’re not from around here, are you, Richard? The accent tells me Boston.’

Andersen looked at him sideways. ‘Oh, you’re good,’ he grinned. ‘Now I bet you’re going to tell me my age, weight and height next. Hey, call me Rick, would you, Richard’s too formal between guys like us. You know, I have this feeling we’re gonna be good pals.’

Garth had to think that one over. Who was this guy already planning their lives together? He let it go. ‘So, what brings you to the Bay Area, Rick?’

‘Antiquities.’

‘Sounds interesting.’ If he was playing games, Garth was well aware of the subtleties of casual questions thrown out with feigned indifference. ‘Good money in antiquities, I suppose?’

‘Hah!’ he chirped enigmatically, rubbing his nose but saying nothing.

The Shelby merged into the long line of tail lights trailing the huge expanse of Golden Gate Bridge as more rain pelted down, brought in by the warm stream of air rising up from the bay. The wipers moved in hypnotic rhythm as Garth glanced over at Andersen sitting sphinx-like beside him, staring blankly out at the shimmering city lights twinkling in the distance.

No man's life is perfect, he thought to himself. He would play this game to get some money out of Andersen and then get rid of him later. He switched on the radio to break the silence, tuning into the silky sounds of George Benson on guitar. Jazz always lightened his spirits.

Then Andersen snapped out of his repose like some kind of electrical device plugged back in. 'Yes, antiquities. That's where the real money is,' he said. 'Untapped fortunes ... classical pieces are what everybody's after. Better than gold or silver 'cause they fluctuate too much. Antiquities only go up in value.'

As he said it, rain pelted down heavily on the car's roof. It was like a bad omen, because Garth knew Rick was leading up to something – something big and possibly illegal. As he increased the wiper speed, the metronome beat seemed to mimic the pounding of his heart.

'I suppose you're talking serious money ...'

Rick gave him a long look, 'You couldn't imagine. I'm talking into the millions ...'

'Guess I'm not in that league,' Garth said, swerving to avoid the spray from an oil tanker hogging the middle of the road.

'Never know – still, plenty of good pieces to be found in Italy and Greece, especially Greece.' He looked at him as if he knew about his past travels there. Whatever Rick was selling or hiding, he obviously wasn't about to spell it out.

'Antiquities are protected by governments these days,' Garth said, trying to draw him out.

'Governments?' Rick rebuked. 'Christ, no need to cut them in, too much bribery and red tape.'

They passed the end of the bridge and pulled off down the Sausalito exit.

'Risky, isn't it?' Garth was trying to get a fix on him, beginning to wonder if making a buck off of this clown was going to be worth the trouble.

'There's a degree of risk in everything we do in life.' Rick said.

'They have some tough laws in Greece. Hell, you can get a year in jail for smoking a joint.'

‘Let’s just say we have a way of doing things that makes it easy. Besides, there are plenty of pieces out there most governments aren’t aware of yet.’ He allowed his sentence to trail off as he drove down the windy hillside towards the flickering lights of Sausalito. The scenic little town was an amiable suburb of affluence with quaint stilt-houses nestled into the lush green hillside.

Just then, Garth noticed a black van that had been trailing them since leaving the Golden Gate Bridge.

He looked in his rear-view mirror. ‘Don’t look now, but someone’s following us.’

Andersen glanced in the rear-view mirror.

‘Friends of yours?’ asked Garth.

‘No, they’re not,’ Andersen replied, looking slightly concerned.

‘Okay, what’s the bullshit? What have you gotten us into?’

‘Nothing, they won’t bother us, yet.’

‘Yet? The guy’s on my ass. What’s he want?’

‘Don’t worry about it. Just pull into the Seven-Eleven over there. Let me get some Scotch.’

The van followed them as the Shelby pulled into the 7-Eleven minimart. Rick went inside, returning moments later with two bottles of Chivas Regal. Garth kept an eye on the black van across the street with tinted windows.

‘Who the hell are those guys sitting over there and what are they up to?’ Garth pressed.

‘Believe me, you don’t want to know. They’re out of your league. In the business I’m in we have some very strange bed partners. At the next stop light, pull off to the right and lose them.’

Garth drove off and followed his instructions. He waited at the next red light until he saw the van creeping up slowly behind them. Then, before the light turned green, he put his pedal to the metal and screeched away in a cloud of burning rubber and smoke. The powerful Shelby growled out a roar as the 428 engine opened flat out, tearing up the tarmac.

A few blocks away he looked back again, but the van was still on their tail moving up fast. Rick held onto the dashboard as Garth careened around another corner down a steep hill flying airborne at times, the van still in hot pursuit.

A huge grey garbage truck pulled ahead blocking the street. Garth slowed for the truck, but as he did, the black van slammed up against the Shelby's side, knocking off the side-view mirror. Garth cursed to himself, becoming alarmed as the van backed up and slammed into the side again. The driver's dark tinted window rolled slowly down and Garth was thinking about getting out and running away, when Rick glared up at the man in the driver's seat, whipped out his silver pistol and fired three shots at the window, shattering it. The man ducked back in and van pulled away quickly, vanishing up another side street.

'What the fuck!' Garth protested, slamming his fist on the steering wheel. 'You'd better tell me who those maniacs are trying to hurt or ... get out of my car!'

'Hey, I'm the one with the gun, remember? I'm not going anywhere, now shut up and drive. They won't bother us any more,' Rick said, slipping his gun back inside his coat.

Though a little shaken, ten minutes later they pulled into the safety of Garth's blue and white Victorian house. He tripped the sensor on the visor, illuminating the facade. It was a stately, elegant, two-story house with bay windows at the corners facing out to the sea, with a row of Californian tall palms lining the curve of the long cobblestone driveway.

Garth got out of the Shelby and was aghast when he saw the damage the van had caused to the right side of his beloved machine. 'Christ, look what they've done. It's going to cost me at least two thousand to fix this.'

'Stop crying,' Rick assured. 'If we agree on this art deal, you're going be able to buy two more new Shelbys.'

'Yeah, well what about buying my life back if they put a bullet in me?' The whole damn situation was beginning to make his skin crawl.

‘Nice crib,’ Rick praised, changing the subject, ‘an old turn of the century. No doubt an indication of your wealth and fame?’

‘Yeah, right, if I can hold onto it,’ Garth pushed the remote to open the garage door.

‘Ah yes, your financial predicament ...’

Garth turned to him, ‘Yeah, what about it?’

‘Well, everybody knows you’re broke. It’s a standing joke around town.’

‘Fuck them and you.’

‘Oh, don’t be so touchy. Let’s have our drink. I want to see your work and then I’ll leave.’

Inserting the key into a side door, Garth de-programmed the alarm system and walked into the spacious living room. Rick gazed up at the strip of track lighting covering the ceiling. The decor was tasteful, warm and welcoming, despite its stark white walls. Sectional couches were placed around ornate brass and glass-topped tables and the floors were inlaid with intricate parquet of walnut and oak. A variety of flourishing tropical plants in oversized terracotta pots graced the foyer.

‘Not bad,’ Rick commented, looking around, ‘a man of wealth and taste.’

‘You can forget about the wealth. Let me get some glasses from the kitchen. Be right back.’

Through an open rococo arch, the kitchen stood in darkness. Garth walked to the fridge, flicking on the light switch with his elbow. Looking back, he noticed Andersen running his fingers over his open laptop computer sitting on the antique roll-top desk. Next to him was the Adamesque alabaster fireplace. Rick pressed his foot on the brass lever, discovering it ignited an instant gas fire, producing a warm glow over the dimly lit room. To his left were the two oversized bay windows facing out to the San Francisco Bay. He moved to the large brass telescope perched on a tripod and peered out as Garth returned with two heavy-bottomed crystal glasses of Scotch.

‘Won’t see much tonight, I’m afraid,’ Garth said as he handed Rick a drink.

‘I’m not here for the view.’

Garth took a sip of Scotch, 'Then what *are* you here for?' He'd grown tired of all the bullshit and decided to cut to the chase.

'Let's see the paintings,' Rick said.

Garth nodded and led him to the arched doorway dimly lit by the intruding light of the living room. Dwindling twilight filtered through the ceiling's perspex skylight. The paintings on the walls appeared like dark masses, uniform shadows of muted rectangles differing in height and width. With a twist of the switch, Garth floodlit the room.

'Ahh ...' Rick swooned. His gasp was gratifying. There were El Grecos, Titians, Frans Hals, as well as moderns like Chagall, Soutine, Matisse and Dali.

'Your private collection?' inquired Rick.

'You could say that.'

He hesitated, 'With all this around you shouldn't have any money problems. I see a fortune here.'

Garth smiled, knowing somehow Andersen wasn't really taken in. He looked at Garth curiously with an arched eyebrow, as if waiting for an explanation.

'I painted them as studies.'

'Just what they told me.' Rick beamed, shaking his head in amazement, his eyes searching each inch of the heavy gilt-framed canvases.

'Who are "they"?''

'Let's just say, they're *not* fans of yours.' He took out a long, thin Panamanian cigar, bit the tip and lit it, casually dropping the match into an ashtray on a nearby end table.

'So this is why you called for a meeting on my answering machine. It was your voice. What's the jig?'

Rick answered with a shrug. A devious smirk crossed his mouth, eyes staring intently at him. He puffed on his cigar and punched Garth lightly on the shoulder 'Hey, relax, man. I'm gonna make you an offer now and you can take it or leave it. But I think you'll take it, since you're in big shit.'

‘I’m listening,’ said Garth, downing his Scotch. Sure, they were fakes, but they were damn good ones. He moved to the bar in the living room to replenish their drinks.

Rick followed and eased himself down into one of the big leather overstuffed chairs near the fireplace. ‘Sit down, Garth. I’m gonna lay it out for you.’

Garth handed him a new drink and took a seat across from him.

‘Let me tell you a little story,’ Rick began, leaning in conspiratorially. The flames from the hearth-side cast eerie shadows across his craggy face. The fiery streaks of red and yellow altered his features, giving him a sinister almost demonic appearance. ‘I deal in extremely rare and valuable items,’ he confided, taking a sip of Scotch. He spoke slowly and deliberately, self-assured. ‘Do you realize how many museums in the world today have fakes hanging on their walls?’

‘Sure. Even the experts have trouble carbon dating. So that’s what you’re up to.’ Garth rose from his seat, uneasy. ‘Well, you got the wrong guy.’

‘Wait a minute for fuck’s sake! Sit down. I haven’t gotten to the good part yet.’

Despite all his misgivings, Garth was curious and wanted to hear him out. He settled back down to hear the rest.

‘I’m talking seventy-five thousand bucks here, pal!’ he said in a cool, calculated tone. ‘Plus a nice free vacation to Greece, which I’m told you already know quite well. Bet you can’t afford to go this year with all those creditors crawling up your ass, can you?’

‘Seventy-five thousand bucks – for what – Is this some kind of joke?’ The thought of seventy-five thousand had struck a jolt to his solar plexus and Rick had his full attention now.

‘Oh, I can assure you it’s no joke,’ he continued, puffing on the cigar. ‘Mykonos ...’ he paused. ‘You used to spend your summers there. Still own a small studio there. Am I right? And Tinos Island, you know it, too?’

‘Sure, right next to Mykonos. But you already know that, don’t you.’

‘Do you know anything about the Church of the Virgin? What the Greeks lovingly call the Panagia Evangelistria?’

‘Yes, I know it; what about it?’

‘The Ikon of Tinotissa? The so-called Ikon of Miracles.’

Garth took a deep breath and rubbed his chin, his mind racing ahead. ‘You’ve got to be kidding! That piece is a national treasure. Hell, the jewels alone are worth millions, not to mention the gold framework.’

Rick measured his words, ‘That’s right – one of the most priceless Ikons from Byzantium.’

Garth downed his drink, ‘You’re whacked, man. I don’t want anything to do with this. Do you know what kind of security that thing has around it?’

‘That’s our problem, none of your concern. Uh oh, don’t tell me it’s your religious past that’s bothering you, is it?’

Garth remembered back to when he was an altar boy in church, but he was somewhat surprised that Andersen knew about it. ‘No, it’s not that. It’s just that I’ve heard weird tales. People claim it has some sort of magical energy surrounding it.’

‘Don’t tell me you believe that crap?’

‘All I know is six scientists came to study it and five of them later died very soon afterwards.’

Garth didn’t know what else Andersen knew about the Ikon – its priceless value – or even if he cared about its history. Not that he was overly superstitious, but he’d developed a healthy respect for native cultures and folklore in his travels through the Far East.

He knew the Ikon of the Virgin was discovered in 1823, when a 72- year-old nun had a vision about its location on Tinos. The islanders first balked at the idea of trying to dig for it, but the nun claimed tragedy would befall the island if they didn’t find it. Needless to say, they found it alright and the Ikon has been revered by all Greeks ever since. During the struggle for independence with the Turks, it was commonly believed the Ikon of the Virgin had a hand in the Greek victory. It held spiritual and political significance for

the faithful from that point on and any attempt to mess with it brought bad luck.

‘Like I said, Rick, those scientists’ deaths were mysterious.’

‘Yeah, right, like King Tut, huh?’ he laughed. ‘Hey, come on, I’m not asking you to steal the damn thing, I’m only asking you to go to Tinos and make me a copy.’

‘Yeah. What makes you think I’ll do this copy?’

Rick moved back comfortably in his seat and stubbed out his cigar. A wide Cheshire-cat grin came over his face. ‘You’ll do it because I’m the proud owner of some Chagall watercolors you sold to Kearney One Galleries last year. Dan Burke, the director, happens to be an old friend; he told me all about you. Lucky for you, he told me about them before he went to the cops.’

‘I see. What else do you know?’ Garth was feeling the heat, but was damned if he’d let Rick know.

Rick pulled out a little black book from his pocket and began to read: ‘You were going to become a priest, but your father died, so you dropped out because you decided “your calling” was to the arts. You went to USC School of Art & Design and then attended the Sorbonne in Paris. On your return you became a well-known local minimalist painter in California. You sold well for a while and began living the good life with fast cars, limos and beautiful women. Then you became co-owner of one of the most hip art galleries in Sausalito. That is, of course, until your partner got busted trying to bring in 40 tons of marijuana on a freighter into Seattle Harbor four years ago. I believe he got five years for that, am I right? And you’re going blind.’ He paused to let it sink in. ‘Have I left anything out?’

Garth protested, standing up on his feet. ‘I’m not going blind! And I didn’t know anything about that bust; I only heard about it in the newspapers.’

‘But you were a bad boy, Garth. In order to keep up with your high style of living, it seems you got a little desperate. So you sold art works of the great masters as originals.’ He looked him squarely in the eye, like an animal of prey eyeing a meal.

Garth glared back. 'Okay, what are you getting at?'

'Well, it's real simple, friend. You do what we want or we have you arrested for art fraud. By the way, whiskey's pretty good. I'll have another.'

'Mother fucker!' Garth shouted, smashing his glass on the floor. He picked up the fire poker and pointed it in Andersen's face. 'You're blackmailing me!'

Rick calmly pulled out his small silver pistol from his pocket and stuck it in Garth's face. 'I have the gun, remember? Yes, I'm a mother fucker, but at least I'm a rich mother fucker who's offering you seventy-five thousand to do a simple job. Now, put the poker down.'

After a pause, Garth begrudgingly threw it beside the fireplace. Rick put the gun back in his coat pocket.

'You expect me to trust you?' Garth said, pacing the room nervously. 'How do I know you're not going to fuck me again later? Blackmail me again or something worse.'

'I knew you'd ask that. So I bought all your Chagalls from my friend. Of course, they are to be turned over to you upon completion of your work.'

'How do I know you'll return them?'

'I knew you'd ask that, too,' he said smugly, pulling out a slip of paper from his coat pocket. 'They're being held in trust at Wells Fargo Bank on Market Street, with instructions for you to pick them up.' He handed over a copy of the original agreement. 'Trick is, neither one of us can pick them up without the other being present. If I die tomorrow, they're yours by default. But I don't plan on dying soon, so ...'

The papers looked legitimate, but Garth had other thoughts on his mind. Rick was probably capable of worse than blackmail, maybe even murder if it came down to it. And who the hell were those other criminals in the black van?

'Come on, Garth, what is it?' Rick urged. 'What dark thoughts are running through that paranoid mind of yours?'

Garth knew he was trapped and his muscles tensed. 'How do I know you won't have me murdered after I do this copy for you?'

Rick let out a chuckle as he stood up. 'My, my, you're suspicious for a petty crook. Look, all we want is the Ikon, not your ass. You'll have to trust me on that. Anyway, the way I see it, you have no alternative. If I pick up the phone, you'll be taking up new residence at San Quentin. These days, I figure you might get two to three years for art fraud.'

'Okay, I'll think about it.' He paused. The futility of the situation had finally sunk in, but he wasn't about to go down easy. 'Make it an even hundred thou and we got a deal.'

Rick saw the resolute look in his eyes and nodded. He flipped out his check book and started writing. 'This will get you started with plane tickets and living expenses, more later as you progress.' He tore off the check and handed it over without blinking an eye.

'Thirty thousand dollars,' Garth said, holding the check. At least it would satisfy some of his creditors for a while.

Rick shook his head. 'And you see ... you made it so goddamned hard on us. Okay, I'm outta here. I think we understand each other, yes? Follow our instructions and deliver the Ikon copy in two weeks or we come looking for your sorry ass, and maybe break a couple a legs for starters. Then, well ...'

Garth watched him move to the front door. 'You want me to call you a cab?'

Rick handed him his whiskey glass, 'Cab? I don't do cabs. I had my bodyguard follow us just in case something went stupid.' He opened the door. 'We'll be in touch,' he winked and proceeded down the steps.

Garth went to the window after and caught sight of a dark green Jaguar sedan pulling out from the driveway. As it disappeared out onto the road he couldn't help but wonder what he'd gotten himself into.

Deep in thought, he opened the window and looked up at the pristine night sky. The fresh air lifted his spirits, the night had cleared and a pale yellow moon was peeking through passing clouds. A cool, damp breeze blew up gently from the bay, bringing the acrid scent of kelp and salt water.

He wanted to take off and run away, but knew there was no place to hide. Rick Andersen had the goods on him and could ruin his life. He poured himself another drink and flopped down exhausted on the couch by the fireside watching the dancing flames.

The situation reminded him of what his old Indian mentor Dr Shrini Raman used to say: that life was a dance. One had to have faith and recognize the rhythm of the dance, because beat and instinct were the fundamental driving force that moved the dancer. And if his life was to be played out in a subtle dance of wits with Andersen, gut instinct told him to tune in and listen, because he was getting caught up in a dangerous conspiracy.

In Greece, faith was the life blood that held tradition and culture together, steeped in Orthodox doctrine. Countless millions of devoted Greeks had faith in the Ikon of Tinos and the island itself subsisted on that bedrock faith. But while they believed in the power of the Ikon, Garth believed in himself. He knew he had the power to control his own destiny, not a religious Ikon or Rick Andersen.

He sipped his Scotch, considering if he really believed in the mysterious tales of the Ikon and in its power over good and evil. What were the chances that he, too, might become an item in a newspaper, a statistic of the malediction that came to all those souls who dared tamper with it?

A clear vision of the Ikon came to his mind, not the copy he was supposed to make from the Church of the Virgin, but the original. He envisioned its glass cover, ornate frame and the extraordinary pearls and diamonds that surrounded it. He remembered that upon entering the church, one took a few steps to the left to view it. Could he actually reproduce this incredibly detailed piece? Precious stones covered most of the Ikon's surface, so that only the tiny head of the Virgin Mary was visible. Alongside her was the small head of the Archangel Gabriel, known as the harbinger of good news. He smiled at the irony of it.

Half dozing, he dreamed of six Templar Knights dressed in white tunics with red crosses on horseback charging into a mosque-temple in Jerusalem,

swords drawn, cutting down Muslims in their path. Blood spatters against the walls as the lead Templar, in his forties with long white beard gets off his gallant steed, searching for something. He finds a crypt and sarcophagus. He orders his men to move the cover slab aside, looks inside and pulls out an ancient scroll. He unrolls the parchment, shaking his head in disbelief, bewildered at his find.

Garth snapped out of his semi-dream state. The moon was bright in the sky and looking at it made him think of the Greek island again and those warm, balmy summer nights. Finishing his drink, he got up and went into the bedroom. Somehow he felt exonerated. After all, he said that he only wanted him to make a reproduction of the Ikon, not steal the damn thing. He had no choice but to go through with it.

But he was getting into much more than he bargained for; this was a twisted, acrimonious tale that would change his life forever and perhaps leave other lives shattered in its wake.

In a grim, indistinct underground chamber, three masked, hooded figures solemnly took their seats in a circle under dim candlelight. Their sullen faces partially hidden in shadows, they came together silently on an urgent matter of great import. In the dungeon-like vault, they faced one another. A couple of the emissaries wore longish grey beards, the other had on a stovepipe hat, while the third in his late seventies looked Caucasian and haggard in appearance and wore a black hooded robe and a loosely fitted red skullcap.

The ecclesiastic envoys faced one another as the senior figure with the skullcap adjusted his hood and nodded in acknowledgement to them. The other two nodded back in reverence as he spoke in a low, monotone, controlled voice revealing a thick Germanic accent.

‘They know of the Ikon?’

‘Yes, Your Grace,’ the second man replied in a broken, Middle Eastern accent. ‘We must not wait.’

The third figure crossed him self in Orthodox style.

‘May God have mercy on his soul.’

Chapter Two

IN THE EARLY LIGHT OF MORNING, as the plane sailed smoothly over Mykonos, the village below looked as pure and quiet as a cloister. Sparkling white cube-houses and little red-and-blue church domes were strung out along the rocky shoreline. Garth could see gentle waves lapping against the rocks, a picture-perfect, idyllic setting that brought hordes of tourists every summer.

Some came for the sandy beaches and the clear blue sea, hoping to find peace in days of lethargy in the sun. Others, perhaps the majority, had read or heard about the wanton pleasures of the island. Hidden among the twisted maze of streets and alleys were the bars, noisy discos and cabarets that make Mykonos one of the wildest, hedonistic party scenes in the Aegean. They call Mykonos *Aspero Tinesia* – the island of white – not only because of its white houses and architecture, but because of the mountains of cocaine, heroin, Ecstasy, LSD and other drugs that are sold and consumed daily. Back in the 60s it was an unobtrusive, sleepy little sea village, that is, until Jackie and Aristotle Onassis arrived on their fancy yacht the *Christina*. Then, after visits from a few more Hollywood stars like Sophia Loren, Lawrence Harvey and others, this quaint little island in the middle of the Aegean Sea became famous, or perhaps infamous, as a “happening” place for the jet-set and the flamboyant gay crowd. Mykonos suddenly became a red-hot holiday playground known to straights and jaded party-goers alike from every corner of the globe.

The early morning sun was already burning hot on the black tarmac runway as Garth disembarked from the small, crowded twelve-seat prop. The terminal was small, but even at this hour the crowds of travellers demonstrated the busy island scene.

An aloof young customs officer, who seemed disinterested in his job, went briefly through his luggage and waved him through. Garth was behind a young American couple, whose accent betrayed their southern origins. The young woman chatted continuously, her words coming out in a honeyed drawl. He

listened in quiet amusement as she asked a nearby Greek if he knew a certain hotel, peppering her inquiry with a clear “y’all”.

Outside, the light was pure bright as Garth remembered it, for this was the famous Greek light, written and talked about for centuries. Referred to as “humanising”, many artists had tried to capture its peculiar transparent quality. It was said that if you lived long enough in the light of Greece, it made you a better human being, more focused on balancing the tensions of human relationships than giving in to neurotic impulses. Garth certainly liked the Greeks’ approach to life: wine, music and dancing, with everyone playing out the Dionysian side of their personalities. They had a common mantra used by most Greeks, which summed up Greek life in general – “*oxi problema*”, which simply meant, “no problem”.

An unruly throng of heated tourists pushed and shoved in a long queue for non-existent taxis. As a regular to the island Garth knew exactly what to do – bypass the crowd and hail an incoming taxi further down the road. A pleasant, elderly little taxi driver saw his raised hand and stopped. Taking his bags, he heaped them into the broken trunk, wired together with pieces of old phone cord.

Welcome to Greece, he thought. Things might be broken, but somehow they still managed to work!

Driving down the narrow, winding road south towards Mykonos town, he couldn’t help but wonder how much he could trust Andersen, questioning the mess he had gotten himself into. Sure, it was nice to be in Mykonos again, but he had an uneasy feeling about this trip – bad karma. He lit a cigarette and sat back to ease his nerves.

The barren stretches of harsh rocky countryside only added to his gloom. Turning a corner on the outskirts of a small village, he noticed a number of people dressed in black, milling about a horse-drawn cart.

‘What’s that all about? *Ti egine?*’ he asked the old driver, trying out his Greek.

‘*Pethani* ... Man die,’ he answered nonchalantly, pointing up to the sky. Garth touched the cross on his neck and then reached into his jacket, took a hit on the cognac flask and sank back into his seat feeling more anxious than before.

Arriving at *Platia Milon*, he took his bag and hoofed it down to the small apartment he owned in Little Venice. It was the area where buildings were constructed on stilts at the water’s edge, with colorful balconies overhanging the sea. The area was one of the popular scenic attractions in Mykonos, with houses painted in various rich colors of red, blue and green and originally built during the sixteenth and seventeenth century when pirating was a threat. The area was said to be used for quick loading and unloading of goods in those perilous times, but now it was full of snug little seaside tavernas and upscale bars.

On his way up the stairs to his apartment, Garth stopped to pet a neighbour’s cat. When he last saw it two years ago it was only a small kitten. Unlocking the door, he walked into his studio and found it damp and stuffy after being closed up for twenty months. He went to the windows and threw open the shutters to freshen the air.

He bought the place six and a half years ago when prices were still low in Greece, before the over-inflated euro came into being. The place was furnished with a small couch, two choice Tiffany lamps, a bamboo table and chairs and an atelier easel set up in a corner surrounded by rolls of canvas and stretcher bars. About 75 square meters in all, the windows fronted the sea and there was a small bathroom with shower and kitchenette.

A couple of years ago, the island’s realtors told him the place might be worth some real money one day. With all the debt he had mounting in Sausalito, he’d thought about selling it, but he was determined to hold onto the things he cherished and worked hard for. Of course, he’d also paid his cleaning lady to look after it while he was away, but obviously she hadn’t been doing her job for quite some time.

As he began to unpack his bags, he glanced up at some photos he'd tacked to the worn cork bulletin board near his painting easel. All his art supplies were right where he'd left them; various tubes of oil paints laid out on the workbench in neat little rows, sable hair brushes standing upright in a glass jar.

Garth set up his easel, put up a tack board with some paper and began to make some charcoal sketches of the Ikon from a tourist book on Tinos and from his own memory from seeing it before. After spending twenty tedious minutes drawing, he threw the charcoal down feeling despondent. It would never work this way, he had to have more reference material for realistic approach and comparison.

He glanced over at his bulletin board and pulled off a snapshot of his old friends on Mykonos. There was Eugene the crazy Irishman, Dimitri the Greek fisherman standing proudly next to his old, weathered fishing caique, Ian Hall the writer and news journalist and, of course, "Petros" the island's famous pink pelican. He wondered how his old pals were doing. He tacked the photos back up on the bulletin board and continued unpacking.

Leaving his studio, Garth hopped in another taxi and sped off to Paradise Beach. As they rounded a ridge, a sweeping view of white sandy beaches was visible, backdropped by a splendid luminescent turquoise blue sea that stretched before them. But his mind was elsewhere as he stared blankly at the wrinkles on the back of the taxi driver's sunburned neck. He'd fallen into a slump and knew he had to pull himself out of it. After all, here he was in the sunny Greek islands again. What more could anyone want?

The road leading down to Paradise Beach was rough and winding, with lots of loose pebble and rocks that made it perilous for night driving. A large brown dust cloud trailed the creaky old beaten grey taxi as it descended the barren mountainside.

Paradise Beach was hot in more ways than one – a 600 meter stretch of sparkling white sand, half packed with nude and semi-nude sunbathers, and nearby stood two wood and bamboo makeshift tavernas and a very, very busy disco bar. Paradise was the secluded haunt of the upwardly mobile hip set; they

were heterosexuals for the most part, but there were no specified rules for behaviour. Down the road a little, at Super Paradise, things were a bit different, for this was the gaping sanctuary of the feral gay crowd, where one might stumble upon anything going on, from making out to explicit oral. On Mykonos, the unwritten law was “live and let live” and it was the attitude absorbed by locals and tourists alike.

Freddy, the wiry grey-bearded proprietor of the taverna, rushed out to greet Garth as the taxi pulled through his wrought iron gates. Lecherous old Freddy rented rooms and tents at his campsite and in his leisure time, he spied on young tourist girls naked in the showers through his secret peephole every chance he got. Childlike and sprightly for a man of sixty-nine, he’d turned this once desolate beach into one of the world’s most popular beach attractions on the planet.

Smiling ear to ear, Freddy threw his scrawny arms around Garth after he climbed out of the taxi.

‘Garthy, good to see you again,’ he said, hugging and kissing him affectionately on both cheeks.

‘Hey, wait a minute, Freddy boy. You save that stuff for your friends over at Super,’ Garth joked.

‘Awh, you always big kidder,’ he chirped, hugging him once more.

‘So, where’s the crazy Irishman?’ Garth inquired.

Freddy’s face dropped deadpan, ‘That *malaka*! He owe me money again!’ he said, grudgingly pointing down the beach, where raucous laughter came from a boisterous group of revellers dancing in front of a bamboo beach bar near the shore.

Nothing had changed much on the islands. His old chum Eugene was in the distance holding one of his infamous “office parties”. The parties were simply an excuse for thinking up new scams for making money and were used mostly for gathering up women for his booze-cruises. However unsuccessful their plans were for making money, there was plenty of compensation with all the loose ladies sprawled out nude across the hot sandy beach.

As Garth soon learned, today's "business at hand" was drumming up new customers for Eugene's infamous all-day booze-cruises, which Garth had in past years worked on with Eugene and his Greek partner Dimitri. Dimitri was a stout, hard-working, trustworthy fellow who owned the large-hulled fisherman's caique they used.

The caique was their life's blood and when they weren't too drunk, they somehow managed to run a reasonable all-day drinking boating party. These unique cruises were created to provide a break from the norm and included a day's sailing off the coast, with barbecue and picnicking on one of the island's more remote beaches. The price of the cruise was only fifty euros per head and included your basic chicken lunch with roast potatoes, *horiatiki* Greek salad and all the ouzo and wine you could drink. Eugene usually made a tidy profit from these little excursions at the expense of customers who went home basically with empty wallets and terrible hangovers.

Eugene was a gusty, energetic Irishman, a few years older than Garth, but with his crisp red hair, freckled nose and bright blue eyes, he appeared younger. He was a man who seemed to have life by the tail and managed to stride through its difficult moments with casual ease, never losing his balance or his sense of humour. He had a slight leprechaun quality about him and there was a fresh sort of candidness in the way he smiled. You could call him a hustler and a clown, but beneath it all was a sensitive, caring soul and a good friend.

Eugene was dancing on a tabletop, balancing a glass of ouzo atop his head, when he spotted Garth and waved him over.

'Hey, mate, great ta see ya again! Now watch this ...'

He jumped down from the table, flipped the glass in the air and caught it in his teeth without spilling a drop. Then he tipped his head back and drank it down in one go. Garth joined him at their table, which was cluttered with ashtrays spilling over with crushed butts, a few empty wine bottles and half-filled glasses, the remains of the day's "business".

Eugene gave Garth a bear hug. 'Hey, old buddy, what timing! Great to have ya back. What took ya so long?'

'I see you finally got that trick down. So, how's biz this season?' Garth inquired, pouring a glass of *retsina* wine.

'Been good; already got twenty lovelies rounded up for tomorrow's cruise,' he said, winking and rubbing his hands together, grinning lecherously. He pulled in closer, 'Forget about women. What I really want to talk to you about is a lot more interesting. Let's take a stroll. I've been waiting for ya!' He stuffed a joint in Garth's mouth and lit it.

They walked down the beach to a quiet stretch, where he pulled out a rolled-up booklet from the back of his shorts and handed it to Garth. On the cover was a single word printed in gold lettering – Connoisseur.

'You found something more important than pussy?' Garth joked, leafing through the pages. It was a special issue featuring a collection of ancient Greek vases. Underlined in red marker pen was a picture of one particularly lovely wine amphora.

'See that?' Eugene beamed. 'That little jug brought twenty thousand quid at Christie's last week. Can you imagine? Hell, Dimitri and me know where there're dozens of those beauties just waiting for us to scoop up. I'm gonna cut you in a third, 'cause you can dive and you're the only other person we can trust.' He paused to let it sink in.

'I'm already onto a job,' said Garth. 'I can use the money, but those amphorae are protected by the Interior Ministry and Greek Archaeological Society. No one can sell Greek antiquities without a permit or go to jail, man. You want Interpol on our asses like they were on Marion True's, the curator at the Getty Museum?'

Eugene wasn't dissuaded and laughed, 'Screw Interpol. We can do this, I know we can.' He laid his hand on his shoulder, 'Now, I know you know how to dive in those tough currents near Delos. Good old Dimitri can skipper a boat, but he won't go in the water if his mother's life depended on it.'

Garth gaped at him incredulously, 'You mean that crazy seafaring sonofabitch can't swim?'

'That's the Greeks for you! Anyway, it'll be easy, man. Dimitri takes us to this spot near Delos, like we're just tourists out for a sightseein' cruise. Then, when the coast is clear, we scuttle over the side, collect the jugs and count our blessings. Any sign of trouble, Dimitri drops down a red underwater flare and we come up empty-handed. You know, like we're having a little swim or somethin'.' He was talking like a kid who had just thought up the perfect scam. 'I'm telling you, it's a piece of cake, man.'

Garth thought about it for a second and then answered. 'No way,' he said emphatically.

Eugene snatched the joint from him, upset, like he'd just been let down by his old friend for the first time. 'Come on, mate, where's your balls? You know ... the old spirit of adventure we used to have in the good old days? This is a sure thing.'

'I said no, Eugene. I have another job to do.'

'What, you're gonna say no after all we've been through?' he pressed. The word "no" was obviously alien to him. 'Dimitri will use his selling connections in Crete and then we split it three ways. I'm talking about thirty thou each for only three pieces.'

Garth wanted him off his back, 'Okay, okay, I'll think about it,' he said. It was certainly tempting and the way he had it planned, it could probably be pulled off without much hassle. But Garth wasn't looking for more problems. The Ikon was his job and it had to be done on Rick's schedule or his ass was grass and needless to say, Rick was the lawnmower.

They walked to a taverna with an inviting patch of cool shade under its blue striped awnings. Eugene was still sulking a little, so Garth told him about his job with Rick and the Ikon copy. Eugene nodded and he could see that he was impressed by Garth's trust in him. They were close friends and had confided in one another over the years on almost everything, from women to business deals. They had met in Mykonos years ago when things were dirt cheap, before

Greece came into the European Community and things got expensive. Back in those days, the dollar or UK pound bought a nice long summer holiday. But now they had to hustle to survive the ridiculously overinflated euro prices. Garth and Eugene had somehow justified that hustling was okay, to an extent where it became okay to forge a couple of paintings now and then and even fish out a few old jugs from the sea.

‘Let’s drink to success,’ Eugene said. He waved his hand at the waiter, who came up immediately, which was unusual for Greece, where service came at a snail’s pace. ‘*Ena kilo retsina, garçon,*’ he said. Only Eugene would use Greek and French in the same phrase- ‘From the barrel, *par-a-ka-lo.*’ He pronounced the Greek word for “please” with deliberate emphasis on each syllable, like a tourist speaking broken Greek, even though he was quite fluent when he chose to be. ‘My *filo* here will pay,’ he added with a click of his tongue.

The waiter nodded and went to bring the wine. Eugene leaned back in his chair. ‘Now, let’s relax and drink to all those lovely lassies out there who’ll help us spend our money.’

Garth was gazing out at a large two-masted schooner pulling into the beach. She was beautiful, a sleek craft with two bikini-clad young ladies hanging over the captain’s shoulders at the wheel. He’d wager the boat was nearly 60 feet in length, a real seagoing vessel if there ever was one. It took money to live well in this world and he was determined not to be left behind.

The promise of a new adventure, not to mention the wine, set their spirits free and in no time Eugene was dancing and singing sweet Irish ballads aloud as they sauntered into Mavrogenous Square, the main taxi center in town. The area was flanked by tavernas and cafes along the harbor, packed by locals and tourists alike from every walk of life.

As they stumbled into Kosta's Cafe, Garth knew they were in for trouble when Eugene approached the bartender and made him a proposition. ‘I ’ave a little coin here,’ he grinned, flipping it into the air. ‘Whaddya say we go double or nothin’ on an ouzo?’

The astute barman paid him no mind because word was out; Eugene had been on Mykonos for far too many years and a hustler like him on a small island gets known quickly. Garth tried to pull him away, but no sooner had he done so than Eugene spied two Greek players in the corner moving black and white pieces around a backgammon board. Garth saw the vacant, greedy look in Eugene's eyes when their game had ended. He could no longer contain himself and brazenly went up and challenged the winner. Eugene was a guy so strung out on gambling, he'd play for anything, just so long as he could play. He'd bet on a drink or even his watch, if he didn't have ready cash.

The big Greek sitting at the *tavli* table grinned at Eugene craftily, displaying a nasty head scar and few broken, rotting teeth. 'Five hundred euros to winner!' the big man bellowed in broken English.

This was about 600 US dollars. Fair enough, but Garth knew Eugene didn't have that kind of money to throw around.

'Right,' Eugene said to the man. 'You're on, handsome.'

Garth shook his head in disgust and moved to the bar, unwilling to be part of the deal. He ordered a beer while they played, opting to watch the parade of pretty girls and islanders passing by the front door facing the harbor.

An old acquaintance stopped in when he saw him, greeting him with a cheerful smile. It was Ian Hall, a writer who'd been a regular on Mykonos for many years. Ian was a bit of an eccentric and a loner, but nevertheless a kind man and a keen observer of human nature. For reasons of his own, he kept to himself. He also hung out with the local chief of police, which is why Garth didn't hang out with him. Gaunt and in his late fifties, he always behaved like the perfect gentleman and dressed like the bohemian gentry in cardigans, with a neat silk cravat tucked into the front of his crisp, tailored shirt.

'Well, hello, Ian,' Garth welcomed. Garth, Ian and John Ralston had been good friends and did some landscape painting together now and then. Ralston was an intense, straightforward, no nonsense kind of guy, but a fine painter, one whose work he really admired. The only problem with Ralston was a nasty drinking problem, where he'd go days at a time on a binge.

Like Garth, he sold his work where he could and his painting occasionally involved the odd ikon knock-off for tourists here and there, but only as a means of supporting his real passion, which was fine art. John's relationships, or lack of them, especially when it came to women, were a puzzle to everyone. He had very few ladies in his life, not even one-night stands as far as Garth remembered. Perhaps his staunch Catholic beliefs had something to do with it. Whatever, he'd made it clear on occasion that even if he didn't always practice his religion faithfully, he respected it deeply.

Ian pulled up a bar stool next to Garth and spoke in a subdued, low tone, 'So you haven't heard about John yet?'

'No, what happened?'

'Well, he went a bit on the nix-nix, you see, stark raving loony he went. Broke all the windows in his studio, smashed it up pretty good. Apparently, he thought he was under some sort of curse from hell. Anyhow, they bundled him up in a taxi and flew him into Athens last week for psychiatric treatment.'

'You're kidding!' The intense sun and summer heat in Greece could do strange things to people, but as long as Garth had known John, he'd been fine. It was possible, however, that after being in Mykonos for so long the staid routine of island life could have its affect on one, especially if you'd been living there permanently for some thirty odd years.

'He was in terrible shape,' Ian continued- 'Going on about devils in churches, cursed ikons and evil spirits and the like. Wouldn't shave or shower. Started to smell pretty bad in the end,' Ian said soberly. 'We thought it was the DTs, but he didn't pull out of it.'

Garth wanted to pick Ian's brain for more information, wondering if his madness may have something to do with the same kind of ikon he was commissioned for.

'Nobody seems to know exactly what happened,' Ian went on. 'He started painting these bizarre messages all over the walls of his studio. The local docs believe it might be a form of mental illness and thought he might kill himself next, so they got him out of here in a straitjacket, pronto.'

Garth was shocked. It was sad to hear someone like John had ended up in such a bad way. Ian slipped behind the counter and poured two shots from a Metaxa bottle before setting it down on the mahogany bar- 'To John!' Ian said, taking a drink.

The disquieting news about John Ralston put them both in a contemplative mood. Ian took his pipe out of the breast pocket of his tan linen jacket, opened up a packet of aromatic Dutch blend tobacco, packed it tightly into his briar pipe, lit it and then leaned his elbow lazily on the bar.

The sweet, fragrant smoke swirled upwards and around, jogging memories for Garth. He was troubled to hear that John was in such a state. In the past, they'd had some good times together, especially discussing literature, art and life in general. He'd even gotten John out of his seclusion, to join them on Eugene's wild booze-cruises a few times. As Garth looked over, Ian seemed to be in a world of his own thinking about John, too. The whole damn thing didn't make sense.

Back at the backgammon tables, Eugene won his first game and demanded another, tossing the dice in his usual manner of reckless abandon. He must have upped the stakes, because he had that expression of glee on his face that was all too familiar.

As Garth took his eyes away and drank his cognac down, a curious hush came over the room, as if someone either to be feared or fantasized had just walked into the bar. The guy sitting next to him looked up and commented softly. 'Well, well, well. What have we here?'

She was tall with long black hair to her waist, a classical Greek beauty. She had a haughty, self-assured look and walked with the grace of royalty, conscious that all eyes were on her. There wasn't a table of men in the whole bar that hadn't turned to look.

'Who the hell's that?' Garth whispered to Ian.

'Forget what you're thinking, old man. She's one of the unobtainables – been around here most of the summer, but keeps to herself. Believe me, there isn't a man on the island who hasn't tried hitting on her.'

Garth didn't pay much attention to his words; his eyes were fixated on the woman. Either she'd been created by the gods or else he'd had too much to drink. Her facial features were exquisite – a Monica Bellucci look with straight aquiline nose, intense turquoise-blue eyes and full ruby-red lips.

'Aphrodite's alive and well and living on Mykonos,' Ian joked, sipping the last of the cognac. 'Remember what I told you.'

Even though his glaucoma was acting up, he could see crescents of gold hanging from her ears, winking in the sunlight as she moved across the room, as her face turned in his direction. A small group of fine-looking young men trailed behind her, hovering and fawning over her like a princess. The sun had caught the glint of the gold chains that hung in the deep cleavage at the front of her black silk blouse. She caught Garth's eye and tossed her head in a gesture as if he were invading her space.

Garth glanced away over at Eugene, still hunched intently over the backgammon game. But when Garth glanced back at her again, he found her walking towards him. Her long, slender legs, immured in skintight black satin, moved in a fluid motion, almost floating as she crossed the floor. Garth was aware of the heady aroma of expensive French perfume, but her radiant Aegean-blue eyes looked straight past him to Ian.

'Ian,' she said, 'where've you been keeping yourself? - Haven't seen you around the courts lately.'

'Linda, how nice to see you...'

Garth stepped aside clumsily as she brushed by him and as she did so, the glass slipped from Garth's fingers and the cognac spilled on her pant leg.

Perhaps subconsciously he'd wanted to do it. 'Oh, jeez, I'm sorry,' Garth feigned, staring at the wet fabric clinging to her thigh.

She glared at him disdainfully, followed with a controlled smile, as though she were trying to ease his embarrassment. The smile softened her features and, in a second of flash fantasy, he imagined kissing those inviting red lips.

'Would you mind getting me a napkin?'

‘But of course,’ Garth answered, going behind the bar. His faux pas may not have been the greatest of introductions, but at least it had opened a conversation.

‘No damage done,’ she said, blotting up the wet spot. ‘But looks like you need a new drink.’

‘And how about you..?’

‘Why not...’

Garth offered her a cognac. She nodded and watched him pour with more than a hint of curiosity.

‘Ian, darling,’ she cooed, ‘introduce me to your bumbling friend.’

Ian put on his formal manners. ‘Meet Garth Hanson – Californian painter, fencer and, unlike some of us mere mortals, an ex-priest!’

The priest bit got her attention. ‘Linda Heller,’ she replied, holding out a slim hand, glittering with more gold and diamond rings. ‘What’s this about being an ex-priest?’

‘That was a long time ago,’ he said, holding her long, slender fingers. But before he could kiss them, she had withdrawn her hand, all the while maintaining eye contact.

‘So, you’re a painter and a fencer, huh? Sounds like you should have lived during the Renaissance.’

‘The way things are going, I wish I had.’

Her brows arched with curiosity, ‘As a painter, did you happen to know John Ralston?’

‘Yes, I did.’ He briefly wondered how she knew him. ‘Ian just told me about his problems.’

‘We all know John was a bit of a religious freak, but that hardly explains why he went mad, if that’s what happened. What about you? You’ve been a priest. What do you think?’

‘I quit the priesthood in my early twenties, but I agree with you; I don’t see why John’s religious beliefs would lead to madness.’

‘Excuse my curiosity, but it’s not every day one gets the chance to talk candidly with a priest. May I ask what possessed you to join in the first place?’

Garth shrugged, ‘My family pushed me into it.’

‘And why did you leave?’

‘Well, I felt more drawn to the arts.’ He could see she was getting ready to pose another question, but cut her off. ‘Hey, I really don’t want to get into this ...’

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to touch on a sensitive area, but it sounds so interesting. Perhaps you will tell me more about it sometime.’

Garth felt a glimmer of hope. Maybe she wasn’t unobtainable, after all. He was about to say something that would further arouse her curiosity, when Eugene’s booming voice interrupted their conversation.

‘Bloody ’ell, a two and a one..? No friggin’ way, man!’ Eugene protested.

Eugene was moving chips so fast, he was sweating. Garth knew he must be in trouble, because the big Greek was twirling his black moustache calmly. The dice were flying back and forth at lightning speed, the alabaster backgammon pieces clacking into their slots like the sound of a freight train crossing an old steel suspension bridge.

A few interested backgammon buffs had gathered to watch Eugene getting his ass beaten. Any moment, Garth expected a vein on Eugene’s forehead to pop. Intense and focused, he shouted at the waiter for a vodka.

‘A double six, a two and one ... Damn ya ta ’ell!’ He slammed his chair away from the table, knocking over a stack of the alabaster pieces. Then he stomped angrily up to the bar, glaring back at his opponent, cursing under his breath, ‘Bloody Greek bubble!’

“Bubble” was a mild slur originating from the quaint Cockney expression “bubble and squeak”, lovingly referring to a Greek. Eugene came up to the bar to fetch his vodka and Garth tried to cool Eugene down before matters spun out of control.

‘Come on, Euge’, it’s only money,’ he consoled. The perspiration was beading down Eugene’s reddened face.

‘Sure, but if this goon finds out I don’t have any bread, he’ll drag me out and break my friggin’ legs ... Then he’ll cut out my heart and feed it to the sharks! Can you help me out, mate?’

Garth knew it was coming before he said it. ‘I told you I had some debts to pay back home, Eugene. Besides, the bank’s closed already.’

Indignant, Eugene went down to the end of the bar and ordered a shot of vodka straight up.

Linda leaned into Garth’s shoulder, amused -- ‘Looks like your friend’s got a problem. He drinks too much, too.’

‘You would, too, if you knew his story.’

‘And what’s that?’ she asked.

‘About ten years ago in Belfast he sympathized with the IRA and they asked him to deliver a package to a market, to warn off a suspected police informer. Well, it turned out that a group of school kids went into the market after he left – and a bomb went off killing them all.’

‘Oh my God!’ she said, placing a hand over her mouth. The big Greek rose to his feet and stomped over to them, eyeing Eugene as if he were the lowest of common denominators. He didn’t waste time with idle threats or words. Instead, the oaf grabbed Eugene by the throat and all hell broke loose; glasses and chairs went flying as most of the other patrons scrambled for cover.

Ian and Garth came to Eugene’s rescue, trying desperately to pull the two brawlers apart, but the big brute was as strong as an ox. Garth hit him with the bottle of Metaxa, but it didn’t even faze the guy. It was like hitting a rhino with a fly swat. Eugene’s face was turning blue from lack of oxygen. Ian reacted quickly by whispering “*Astynomia*” in the Greek’s ear. It meant the cops were on their way and it got the thug’s attention. He glanced around tautly and let go of Eugene’s throat.

The Greek patrons quickly hustled the maniac into a corner, trying to calm him. Garth shook his head in dismay; he was getting too old for this sort of barroom brawling crap. Linda came over and laid a comforting hand on his shoulder.

‘Looks like your friend’s got a little problem,’ she said, amused.

‘It’s serious! This lunatic is known to be a killer around here.’

‘How’s that?’

‘He owns the local slaughterhouse!’

She glanced over at the creep and shook her head. ‘I see what you mean,’ she offered, her voice expressing concern. ‘Look, I like you and your friend Eugene seems all right, too. How much does the Neanderthal want to go away?’

Eugene hesitated, which surprised Garth, considering the trouble he was facing. But for some reason, perhaps his Irish pride, he was hesitant to divulge his financial difficulties to a stranger. ‘No thanks, miss. It’s my affair – I’ll take care of it.’

‘Fine,’ she said. ‘And if this guy breaks your neck? Let’s just say I’m feeling philanthropic tonight. So, how much to get you off the hook?’

Eugene looked at Garth, puzzled. He raised his eyebrows and slowly came out with it- ‘Five hundred euros.’

She opened her purse and counted out a pile of fifty euro bills. Whoever Linda was, she certainly had no problems with money. ‘There,’ she said, fingers busy going through the notes, ‘four fifty, five hundred. Consider it a loan.’ She handed him the wad of bills and he nodded his thanks.

The big Greek was watching as she passed the money over. Then Eugene went up to him, threw the money in his face and walked away, defiant. The thug picked up the stray bills that had floated to the floor and licked his lips as he picked up the money. He had a hard, rough face with deep-set dark eyes, the gaze of a man who had no problem taking a life, animal or human.

Eugene settled at the bar for a drink and started chatting with Ian. Garth was glad for the chance to talk one-on-one with Linda.

‘That was decent of you, Linda.’

‘Well, it’s only money.’

Garth wished he had her casual outlook. ‘Don’t worry, he’ll pay you back. I’ll make sure of it.’

‘I’m not worried, Garth.’ She said his name as if she’d known him a lifetime.

‘Whatever your reasons, thanks,’ he leaned in, bussing her cheek.

She smiled back appreciatively. ‘No thanks necessary,’ she said. ‘But you can buy me a drink later tonight at the Infinity Disco. Say, two-ish?’

‘By all means, Ms Heller.’

She turned with a swirl of her hair and walked out into the square. The violet afterglow of dusk seemed to engulf her in a mystical shroud of light. The evening sky had turned magenta and the tiny lights strung out on the boats around the harbor were twinkling like small silver stars. Garth watched silently as she disappeared down one of the narrow cobbled side streets. He looked at his Tag Heuer, lost in thought. The Infinity Disco was not one of his favourite hang-outs, because things didn’t get started there till after three in the morning and he was an early club person. It would be a long wait until two o’clock.

Chapter Three

MODERN DAY MYKONOS wasn't like any other Greek island; its habitués range from the simple Greek village folk to the jet-set who frequented the island, from Mick Jagger and Keith Richards to Giorgio Armani, George Clooney and Madonna, or just plain tourists in on a two-week package holiday. Here, you could find the Mediterranean's wealthiest shipowners seated next to barefoot backpackers. It was also known as the summer playground for the idle rich, the up-and-comers, as well as a popular sightseeing and shopping excursion for tourists and sophisticated passengers from cruise ships, popping in for a one-day trip.

Mykonos was the crown jewel of the Cyclades group – a delicious, alluring apple in the Greek Garden of Eden where nudity, sex and drugs flowed freely. Its cubist villages were an inordinate part of it, stark and vivid in flaring whiteness against the ink-blue sea. The cobbled streets curl around a maze of colonnades and arcades that host a number of high fashion shops, such as Gucci, Prada, Armani, Dior, Lalotis, Burberry and Gaultier. And on the side streets, the cosy little whitewashed houses seemed to interweave with one another, their wooden balconies spilling over with flowing crimson bougainvillea and colorful hibiscus, and at the end of every whorl of streets, the sea sparkled invitingly.

By daytime, the village was as dazzling as a Moroccan souk, where the shopfronts and balconies were hung with an effulgent array of blankets, shawls and carpets. The harbor was lined with snug cafes and tavernas with tables set out under colorful awnings. But at night, when the violets, pinks and rose reflections of the setting sun fell gently upon whitewashed walls, grey shadows of twilight set in the labyrinth-cut backstreets, like mysterious, angular, archaic patterns.

Back at the harbor, tourists sat at one of the harbor's favoured snack bars, sipping a glass of clouded, liquorice-flavoured ouzo or watching the last of the sun's golden rays turn the warm evening into sheer enchantment.

‘A wee bit of ouzo to loosen the lips,’ Eugene would say, entering a bar. Then he’d approach the barman, take out his good-luck coin and try and flip him for it. They all had their favourite haunts. Garth’s was the mellow Piano Bar with live music. Eugene’s was the raucous, noisy Dubliner Pub, of course, which was oddly enough right smack dab next to Petro’s, a wild drag-queen cabaret show bar.

That evening Garth hoped to change his routine away from Eugene and stay out of trouble. Needless to say, his mind was preoccupied with Linda and he wanted to know all about her. He felt like a kid on his first date, primping, combing his hair back, and he found himself a little self-conscious as he walked into the boisterous, crowded discotheque. Loud hip-hop music was blaring in an ear-splitting thumpa-thumpa-thumpa beat, spewing from the massive 6-foot speakers. He noticed some of Eugene’s crowd from the beach drinking and wiggling out, dancing under green-and-red strobe lights illuminating the dance floor, pulsating to the music’s jerky arrhythmic beat.

The DJ Spiro Adonis was an old friend of Eugene’s and he greeted him with a beaming toothy grin.

‘I’m looking for a woman ...’ Garth shouted up to him at the turntable on a raised dais platform. ‘Linda Heller. You know her?’

‘Ahh, man ... you always looking for woman!’ He rolled his eyes and grinned, looking vaguely goat-like with his bald, shaved head, sunglasses and trim goatee. Garth came in closer as he was changing records. Spiro bent over behind the console, putting his nose to a line of white powder on a tray he had near a rickety side table with gram packets made up ready to sell.

‘Hey, have a line on me, man,’ he offered, passing a straw. ‘Great coke! Best shit on the island. I can get it for you cut rate for one twenty a gram. You want? Hey, maybe you sell some for me?’

Garth hated hard drugs. More than that, he despised hard drug dealers.

‘No thanks. Look, do you know Linda or not?’

‘Yes, yes, I know the *putana*, man’ he said, bobbing up and down, gyrating to the music. ‘Very mysterious chicky! Big fashion *modelo*... Very sexy bitch,

eh?’ Spiro leaned down closer into Garth’s ear, ‘And she have some very nice, big American tits, too – yeah, man, we like, we like! Hey, you fuck her yet?’

DJs and bartenders were always a good source of news and gossip about their customers, but this animal was just plain foul.

‘Get a fucking life, Spiro,’ he said, purposely bumping into his cocaine pile knocking it to the floor. As the dubious white powder splayed across the platform, Spiro began jumping up and down screaming, ‘Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck! What you do, man?! That was my stash, man. It no good now; what I gonna sell tonight? Fuck you, man!’

‘Oh, jeez, I’m so sorry,’ Garth feigned, walking away smiling to himself. He looked back to catch Spiro grovelling around on the floor on his knees in a panic, scooping up the remnants of his dope with his hands.

At that same moment, Linda arrived on the scene. She was a lovely vision in white, her sheer skirt suspended lithely as she moved, giving her an air of affluence. She looked more tanned in the evening light, her hair blacker than he’d remembered it, wearing jewellery that would have made Ivana Trump envious. She put out her hand with a jangle of diamond bracelets. He took it in his and led her downstairs to a nice quiet spot where they could talk. ‘Let’s move to that table in the corner,’ he suggested.

He lit the candle in the red glass globe on the table. The little flame sputtered and flared, casting an amber glow on her smooth face. She looked fresh and vibrant, somewhere in her late-twenties. A cute little waitress came over for their order, giving Garth an amorous sly wink. Linda didn’t catch it, ordered herself a Martini with a twist and lit a cigarette.

Garth looked at Linda askew, ‘A Martini in a place like this?’ He looked back up at the waitress, ‘Dewar’s, straight up.’

‘Why shouldn’t I order a Martini?’

‘This is a disco, not the Waldorf. They don’t even know how to spell it here, much less make one.’

‘Really?’

‘I see you’re not a disco person. Good! Me neither. So, Linda ... are you modelling here in Mykonos?’

‘I don’t work when I’m on holiday. I relax.’

The waitress eventually came back with their drinks. Linda took one sip of her Martini and gagged. ‘Yuk! I see what you mean.’ She twirled the dark green olive absent-mindedly with her long, slender fingernail.

‘Next time maybe you’ll believe me. So how long you here for?’

‘A week, maybe, haven’t decided yet.’

‘Boyfriend..?’

‘Not presently.’

‘Okay,’ Garth muttered. ‘I can see this is going to be like pulling teeth.’

‘What did you say?’

‘Nothing, forget it.’

Her responses to his questions were non-committal. It occurred to him that a deep vein of cunning may lurk behind her evasiveness. Spiro was right in that respect – she was mysterious and obviously enjoyed being so.

‘Did you know John well?’ She glanced up at Garth intently. Her exotic blue eyes disclosed nothing, hidden by a dark illusive veil.

‘He was a friend,’ Garth offered, still curious as to why she was bringing him up yet again. ‘We painted some landscapes together on occasion. His iconography wasn’t too shabby, either.’

‘Do you think he’s really gone crazy?’

Garth laughed. ‘Crazy? Christ, aren’t we all a bit nuts living in this mad nuclear world? He’s no crazier than the rest of us.’

‘Supposedly he thinks he’s cursed.’ She took a deliberately long, slow drag from her cigarette, waiting for a reply.

‘You mean under some sort of spell?’ He thought of the Ikon, the stories about its mystery and powers, and wondered if she was on the same wavelength.

‘That’s right, a bad spell, a curse,’ she said, butting the cigarette down in the ashtray and pulling a scrap of paper from her purse. ‘Read this ...’

Something knotted up in his guts when he saw it, but he tried not to show surprise. He carefully took the newspaper clipping from her and read aloud:

The Ikon of Tinotissa is known to provide miraculous cures to the faithful. Multitudes of sick, infirm and handicapped come to the shrine every year for the Virgin's blessing. The Ikon has been worshipped and revered throughout antiquity as housing a divine presence, originating from the ancient sanctuaries of Poseidon and Asclepius, the god of healing.

He became momentarily lost in the memories of the first time he visited Tinos. It was the fifteenth of a muggy August day and the ferry was crowded with pilgrims. Faith was etched deep on their wrinkled faces, especially the infirm and crippled, who had come seeking miracles. For some it was their last hope. If anything could heal them, it was the power of the Ikon of Tinotissia.

The most impressive sight on Tinos was the procession of black-clad women slowly creeping up the steps to the church on their knees, ignoring their pain as they made their way upwards to kiss the sacred relic. One couldn't help but be impressed by their show of faith, pure faith, hanging on prayer. Garth had once believed in the Church, too, and he'd had that same zeal, but not any more.

Now, he found himself more concerned that if faith could perform miracles of healing, might it not also cast harmful spells as well? For he felt there comes a moment of epiphany in every rational man's mind, when the battle between reason and emotion tilts in favour of something deeper. That day, years ago in Tinos, as he watched the procession of the infirm going painfully up the steep steps to the church, he had a profound moment of enlightenment. And now, recalling that moment must have showed in his eyes, because Linda seemed puzzled, looking back at him.

'What are you thinking?' she asked.

'Well, I don't get the point,' Garth said, handing her back the folded page. 'What's the Ikon of Tinotissia got to do with Ralston?' He watched her face for a clue, but it was a beautifully sculptured, impenetrable mask and he wondered what was behind it.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘all I know is that he made some kind of deal with a man, an important commission – something to do with the Church of Panaghia Evangelistria. Soon after that job, his mental and physical health started to fail.’ Linda finished her Martini and set the glass aside.

Garth didn’t say anything, hiding his own ideas about what Ralston’s so-called commission might have been. Christ, he thought, could John have been involved in an arrangement similar to his?

The waitress approached their table with a rack of six Tequila Gold shooters, all lined up nice and neat in a row. Garth looked straight at Linda, took a shot and gulped it down in one go. Then he turned the glass upside down and slapped it on the table in a challenge to Linda. She picked up the next shooter and matched him shot for shot, until all six were finished.

‘Good girl,’ Garth praised. ‘Anyway, I heard it was the pressure and too much alcohol that got to John.’

‘Perhaps, but I wonder if there’s more to it than that.’

‘Well, I’ve known him to pull many an all-nighter. But I must admit that I still don’t understand him flipping out and wrecking his own studio. I mean, he was a mellow guy.’ An awkward silence followed. ‘Anyway, enough of Ralston,’ he said, changing the subject. ‘I want to know more about you.’ Garth was using a lead-in question to learn more about her private life and he hoped it would work.

But instead of responding, she stared blankly into space as if she had just remembered something. In the silence, the music grew louder as the upbeat of *Brown Sugar* by the Rolling Stones came on the massive stereo speakers and the dance floor came thumping to life. Garth decided he’d try another tack.

‘All that nice music seems to be going to waste,’ he said. ‘Let’s get out there and boogie.’

She hesitated for a second. Then she snapped out of it, ‘Sure, let’s dance,’ she said, rising from the chair.

He took her hand and led her to the floor, her long hair swirling out like a raven-black cape, her skirt flowing up freely, revealing the sexiest of see-through black lace panties and her long, slender brown legs.

Garth loved a woman who wasn't afraid to show it off and he twirled her on several more occasions just to get a look at her in those hot, sheer panties again.

Perhaps it was the heat or those double Tequila Gold shooters, but they stumbled as he went back to their table, where she ordered and downed another rack of shooters. If she were trying to keep up with him, she was doing a damn good job.

At one point, she slurred her words and Garth made the error of laughing about it to a cute waitress friend of his who passed by.

Linda caught it and her mood turned sullen. 'What are you laughing at?' she said. 'Don't tell me that little priest in you is judging me?' Her half-smoked cigarette was still burning in the ashtray as she took a drag from it. 'I don't like being a source of ridicule.'

'Hey, I'm not judging anybody. Lighten up.'

'You men ... you're all the fucking same.' Her eyes were bloodshot and feral. She reached for her drink and knocked it over, dumping the contents onto the tablecloth. 'Have a nice night, Garth.' Taking her purse, she got up and walked out of the door.

He threw his money down for the drinks and hurried out of the packed disco after her. She was walking briskly up the cobbled street, when one of her high heels became stuck in a crack and broke off. She cursed herself aloud and stopped to take off her shoe. Garth quietly slid up beside her in the hope of remedying the situation.

'Christ, Linda, please. Will you ease up?'

'Get lost,' she said coldly.

He caught her by the wrist. 'Come on, what the hell's the matter?'

She tried jerking away, but he kept tight hold. He wasn't about to let her go, there were too many unanswered questions.

Then, with her free hand, she swung her purse at him. 'Let go of me!'

'Come on, Linda, you've had too much to drink,' he said, eventually releasing her wrist.

'Oh, give me a break – you don't even know what's going down here.'

Garth took her firmly by the shoulders and spun her around, so that she could see his face. 'Now, what's that supposed to mean?'

She stared for a second as if she had accidentally revealed something and then spat in his face. He felt the warm saliva running down his cheek.

He pulled her in tight again and covered her mouth with his. She tried to bite him and didn't stop until their tongues made contact. She finally gave in, her mouth bitter-sweet from drink. He felt her supple body weaken as they embraced and kissed passionately. She was breathing heavily, her silken hair askew, red lipstick smudged. Garth stopped and pulled her head back by the hair, gazing into her alluring eyes. 'So there's some warmth underneath that chill, after all.'

She slapped his face. The sting was sharp; the surprise held him stunned for a moment, till she pulled away and started running down the cobblestones again, clutching the broken high heel. He decided to let it go. She was drunk, what could he do.

But he decided to follow her as unobtrusively as he could. The backstreets were dark and narrower as they led away from the harbor-front. As he crept along, he could hear the clicking of her one shoe on the cobblestones.

He searched the alleys for a few minutes and then spotted her as he came around a corner climbing a small staircase. He hovered in the dim shadows and watched until she'd disappeared around a low wall of a courtyard. The number "9" was scratched on the side of the building. He made a mental note of it, sure he'd remember that narrow flight of stairs again and the vine-covered wall. Whatever she was up to, he was intent on finding out. Her drunkenness didn't explain her erratic behaviour and those few cryptic words.

The scent of jasmine hung heavily in the night air and he stood for a long time in the shadows, thinking about her and what to do. The white walls of the

houses loomed around Garth, enclosing him like a sepulchre. He decided it was time to go back to his apartment.

Back in his studio, Garth lay on his bed thinking about Linda and how sexy she looked in those black sheer panties. He felt a hard-on growing. How he'd like to get inside those panties, he thought, while kissing her ruby lips. Maybe it was pure imagined fantasy, but it was all he had to look forward to for now.

Garth got up and walked over to his dresser. There was an old photo of John Ralston on it; he picked it up gingerly and studied it. It was of John with white beard, neatly trimmed, with a slight smile on his weathered face. He remembered he'd taken the picture some ten years ago, when they were at Ornos Beach, just outside of Mykonos town. John was full of life in those heady days, a successful artist filled with vigour and boundless potential. How did such a fine person change so much and end up so far astray? he wondered. Then he reflected on the Ikon and his pending trip to Tinos. He thought of Ralston and his crazy curse and wondered if he himself might come under the same spell. Who was he to think he could get away with such an ikon scam? To copy the Ikon of Tinotissa was to tamper with the gods. But he was locked in to Andersen now and there was no way out. If nothing else, he decided, at least he'd go to Tinos to try to find out what really happened to John.

He flopped down on his bed, exhausted, dreaming back to when he was an altar boy again. He was being led gently by the hand into a darkened back room by a curious, smiling Catholic Priest. Then, slowly the door closed behind them...