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IN THE
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A Novel By

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Dedication

To Niniel, Mago Joshua and Pinchi, with love now and always, to Maggie and Alan for giving me the idea and to Robert Gelinas for believing in it.

*All the diamonds in this world that mean anything to me
Are conjured up by wind and sunlight sparkling on the sea*

All The Diamonds In The World

Written by Bruce Cockburn

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Author's Note

This is first and foremost a novel. With that said, all of the places, some of the events and even a few of the people herein are real. If you think you recognize any of them, you might just be right.

Athos

The monk's heavy garments impeded any swift movement in the dark night. No moon lit his way and no stars helped him see as he fumbled with the key in the library door. The bitter cold numbed his fingers and he could not feel the touch of the metal on his shaking hands. Even the slightest noise seemed to echo in the empty patio inside the monastery. A cold sweat of panic broke out on his forehead and his back. He calculated that he still had a few minutes before they reached the monastery, and managed to calm down enough to open the library door and close it again behind him.

He fumbled in one of the folds of his garments and took out a large but worn envelope. A quick look around offered no hiding place better than any other, so he quickly opened one of the cupboards containing rows upon rows of manuscripts, chose one at random, took it out of its protective white bag and slid the envelope into the ancient pages as delicately as he could under the circumstances. He stopped to say a quick prayer and left the library just as he had entered it. Silence still reigned in the courtyard—nobody had seen him yet.

With a great sense of relief, the monk made his way to the church. He knew that he would not live the night out, and accepted his fate. He had dabbled with the wrong kind of people and had done things no monk should ever do and was about to pay the price. He had repented and felt forgiven—and ready to meet his God.

Some minutes later the silent figures entered the church

and in spite of the dark saw the stooping figure of the monk. He offered no resistance as they came for him and held the cold knife to his throat.

“You have betrayed the Brotherhood and you know the price. Where is the money, old man?” the younger one seethed.

“Far away from here” replied the monk, his voice filled with the thrill of knowing he was about to die.

“You knew what would happen if you told our secret,” rasped the other man.

“Yes,” answered the figure in black robes. “I am prepared.”

He closed his eyes in anticipation and felt a sharp burning pain as the knife entered his throat. Hot blood flowed down his neck as he lost consciousness and fell heavily to the floor. The two figures disappeared into the darkness as silently as they had entered the monastery.

All was quiet again as the dark pool of blood spread out around the dead monk.

The Brotherhood of the Holy Face

“I spoke with our Brother on Mount Athos last night and he told me a scholar from England is making enquiries about the Image of Christ.” The elderly man, smartly dressed in a dark suit and with deep, dark, world-weary eyes, paused to let his words sink in.

The listeners shuffled somewhat uneasily in their chairs, while one of them, whom all seemed to respect, stood up. He gestured with his hands, asking for calm. “Please, please, there is no cause for alarm. We all know that the Image of the Holy Face of Christ, the Mandylion, disappeared centuries ago in Constantinople. Since then our brotherhood has kept the secret of the Image’s true nature and power, through wars and peacetime, from church and state alike, always on the lookout just in case the image comes to light again.”

The members of the brotherhood settled into their seats, prepared to enjoy once more hearing the reasons why they existed at all and what their mission in life was. They had sworn to search for the lost Image of Christ, to find and recover this miraculous relic and to avoid it falling into the wrong hands at any cost, even the cost of their own lives if need be. The man who was standing continued his address.

“To the best of our knowledge, the original image of Jesus Christ, miraculously imprinted onto a cloth, is not here to be found. It was the first image, the prototype, known in the east

as the Mandyllion, in the west as the Veronica. It is the true image of the Messiah, endowed with great power and healing properties. Should it ever come to light, whoever holds it in his possession will hold the key to world peace...or world war. A simple English scholar searching through manuscripts on Mount Athos is no cause for concern.”

His words seemed to soothe the other members, although the dark-suited man was not satisfied. “Thank you for your words, but surely we are forgetting something. We are all aware that for some time now we have been...how should I say it? ...obtaining manuscripts and icons from the Holy Mountain in Greece, and the last thing we want is to draw attention to the fact that they are no longer there. What if this *simple* scholar realizes and reports that the manuscripts he wants to see are no longer in the archives?”

The standing man replied, “Even then, there is no reason to link such a disappearance to us. You know we do this indirectly, through our Russian collaborators. But just to be on the safe side, I will send word to other members and have someone observe our English friend, just in case his research takes him any further than is convenient.”

The suggestion met with approval, and soon the members of the Brotherhood of the Holy Face filed out of their anonymous meeting place and went their separate ways, dissolving into the crisp night air and crowds of tourists in Rome, the eternal city of the emperors and popes.

Thessaloníki

“Can I sit here? All the other tables are full.”

He lifted his eyes to the sound of the voice, speaking perfect English but clearly foreign. Her immediate beauty caught him off guard for a second and he felt himself blushing, but he somehow mumbled a kind of acceptance and put his coffee down.

“I’m really sorry for bothering you, but we have almost filled the hotel with our conference.”

He smiled at her and wondered where she was from. The answer to her question was the obvious one, that it was no bother at all. She was captivating. He asked her, “What conference might that be?”

“My company is expanding into eastern Europe and we are holding a conference to meet potential customers. We chose Thessaloniki because it is well placed for them and well, because it’s sunny.”

He smiled, “I love the city. How long will you be staying here?”

The question seemed too familiar for someone he had known for less than a minute—it sounded as if he was about to make plans with her if she was staying long enough. Before she could answer, the waiter came with a fresh pot of coffee and asked how they wanted their coffee, with milk, without milk, with sugar, without sugar. The foreign girl stood up and went to the buffet to get some fresh fruit and thick, creamy Greek yoghurt. He watched her closely. She moved

with grace and elegance, dressed as young professionals do in a cream colored trouser suit designed so as not to make her femininity so obvious, and yet at the same time highly suggestive. She made him feel strangely unworthy and out of place in his khaki shirt and waistcoat, green trousers and hiking boots.

She drifted back among the dark suited executives and smiled at him as she took her seat once more. He blushed again and looked down at his coffee.

“Well, you’re obviously not at any kind of professional conference,” she asked more than said, waiting to be told what he was doing in Thessaloniki.

“No, I’m...well, carrying out a sort of historical investigation.” That was the only way he thought he could put it without killing off the conversation, as he had done so often over the years. How you do artfully explain to anyone, let alone a beautiful young executive, that your specialty in Byzantine Greek and iconography regularly takes you to the medieval world and the archives on Mount Athos?

“What kind of historical investigation? Something about ancient Greece?” she asked.

Her interest seemed genuine, although ever since his distant days at university he had become used to not going into too much detail about his work with people who did not have to know the intricacies of iconoclasm and Byzantine theology. With people who *did* know the intricacies of iconoclasm and Byzantine theology, he generally preferred to talk about football or rock music just to see how they reacted.

Trying not to sound condescending, he asked if she had ever heard of the Image of Edessa, or the Mandylion. Of course not—but then again, he himself had without a doubt never heard of the details of her job, whatever that was.

“Marketing. I’m head of marketing for eastern Europe,”

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she explained, trying not to let her evident pride at such a position show too much. “We build houses and we’re looking for possible partners to expand into Poland or the Czech Republic especially. So tell me, was Thessaloniki an important center for Byzantine icons?”

“Well, not really, no more than anywhere else in Greece or Byzantium. I’m working at the—wait for it, it’s quite a mouthful—Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies, before moving on to Mount Athos. You know, the peninsula with all the monasteries where no women are allowed to go?”

“What? What do you mean women are not allowed to go? But this is the twenty-first century. How can that happen? Aren’t we meant to be under European law?”

He had never really thought too much about the prohibition of women on the peninsula. Maybe since it would never affect him, he never found it so significant. Although, even if women were permitted to enter, the vast majority of them would never find anything remotely interesting there, just as the vast majority of men wouldn’t either. It wasn’t an easy place to access.

“Well I suppose you’re right, but I can guarantee that you wouldn’t enjoy yourself too much there. It’s really quite rough. I wouldn’t worry too much about it. Whatever you do sounds much more interesting.”

“Depends on what you’re interested in really. We have to try to build and then to sell houses in countries that have just joined the European Union or have applied to join, and they don’t necessarily like the same kind of advertisements or promotion as other countries, so we have to adjust and adapt.”

A couple of minutes of silence ensued while each of them toyed with pieces of fruit in the yoghurt, or a teaspoon aimlessly stirring coffee betrayed their nervousness. He didn’t like

it, but so as not to let the conversation die he had to have recourse to the banalities of where she was from.

“Maloy. Don’t even ask, I know you’ve never heard of it—it’s a small town on the coast of Norway. You pronounce it Mu-ly, even though it looks like it should be Maloy—that’s our wonderful Norwegian phonetics for you.”

This was almost as bad as Byzantine iconography. “No, to tell the truth, I have never heard of it. Honestly, I have hardly heard of anywhere in Norway outside Oslo.” They had both finished their breakfast and there was no reason to stay at the table and continue the conversation. He was first to stand up.

“Well, it’s been nice talking to you. I’d better get going up to the Institute.” He cringed inwardly at how trite he must have sounded. As he stood up, her eyes met his and seemed to hold his almost against her own will for a few seconds.

He turned to walk away, but then in a split second a thousand thoughts raced through his head. How many people did you meet like this over a lifetime? What would happen if one of these people was the one destined to be with you and you just turned and walked away? A voice deep down inside reminded him that life is made up of moments and most never return if you let them go. Second chances rarely exist. Who knows if this was one of those moments?

In an act of rare confidence in him he turned back and said, “Look, why don’t we have dinner together tonight?”

Why should she? A few seconds of silence while she seemed to be involved in some kind of inner debate with herself or her own feelings. She could be married, she could have children, she could be a ruthless professional who had no time for personal relationships—she could be anything. But then a hint of a smile broke out on her lips. He noticed that whenever she smiled she made a funny little noise in her throat, and

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it made him smile too.

“Yes, of course. But only dinner—don’t take it as a passport into my bed or anything like that.”

His face betrayed an obvious surprise at her reaction, warming to someone who could speak in such a way to somebody she had only just met.

“My passport is hardly enough to get me onto Mount Athos—and beds are much more complicated. If we find a nice restaurant it might be much better anyway. I’ll see you here in reception at seven.”

Without waiting for confirmation he turned and left. Luckily there was a taxi at the door and he jumped in without looking back. The taxi took him up to the Institute, where he was used to working alone. It was part of the monastery of Vlattadon, situated at the top of the city. From the gardens that surrounded the building you could see the whole city in a spectacular view all the way down to the sea. Behind him were the city’s defensive walls, empty apart from the few tourists that came to Thessaloniki. A Mediterranean city with no beach had little hope of attracting swarms of tourists—in fact, it was one of the few places where hotel prices actually went down in the summer.

The Institute held microfilms of many of the manuscripts held on Mount Athos. Around a quarter of the world’s Greek manuscripts were at the various monasteries on Mount Athos, the Holy Mountain, one of the most sacred places in the Orthodox world. Copying by hand had continued there long after the invention of the printing press, and there were manuscripts faithfully written from dates as late as the nineteenth century.

Despite the attempt to photograph all the manuscripts and make microfilm copies available to researchers, the project

was far from complete. Many important texts were missing and others were unusable, as the microfilm copies had been made over twenty years before, when technology was not as advanced.

He took up where he had left off the previous day, with a twelfth-century manuscript from Megistes Lavra, the largest and oldest monastery on the peninsula. The hours would normally rush by as he became more and more immersed in the texts, something he found profoundly fulfilling and deeply spiritual. The 16th of August, the day when the Orthodox church celebrated the taking of the Image from the city of Edessa to the imperial capital, Constantinople. The image of the face of Christ that held men transfixed, thanks to its ethereal and unworldly nature—the image was *acheiropoietos*, or not made by human hands, a Greek name expressing its supposedly supernatural origin. He pictured the Image in his mind, and did not object when it slowly transformed into the image of a young woman from a place called Maloy, the pronunciation of which he could not even remember and whose name he did not even know, but whose eyes of fire were burning into his mind.

He read and reread the story of the Image. An ancient king of Edessa, Abgar by name, had asked Jesus to go and cure him in person, but realizing that the Savior might not be able to go, sent his court artist to paint his portrait and take it back to Edessa. Jesus realized what was happening, took a cloth and wiped his face with it and his features were miraculously impressed onto the folded linen. This story from the eastern church was the forerunner of the Veronica legend in the west, in which a woman wiped Jesus' face as he went to be crucified and his face was impressed onto this cloth. It was amazing how many people thought this story was actually in

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the gospels.

The portrait was known as the Image of Edessa, later on the Mandylion, and it had disappeared after the sack of Constantinople in 1204. Did it still exist? *Could* it still exist? His original project was simply to record every known text about the Image and write the definitive story of what happened to it, but he was fascinated by the possibility that it might have survived, taken to France or to some other European country along with thousands of other relics plundered by the Crusaders.

Some of the texts he had found only existed on Athos. Some he had already seen, others he still had to find. This was his fourth trip to the peninsula, and consequently to the Institute, where he could try to make out what was on the microfilm records before studying and photographing the originals at the archives. There was never time to read every word of a text and compare it to other versions at the Institute, so he ordered printed copies from the microfilm. Back at the hotel he would then photograph every page with his own camera, a kind of primitive back-up copy. The papers would then go into his hand luggage while the camera film stayed in his pockets.

Ω

Thessaloniki was hardly the most interesting city in the world to visit, although for some reason he felt very comfortable there. Walking down from the monastery of Vlattadon back towards the city center, he stopped briefly to buy some fresh fruit and thought again about what had happened with the girl from Maloy. Quite apart from the fact that he didn't even know her name, she must have been about ten years

younger than he was. He smiled at his oncoming middle age and his innocence at thinking that she might be attracted to him, while the elderly lady in the shop said something to him in Greek that he didn't understand and smiled too. He noticed that she didn't make any kind of noise when she smiled—although, he could hardly think of anything else.

He walked along the promenade, filled with the salty smell of the ocean, occasionally sitting on a bench to watch the water, never calm at this point. At the White Tower he turned around and slowly approached the hotel, trying not to look at his watch. It suddenly occurred to him that he had no decent clothes to wear to dinner. Every time he went to Athos he took old shirts and threw them away as they became unusable as washing facilities on the peninsula were hardly ideal. Showers were not common at the monasteries, and those that existed only had cold water, very cold water. There was no need for good clothes, but as he was at the start of his trip at least his shirts were still clean.

He put on the best one he had and was downstairs at ten to seven, trying to look as if he wasn't nervous, as if he wasn't waiting for anyone. At seven on the dot she appeared—a queen to pay homage to. That was when he realized he had no idea where to go. He used to have dinner anywhere, at any little restaurant he could find, but if you were taking a woman out to dinner surely he would have to go somewhere nicer. He vaguely remembered walking past some restaurants near the market, the old traditional kind rather than some luxurious place, but that would have to do.

They started off in that direction.

Conversation flowed easily now, about anything and everything. Every so often they would brush against each other and both seemed to enjoy the touch. He remembered her

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comment about dinner only and decided to make an effort not to do anything at all to suggest anything other than dinner.

They sat at an outside table and ordered. The temperature was ideal, and he deliberately focused on her eyes. He could do that without suggesting anything further and at the same time he knew it would have some effect on her. At first she sometimes seemed shy or embarrassed and would lower her own eyes, but as the evening wore on she would hold her gaze on him too.

“So here we are, and I don’t even know your name,” he offered.

She asked if he really needed to. The answer took him by surprise. Did he need to know her name for what?

“I don’t see that it makes any difference to anything, but if you really want to know, my name is Anniken. It’s a Norwegian name, meaning grace.”

He told her his name and realized that she was right, it made no difference to anything. Knowing her name didn’t change anything at all, her fiery eyes were still there in front of his, and he knew nothing about her, just like before. And she had told him to expect no more than dinner.

“Look, Anniken, I find it quite strange to be here talking when we don’t know anything at all about each other. So be warned—I might put my foot in it by asking you the wrong questions. I hate asking boring questions, and I hate the kind of unwritten law about only asking more personal questions as you get to know someone better. So how about this one to start—are you happy in your job?”

She liked it. She hated small talk too, the kind she had to make when she met potential clients and had to have dinner with them. Now she wasn’t working and didn’t have to impress anyone or sell anything.

“I feel like I’m being interviewed, but I like it. It’s not an easy question to answer. I am well paid, and it’s something I have always wanted to do. And it wasn’t easy. My parents always wanted me to be a musician. I used to play the violin, but my heart wasn’t really in it, so I gave it up. You know, the grass is always greener somewhere else and in a different job. I find some of the things I do quite fascinating. I meet all kinds of people, some nice, some not so nice and some who really give me the creeps. The worst thing is that I have to be nice to them, when I feel like sending them to hell. They think that just because my company wants to sell them something they have the right to treat me like a dog—Anniken, bring me this, Anniken bring me that—and touch me, all these older men who tell me how much they could teach me in bed...it’s disgusting. But well, if you leave that part out, it’s OK. Was my answer original enough?”

Her answer made him feel uncomfortable. He felt like he was one of those older men, captivated by her eyes, although he wasn’t too sure that he would be able to teach her very much. So he kept on asking questions.

“Not bad. Now, tell me about your secret hopes and desires. When you’re an old grandmother sitting in a rocking chair somewhere in Norway, what will you most like to have done?”

“That’s more difficult. To be a grandmother I’ll have to be a mother first. And who knows what I’ll regret? I always used to think it was better to regret having done something than to regret not having done it, but now I’m not so sure. And anyway, that *is* a very personal question. Do I have the right to remain silent?”

“No, absolutely not. I’d rather know all about that than those dirty old men who try to pick you up just because they

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are buying something from your company. And it's so much more interesting than asking you what kind of music or films you like."

He hoped to have distanced himself from the older men she had spoken about with such evident distaste and made it clear that he was different, although the more he talked and looked, the more he knew he was captivated by those eyes.

"So you want to know all about my secret desires. How funny—why should I tell all my secrets to a total stranger?"

"Precisely because we are perfect strangers. There's no danger—I can't tell anyone else we both know, and you can't hurt me because I am completely alien to everything you have ever done. So rather than ask you if you have any brothers or sisters, why don't you tell me what your secret dreams were when you were...I don't know, fifteen?"

Anniken laughed. "This is so funny. Let me see, when I was fifteen I was still at school, obviously. I think at that time I was convinced that the whole world would be fine if I could get away from home, from my parents. It took me a few years, much longer than I thought in fact, but now that I've done it, all I've realized is that you just exchange one set of problems for another. But you're not going to get everything out of me so easily, with nothing in return. So tell me, what about you? What do you want?"

"Well right now, I want to find the Image of Edessa, if it still exists anywhere. I know, not much of an ambition maybe, but I admit I'm a bit obsessed with it. I'm going back to Mount Athos in a couple of days in search of more manuscripts that might help me. To tell you the truth, that's what I'm really after, although as the question goes, what do you do when you find the Holy Grail? I mean, what if I ever do actually find it? What else do I want? You've got me there..." His

voice trailed off into silence.

“Are you married?” she asked.

What kind of question was that? Did that mean she was interested and a yes meant come no closer, while a no left the door open in spite of what she had said at the breakfast table, or was it just a question to ask?

“No, I’m not married. No long term relationship either. What about you?”

“My last relationship was not exactly what we might call a success. I left him in hospital and have no idea what happened to him after that. But I would prefer not to talk about it if you don’t mind.” After a few seconds silence, she looked up and said, “You know, you’re really different. Most people would answer that question with variations on happiness, success, a good job, marriage, children, whatever. And you tell me that your ambition is to find an old icon called the Image of Edessa.”

Every time she smiled and made that little noise in her throat, he had to make an effort to control himself and not get up and kiss her. He paid for dinner and back they went to the hotel. Neither of them noticed the dark-skinned man who had eaten at the same restaurant; he paid quickly without waiting for the change—a brusque gesture informed the waiter he could keep it as a tip—and followed the unlikely couple at a distance.

It just seemed that everything was fitting into place, that despite Anniken’s expressed reluctance, all either one of them had to do was say the word and they would spend the night together. Back at the hotel, they got into the elevator. Both were nervous, and neither knew what to say or do. In the end he took control and when the elevator stopped at the third floor (which he assumed to be hers—who had pushed the but-

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ton?) he said quite simply, "Good night, Anniken."

She got out and turned to look at him, wondering why he wasn't giving her the chance to refuse him.

"I'll see you tomorrow no doubt," he said as the doors slid together and took him away from her.

Six times he picked up the telephone to call her room and six times he put it down again. If he called and she said yes, what would happen then? He would go to her room or she would come to his and they would say hi, maybe make some more small talk, but it would be so different because they would both know the intention was sex. And what then? Would they stay all night together? That was more intimate in many ways than making love. What would they talk about afterwards? Would either one ask how it had been for the other?

Meanwhile, Anniken lay awake on top of her bed fighting against her deepest feelings and convictions, until sleep finally overcame her.

Ω

The next morning he showered and dressed quickly, hoping to see Anniken at breakfast. The dining room seemed strangely empty compared to the usual bustle with all the people at the convention. It occurred to him all of a sudden that the event might have finished and everyone might have left. Just as the waiter was coming towards him with a coffee pot he stood up and half ran towards reception.

A large woman was complaining about something at the reception desk, but this couldn't wait. His voice brooked no delay. "Excuse me, yes, yes, I know you are talking, sorry for interrupting, but I need to know something. Where is every-

body from the convention?” He realized how little he knew about her or her company—he didn’t even know what the company was called. All he received in reply was a blank look from the receptionist and angry movements from the overweight woman. He added, “You know, the company from Norway. Please tell me, are they still here?”

Apparently, he was told, they had all gone to visit some building development outside the city and would be away most of the day. He apologized once again to the large woman and returned to the breakfast table.

So they hadn’t left. He would see her again.

Ω

That day at the Patriarchal Institute was strangely productive. He felt strong, in charge of what had happened the previous night, and it felt good. He applied himself to his work and for a couple of hours sorted out the different manuscripts he wanted to see. The microfilm was old and some of the texts were unreadable. There was only one large catalogue of manuscripts on Mount Athos, produced towards the end of the nineteenth century. Just five years after it was published one of the monasteries, Simono-Petra, whose name distracted him for a few minutes, had lost all its manuscripts and books in a large fire. He read slowly through the catalogue at this point, wondering what treasures and unpublished knowledge had been lost forever in the flames.

The Image of Edessa had at some point in history supposedly helped save the city of Edessa from the hostile Persians. He had never liked this kind of story, where the Christian God lovingly and tenderly wipes out an enemy army who are attacking one of his protected cities. People who wrote or be-

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lieved this kind of story clearly assumed that none of the Persians had wives, children or families; nobody awaiting their homecoming; no babies who would never know their fathers—or if they did, they were pagans and heathen who deserved to die anyway. Regardless of such non-Christian Christian literature, this had never happened anyway—the Persians did attack Edessa on two occasions but no Image of Christ ever drove them back home again. If the attack failed, it was because the city was too strong for them, not because any God was fighting on behalf of the Christians.

And why didn't the Image help Edessa when the city was taken over by the Muslims? Did Christ have something against the Persians but not against the Arabs? There was so much to learn from history, and most of it was learning from mistakes, learning what not to do rather than taking any positive examples from our predecessors.

And yet, the Image really existed. At least up to the thirteenth century. And after that? Would he find it if it was still locked away in some church or cathedral in some obscure corner of the planet? And if he did, what would happen?

His thoughts had taken him up to midday. It was time to go back to the hotel. After a quick lunch and short nap, the one true luxury of life, especially if followed by a good cup of coffee, he ambled down into the reception area with the intention of going for a walk round the city center and looking round the book shops. As he came to the hotel door, he saw on the notice board that the day's convention meetings were being held in the hotel. There was a list of the day's speakers, and there was Anniken's name, talking about marketing in new European Union member countries. He looked at his watch—her talk had started ten minutes ago, if it was punctual. He couldn't resist going to listen to her and went back

to the first floor, where the meeting rooms were located.

There was no check-in or control over admission as there so often was at a convention, so he gently pushed the doors open and walked in. Anniken was on stage talking. The lights were dim in the main room, as she was showing a presentation on a large screen behind her. However, the movement caught her eye and she looked at him as he sat down in a chair in the last row.

Her voice stuck in her throat and the color drained from her face. She tried to speak but no sounds came out. People noticed that something was wrong and followed her eyes to where he was sitting. She made an effort to carry on and managed to recover her composure and continue the presentation. Her presentation was all about the marketing of houses, how to sell them, why their houses were better and cheaper than everybody else's, and the great plans they had for expansion into Eastern Europe. For all he cared it could have been about a new species of beetle and how they store food for the winter, he was just watching and listening to Anniken, how she spoke, how she moved, how she looked at people and smiled.

She wound the presentation up and thanked people for listening to her. Were there any questions? He felt like asking for the microphone and asking her if she wanted to have dinner with him that night, but that kind of thing only happened in films. Someone with a foreign accent asked if their architects took into account the different birth rates in other countries when deciding how big a standard house should be, and he made the most of it to stand up and leave. As he did so, she glanced quickly in his direction, and made an almost imperceptible movement with her finger. What did that mean? That they would meet later? That she was angry with him for going in and never wanted to see him again?

Ω

He walked through the city towards a book shop he had seen on a previous day. It seemed to specialize in religious books and he wondered if perhaps they might have something about the Image of Edessa. He spent a while surveying the shelves, and apart from the modern versions of the Synaxarion texts he was looking at in the Institute, there didn't seem to be much of interest. Despite an inbuilt dislike of requesting help in shops, he forced himself to ask if they had any books specifically about the Mandylion, using this term rather than the Image of Edessa as that was how the icon was generally referred to in the twentieth century.

The shopkeeper shuffled over to a cabinet and opened it. Piles of books and papers fell out and he picked one up, a small book with a black cover and handed it over. It was in Greek and French, a bilingual essay about the Mandylion and the copy conserved in Genoa, Italy.

Outside in the sunlight he sat down to flip through the booklet. The author was trying to argue that the icon in Genoa was in fact the original Mandylion. He had never seen the icon in person, but from all accounts it was nothing more than a painting, an old and no doubt interesting copy, but not the original. Still, he thought, one day he would have to go to Genoa and see it. He couldn't close a door without seeing what was behind it first.

Ω

The hotel receptionist stopped him as he was going back up to his room. There was a message for him in a sealed enve-

lope. It was a hotel envelope, so he realized it must be from Anniken. Who else did he even know in the hotel? He opened the envelope and read the message inside. He liked her handwriting, it was like a child's:

Be at the hotel door at 20:00. DON'T BE LATE.

Quite clear, he thought. He was excited, nervous; it felt like he was a teenager again. He didn't know whether he liked that sensation or not. It was almost seven o'clock already, so he quickly went out again to a clothes shop near the hotel and bought a new shirt, some trousers and some shoes. He would have to leave them here, they would be no good at all on Athos and he couldn't take any extra weight in his rucksack, but he needed them for tonight.

He took a shower and put on the new clothes, hoping it wasn't too obvious that they were new, and was outside the main hotel door a few minutes before eight. At exactly eight o'clock a car drew up at the front door and the driver got out to open the back door for him. No one else was in the car, but he felt quite comfortable getting in and being taken anywhere, as long as Anniken was there. The chauffeur maintained a stubborn silence, so he didn't even try more than once to ask where they were going. Maybe he didn't speak any English.

They drove to the top of the city, towards Vlattadon and the Institute where he worked every morning. In fact, they went right past the door of the monastery grounds, stopping a few minutes later at another gateway. It looked to be a kind of park. The driver once again opened his door and simply pointed through the gate.

Shrugging his shoulders and enjoying the mystery, he

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went in. Standing under a tree was Anniken, immaculate in a black dress. She turned when she heard him approach.

“You really made me nervous when I saw you at the presentation. You should never have done that!” she said.

“Sorry. I saw your name on the speakers’ list and I just couldn’t resist. If it means anything, I thought you were great.”

“I *was* great till you walked in and made me get all mixed up. But never mind, I’ll get you back one day.”

“Well I’m sure you haven’t invited me all the way up here just to tell me off for attending your presentation. Why all the mystery? What’s the special occasion?”

She smiled and looked him up and down. “You must think it’s special if you went out and bought new clothes.” So it was that obvious. “I’ve been out to a cocktail reception with the company and I just thought it would be nice to give you a surprise and do something different. Nobody else was using the company car so I decided to make the most of it. So what do you want for dinner?”



She took him to a restaurant in the park that overlooked the whole city, shining below them as if it were hundreds of miles away. It was too good to be true, but Anniken brought him back to earth.

“Look, I feel I owe you an explanation. I told you last night that I’ve just came out of—well not just, it was quite some time ago now—out of a difficult relationship. I don’t want you to think anything you shouldn’t. I honestly couldn’t get into another one right now, not even for one night. I like your company, and like spending time with you, but I don’t

want you to think there's anything more."

He looked at her. He liked her honesty. "Well that's quite clear. I think I can stand it for the moment, but if I suddenly change my mind I'll just get up and leave, which means you'll have to pay." He smiled just to show her he was joking.

"I'm paying anyway. You paid yesterday so it's only fair."

She told him about her childhood as a musician, a violin player. She loved it except for the pressure from her father, who kept pushing her to be the best. He hadn't given her any time to just enjoy playing. He sent her to New York to study and learn. That was where she got involved with someone she shouldn't have. She didn't want to go into any detail, and he didn't ask. She left everything, musical career and the person she shouldn't ever have been with, and returned to Europe to study marketing. And now here she was, marketing manager for a big, successful company in expansion.

He was so intent on her every gesture and word that he had no idea if there was anyone else in the restaurant—otherwise he might have recognized the same dark-skinned man who had eaten at the same restaurant the first time they went out for dinner. He was sitting alone, apparently reading a book, near enough to hear their every word but not quite close enough to raise any suspicion.

Anniken's companion told her about his love as a boy for the ancient world, about how he would come home from playing football with his friends and read books about the fall of the Roman empire.

"Why the fall?" asked Anniken.

"Good question, I don't know really. I was always more interested in the end of something so enormous, trying to understand what went wrong rather than how and why it grew up in the first place. Then I started Latin at school and fell in

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love with it immediately. I remember the last day—there was a big party and everyone was going over the top, you know, being stupid and senseless. I went down to the central library with a copy of Virgil and sat reading the story of the wooden horse of Troy, and I felt waves of happiness. It's one of those moments I'll always remember as being truly happy."

She smiled at him. "You're so different from anyone else I've met. I mean, you should be a boring old man, someone who prefers reading Latin poetry to enjoying a school party, but you're not."

"Maybe I am, and I just know how to pretend very well."

"Maybe. If you are, you've fooled me. Tell me more."

"More? What about?"

"Well, about how you got into looking for this icon, more about how you can feel fulfilled just by looking at old manuscripts. More about you."

"If I tell you everything you might really think I'm boring. Look at it this way—I'm just lucky to be able to make some kind of a living doing what I love. It gets very lonely sometimes, but then again every so often you meet fascinating people," he said with a warm smile, "like a girl I met recently."

"Oh yes?" She returned the smile. "And who was that?"

"I don't remember her name right now. I think she was from some small town in Norway."

"Stupid!" laughed Anniken. "Is it really lonely?"

"Well yes, sometimes. Basically I work alone, apart from monks and other people who work in archives, but there is never any real contact there. I mean, I have some good friends on Mount Athos, but they are monks and they are not interested in what they call the real world. It's great if we talk about their world but it doesn't ever go any further."

Anniken thought for a moment. “But you must have friends back home.”

“Of course. But don’t forget that when I’m working on a project I spend long periods of time away. You must too. Don’t you spend time in all those countries you’re marketing for? Poland, the Czech Republic and all that?”

“Yes,” she answered. “And I understand what you’re saying—very often all I see are offices and a hotel room. I talk to some people about work, and there are always some that I have to say the minimum possible to because they always think I’m making myself available, as it were.”

“Do you think I’m trying to pick you up?” he ventured.

“I think you like me. But I also think you’re clever enough to understand what I told you and do not to want to spoil what we have, if you can call this anything—a friendship, whatever.”

He could only agree with her, at least outwardly. He did want more, of course, but at the same time it was true that he didn’t want to lose what little contact they had.

“Friendship might be more important than any other kind of relationship anyway,” he lied. “You know how the saying goes—the only relationships that last are friendships with erotic moments.”

Anniken looked at him. “What are you trying to tell me—that romantic love is dead and only friendship survives?”

“Not at all. Just that romantic love, or passion, does cool down over time. I mean, it has to, with routine, shopping, furniture, cooking, washing, children if they come, school, middle age, men going bald and women dying their hair, and so on. Now that we’re talking about it, it’s something I’ve always been afraid of—you know, losing the passion in a relationship. But at the same time, it’s true—all of that can never

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last and friendship can. I mean friendship with erotic moments of course.”

He enjoyed talking about relationships with Anniken, with whom he was not having a romance, but would love to. But why, if the passion would fade away and everything would turn into routine? Because she was beautiful and he wanted to feel her body against his. That was answer enough.

“What do you want for dessert?” he asked, more than anything to change the topic of conversation. “I’ll have cheesecake if there is any. I should carry out a field study of cheesecake all over the world—I’d end up disgustingly fat but I’d have a great time for a while.”

“I’ll go for the cheesecake too,” said Anniken. “Who’s winning so far?”

“A restaurant in New Orleans that some professor once took me to when I was lecturing there. I can’t remember the name right now. I’ve got a card somewhere at home. An enormous plate, a nice solid cheesecake, no fluffy or light stuff—the real thing, pure calories. Wonderful.”

“What’s fluffy?” asked Anniken.

“You know, too light, airy, not solid enough.”

“Can you say people are fluffy?” she asked. “If you can, it would be the last word in the world I would use to describe you. You’re solid, the real thing.”

“I suppose that’s a compliment—thanks,” he replied.

Ω

After coffee he asked her if she wanted to go for a walk, to get rid of some of the calories. Anniken pointed at her shoes and high heels—not comfortable for walking. The company car took them back to the hotel, where Anniken made her way

straight for the elevator. He knew that if he asked her to change her shoes and then go for a walk or anything like that she would say no, so he just said goodnight. He had no idea how long she would be there, if they would see each other the next day—which was his last day in Thessaloniki. He didn't want to ask her either. It wouldn't change anything.

Ω

The next day was just like all of the others he had spent in Thessaloniki—breakfast, taxi to the Institute and his head full of Anniken, distracting him from his work, distracting him from his life and from everything he tried to do. He knew he would not be able to concentrate on any manuscripts that day, so he had copies printed out from the microfilm to look at later, when he could gather his thoughts and focus. He ambled back down into the city center.

He went back to the hotel and packed his rucksack with clothes for both Mount Athos and then for the five days he had booked in what was without doubt his favorite hotel in the world—the Eagle's Palace, just outside Ouranoupolis. It was an impressive setting overlooking a private beach and swimming pool, enormous bedrooms and good food. After the harsh life on Athos there was nowhere better to wind down and just relax in the sun.

Early in the evening he went downstairs with no clear plan other than a vague hope of seeing Anniken. There she was, talking to one of the receptionists. She turned around as if on cue, as if she had been waiting for him, and with a smile that would have disarmed the purest of men, simply said, "Hi. Nice to see you again. Shall we go for a drink?"

The smile was not really needed—he was already dis-

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armed. The hotel bar was one of those anonymous places with no character or personality at all. As they sat down, they heard the first clap of thunder, shortly followed by pouring rain, one of the regular summer storms in this part of the Mediterranean.

Both of them felt a need to say something about what had happened the night before, but before they had time to say anything they were brusquely and rudely interrupted by a man in a suit.

“Anniken! I’ve been looking everywhere for you. I have to speak to you,” he insisted, looking at her companion with a mixture of scorn and curiosity. “But I can see you are busy with someone at the moment. I’ll come back later.” He nodded curtly and left.

“Shit!” she exclaimed. “That’s one of those guys I was telling you about! We’re about to sign a big deal with him and he thinks he can use me just because there’s lots of money involved. Let’s give him five minutes and we’ll disappear.”

He liked the way it sounded. *We* would disappear, not just her. She was clearly nervous and seemed to have forgotten about the tense situation they had put themselves into the first night they went out. A few minutes went by and the insistent gentleman was back at the bar. He had his back turned towards them, and Anniken suddenly stood up and told him to hurry, she didn’t want to be around when that guy came back to their table.

They left the bar without paying. They made straight for the hotel door but it was still pouring with rain, there was no way they could leave without getting absolutely soaked.

“Quick—the elevator!” he said.

She looked at him for a second and doubt overshadowed her eyes, but it passed in a second and she followed. He had

no idea where to go and pressed the fourth floor button, where his room was. They ran down the corridor, laughing at the way they had escaped from their persecutor.

“We did it! We lost him!” he shouted out in triumph. Still laughing, he took out his card and opened the door. He had given no real thought to the fact that he was about to go into his room with a woman, and she stopped.

“I don’t go into rooms with men I don’t know,” she said and looked at him.

He had no answer. He looked back at her and after a few seconds hesitation, they both went in. He wanted to tell her that she was safe, nothing would happen, but in a flash he realized that he couldn’t tell her such a thing. He wanted something to happen. She sat down on the chair and he sat down on the bed and made himself comfortable with some of the many cushions that lay strewn over the bed. Papers and notebooks were all over the desk and floor, but they were ignored.

The conversation continued as if they were anywhere but alone in a hotel room.

“So you told me you aren’t married. Is that because you have been? Are you gay? Celibate? A monk from Athos who has come to meet a woman in secret? Come on, tell me,” she said in mock seriousness.

He returned her grave look. “I am none of the things you mentioned. I don’t think I’m gay, and if I am I haven’t realized it yet. I do happen to be celibate at the moment, but not through my own choice. And I wouldn’t mind being a monk on Athos sometimes—but not a regular monk, rather one with a nun to love him at nights. Do you want me to give you a list of old girlfriends and lovers?”

What happened to old lovers? What happened to the peo-

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ple we fell in love with when we were young? Did they grow older, get married, have children and become someone else? Or did they stay the same age and never change, waiting somewhere for the lost loves and passions of youth? How could we get through life without ever seeing them again? And what would you say if you did meet them?

“OK, no more personal questions for now” she said. “Let’s leave your old girlfriends where they belong—in the past. Tell me what it’s like working for yourself—tell me how wonderful it is not to have to put up with a stupid boss.”

“It has its advantages, I have to admit, but don’t think it’s perfect. It gets very lonely sometimes, you miss other people. Well, you miss them until you are with them again, because most of the time when I am with people, I want to be alone. Present company excluded of course,” he smiled.

“Yes, of course,” she smiled back at him.

He had almost forgotten that they were alone in a hotel room with nobody to answer to and nowhere else to go. The conversation lulled for a while and he looked up at her. Her neck, her perfect skin caused something to react in him and despite all his fears and reserve, his body stood up and walked over to her leaving his mind back on the bed. He went round the back of her chair, bent over and very lightly, very gently, kissed the back of her neck. For a magical moment he felt her skin on his lips and drank in her faint and delicate perfume. Her hair was done up in a kind of pony-tail, which for some reason he found the most attractive way a woman could ever have her hair. He had not planned to do this, he saw her hair and her skin and his body just moved over to hers and tried to form part of it.

The mistake was obvious. She froze, colder than ice. It felt like she had stabbed him as her burning eyes turned their cold

glare at him. He recoiled, but could not bring himself to apologize for something he was hardly conscious of having done, let alone for something he wanted to do. He moved over to the window and looked down at the square, full of life even at this time of night. Parents playing with their children, young couples sitting on benches laughing and sharing ice cream, personal worlds unfolded before his eyes.

“Anniken, I think I’m falling in love with you.”

A soft voice answered. “I don’t even know you.”

Of course not. He did not need to know her, he just wanted to be part of her. What did knowing her mean when his soul was crying out to be joined to hers? He heard the door close gently and still did not look back for a few minutes.

The sudden emptiness of the room crushed him. A bitter smile covered his face. He undressed and got into bed. He lay motionless, just staring at the ceiling, until sleep finally overcame him.

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