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Chapter 1

A short, elderly man, dressed in an expensive suit, hastily made his way along the dark, unlit New York streets. Every now and then he glanced at his watch, as if he was afraid of missing an appointment. In the deathly pale light of the moon, he could see the hands of his watch moving toward midnight.

The man looked around nervously. He peered cautiously into the darkness, seeking out his invisible pursuer and then anxiously wiped his sweating brow with a handkerchief, unable to shake off the sense of some kind of unseen presence.

Crooked shadows, blurred figures, muffled sounds...

He seemed to be not in a modern metropolis, but in a grim, mediaeval ghost town.

Suddenly, the man heard a voice.

“Your passport please, sir.”

“What?”

“Your passport, sir,” repeated the Kennedy Airport employee cheerfully.

The fleeting vision vanished as suddenly as it had appeared, as the man came to.

“Yes, yes of course,” he said, somewhat hesitantly taking the document from his jacket pocket and handing it to the passport control officer.

“Are you OK darling?” The slim, young brunette, with aristocratic features, looked tenderly at her husband.

“Yeah, Jess. I was just thinking about something.”

“Welcome to New York, Mr Peterson!” said the officer politely, as he handed back the passport.

In no time at all, Mr and Mrs Peterson had left Kennedy Airport and were in a cab on their way to the hotel.

New York greeted them with sunshine, congestion and a dizzy pace of life. Jessica was already anticipating persuading her husband, Morris, to take her around the most exclusive boutiques in Manhattan, but seeing the anxious look on his face, she took his hand and said, soothingly:

“Don’t worry, darling. We’ll be free of it tomorrow.”

“Unless it kills me first,” Mr Peterson muttered.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Morris. That’s just a pile of nonsense. You shouldn’t believe everything you hear,” Jessica responded, reassuringly.

The hotel that Mr and Mrs Peterson arrived at exuded real class and luxury. Their suite was decorated in a classical style and seemed to have been made for lovers of the extravagant. The antique French chairs, the kingsize four-poster bed, the Dutch Masters on the walls, and all the other luxury items would have made an impression on even the most sophisticated connoisseur of fine interiors.

Jessica twirled around in front of the mirror, taking pleasure in her perfect figure. She could just picture herself dressed in the latest fashions from the New York catwalk.

“Darling, would you mind if I went out to meet some of my old classmates today?” Jessica asked sweetly. “I haven’t seen them in such a long time, and I would so like to have a cocktail or two with them, as we look back on our wild student days.”

“Just don’t be long,” Morris replied absently, his mind elsewhere. “Shall we breakfast here at the hotel?”

“Oh, yes!” Jessica could hardly contain herself.

Mr and Mrs Peterson went down to the first floor, to the restaurant. At such an early hour, the place was empty apart from an elderly lady who looked something like the Queen of England, a young girl with an Asian appearance and a respectable looking gentleman who was dressed to the nines.

Morris and Jessica placed their order.

Deep in thought, Mr Peterson placed a small antique item on the table and took an auction program booklet out of his case.

“Darling, do you mind if I go and powder my nose?” Jessica asked.

“No, you go ahead,” said Morris, his head buried in the booklet.

Once inside the ladies' restroom, Jessica checked to make sure there was no one around, and then took out her cell phone.

“I told you not to call me on this number!” she uttered, angrily. “Yes, tonight, just as we agreed... No, he doesn’t suspect a thing. Morris is all wrapped up in this auction... Are you crazy? It’s too risky! I have to go now. See you!”

Jessica went back to the table and started chatting away as if nothing had happened. Using all her charm, she managed to snap Morris out of

his reverie and cheer him up, before asking him, innocently, to take her shopping. Her husband agreed almost instantly.

The day flew by, and soon it was evening, when Mrs Peterson went off to meet her old classmates, and did not make it back until morning. Returning to the hotel in the early hours, she was surprised to see that, even at that time of day, there were people on the leather couch in the lobby. Seeing her, they stood up and approached. Taking a second look, Jessica realized that these were no ordinary guests.

They were cops.

Chapter 2

Private detective Kevin Kris was passing time on this warm August evening at his desk as usual. His office was in a cozy, two-story building in Forest Hills Gardens, one of the quieter streets in New York.

Its unusual architectural style made the building look more like a stately home than a detective agency. It had a quaint tower that brought to mind the romantic image of a medieval fortress. On the second floor, a mass of green vines wove carefully in and out of the wooden balcony fence. This was where the private eye liked to sit and sip his strong coffee in inclement weather.

There were only two members of staff at the detective agency: Kris himself and his faithful assistant, Penny, who was also a freelance journalist with a big New York publication. Business had been pretty good, and the private eye had made something of a name for himself in certain parts of the Big Apple.

However, in the last three weeks Kris had had no clients, and he had been spending his free time switching between studying the catalog of an important upcoming auction, going to the gym, and playing *Go* with Penny.

Kris lovingly dusted his gleaming collection of antique guns, swords, daggers and knives. Penny was at her computer, working on an article analyzing the crime level in the Bronx over the last five years. Her beautiful green eyes burned enthusiastically and she was even a little

flushed with excitement. At times like this, nothing could distract her from her writing.

Wiping his already spotless musket, dating to the French Revolution, Kris picked up a dog-eared catalog for the upcoming auction. Being an inveterate collector of ancient weapons, the private eye was planning to join the bidding for a 15th century *katana*, a large, two-handled Japanese sword.

Before long, Penny said goodbye and left for home. Kris remained sitting in his armchair, mulling over the coveted *katana* in the picture, when suddenly the doorbell rang.

On the doorstep stood a respectable-looking middle-aged man in a stylish suit. His long, dark hair was combed back, and his puffy red eyes indicated that he had not had much sleep. The visitor was pale and clearly agitated.

Kris let his visitor in and gestured to the armchair by his desk.

“My name’s Edmund Peterson,” said the visitor, introducing himself. “Can I get straight down to business?”

“Fire away,” replied Kris, listening attentively.

“Yesterday, August 6, at 2.30 a.m., the body of my father, Morris Peterson, was found in the Brooklyn ghetto.” Edmund paused to gather his thoughts, struggling with every word. “My father and his third wife, Jessica, arrived in New York on August 5 to attend an auction. They wanted to sell some kind of medallion. That same evening, Jessica went out to a nightclub and when she came back to the hotel in the morning, the police were waiting with the news.”

Edmund stopped.

“How did your father die?” asked Kris.

“According to the doctors, he had a severe shock that made his heart stop. What’s more, his face was twisted into an expression of unspeakable horror. Seeing him in the morgue, I literally vomited.”

“You mean he was frightened to death?” Kris inquired.

“It looks like it. My father must have seen something so horrendous that his heart couldn’t take it.”

“Did your father have any health problems?” the private detective asked.

“He never complained about any, as far as I know.”

“What was Mr Peterson doing in the Brooklyn ghetto?”

“That’s something no one knows.” Edmund shook his head. “My father was a respectable and respected businessman, a millionaire with businesses all over the world. I’ve no idea what he could’ve been doing in such a place at that time of night.”

“When did Mr Peterson leave the hotel?”

“The inspector told me that my father went out at 11.30 p.m. and caught a cab to an unknown destination,” Edmund replied.

“Did the police tell you anything else?” asked Kris.

“Only that they found a single clue at the scene of the crime, and I don’t have any idea how it could have got there,” said Edmund, slowly.

“There was a book on his chest.”

“What book?”

“*Mythical Creatures of Ancient Greece*. It was published in New York this year and was opened at the page on Chimera.”

“A monster with the head of a lion, the body of a goat and a serpent for a tail. The offspring of Typhon and Echidna that was slain by Bellerophon, at the command of King Iobates.” Kris nodded. “Was your father interested in Ancient Greek legends?”

“He didn’t know anything about them.” Edmund shook his head. “On the page it was open at, someone had made a simple, pencil sketch of a king on his throne, and some woman.”

“Hmm,” said the detective, pondering this. “Were there any wounds, cuts or bruises on the body?”

“No. There were no signs of violence. It looked as if he just died, just like that.”

“Did he have any enemies?”

“My father was an extremely wealthy man. I’m sure you realize that enough people were jealous of him.”

“Had anything been taken from the scene of the crime?”

“Not a thing. His wallet, containing five thousand dollars, was untouched.”

Kris thoughtfully massaged his left temple with his index finger. It was a pity Penny had gone home. This looked like being a rather interesting case!

“Did Mr Peterson often go to auctions?”

“At least twice a year. Sometimes he sold things. He might decide that he was fed up with something and auction it off. He was passionate about antiques, an honorary member of a Parisian collectors' club, and he was interested in painting too.”

For a while, the private detective and the dead millionaire's son stood in silence together.

"Do you think Mr Peterson was murdered?" The detective broke the silence.

Edmund, seeming to come out of a trance, said earnestly,

"I know who did it."

Kris looked coolly at his client.

"His third wife, Jessica. She's the murderer. She never loved my father and only married him for his money," Edmund said, with conviction. "She's real sly and cunning. Jessica set things up to make it look like my father had died of natural causes, and put that stupid book there to fool everyone, to make it seem that dad was killed by some crazy idiot, not a respectable lady of society, a millionaire's wife."

"How did Mrs Peterson manage to lure her husband to the Brooklyn ghetto?" asked Kris.

"I have absolutely no idea." Edmund shrugged. "That's why I'm here. I want you to prove that it was Jessica who murdered my father."

"Why are you so sure that Mr Peterson was killed by his wife?"

"Under the terms of his will, Jessica stands to inherit most of my father's assets when he dies."

"You do know that my services aren't cheap?"

"I'm not concerned about the money," Edmund replied. "Jessica's going to pay for my father's death."

"Well then, my fee for solving the case will be the *katana* that you're going to buy at tomorrow's auction," said the detective, handing Edmund the catalog with the picture of the weapon.

“It’s a deal.”

Kris and Edmund Peterson shook hands.

The investigation had begun.

Chapter 3

Penny usually started the day by sorting the mail, checking her emails and going through documents, and could even find time to water the flowers and brew some aromatic tea. She had been working for Kevin Kris for three years now and was a great assistant, dealing with all the paperwork, from case files to the detective agency's financial affairs. In that time, she had got so attached to him that she would have been happy to help this habitual bachelor with his household chores, but twice a week old Mrs Rose came round to clean and tidy the place. Since the detective's house did double duty as the headquarters of the detective agency, Kris was particularly fastidious about keeping it tidy.

This was the office, on the first floor of the private eye's truly wonderful house, where 27-year-old Penny came to work every day. The young woman liked helping the private detective, since she was often called on to take part in investigations, and that was the part she found really exciting!

At 8 a.m., Penny opened the front door as usual and walked into the detective agency, no run-of-the-mill office for the average New York private eye.

Opposite the entrance door was a wooden spiral stairway leading to the second floor, and the private detective's own cozy office was located underneath this. Penny's desk was on the left of a large window and

overlooked a lovely garden. On the opposite wall was a fireplace, and alongside that a beautiful couch.

Everything in the spacious hallway had been tastefully chosen: the fine, wooden furniture, the curtains in a shade of malachite green, the gold-braided cushions, the bookcase filled with books all bound in red. The final touch was the large ironwork chandelier. The simplicity and elegance of this interior was clear evidence of its owner's refined and aristocratic taste. At the same time, it was homely and cozy.

The door to Kris's office stood ajar. Peering in, Penny saw the private detective looking at a stand to which several diagrams had been pinned.

"Good morning, Penny!" said the detective warmly. "I've a new brain twister for you."

Penny loved Kris's puzzles. They were something of a game: the detective came up with different riddles, puzzles, brain twisters and crime scenarios, and she tried to solve them. This often took her several days, or even a week.

"Good morning Mr Kris!" Penny smiled. "So what's this brain twister about?"

"Well, a certain Mrs Meyer, arriving at work, realized that she'd left her purse at home. She borrowed 100 dollars from her colleague for lunch, but lost it on the way to the restaurant. Luckily, Mrs Meyer met a friend at the restaurant, who loaned her 50 dollars. She used this to buy two ten-dollar hamburgers leaving 30 dollars over. Back at work, Mrs Meyer gave this back to her colleague as part of her loan, which left her owing 70 dollars to her colleague, and 50 to her friend. Altogether, she

owed 120. Plus, she'd had two ten-dollar hamburgers, making it 140. But, if you remember, Mrs Meyer first borrowed 100, and then 50, so she'd borrowed 150. The question is, what happened to the other 10 dollars?"

"So, she borrowed a hundred, then fifty, but it came to a hundred and forty," Penny mulled this over. "Hmm, I'll have to give this some thought."

"There is one other brain twister. The body of a millionaire is found in the Brooklyn ghetto. The cause of death was shock, making his heart stop. None of his personal possessions had been touched, and a book entitled *Mythical Creatures of Ancient Greece* was found on the body. The task is to prove that this was a homicide and that the murderer was the dead millionaire's wife."

"Have we got a new case?" Penny's eyes fired with obvious enthusiasm.

Kris nodded and recounted the details of the previous day's conversation with Edmund.

"You mean, Mr Peterson died of severe shock?" asked Penny.

"It seems that Morris was an impressionable man," the private detective replied.

"What could have caused it?" Penny wondered out loud, "and what's the book on mythical creatures got to do with it?"

"I think we'll soon find out," Kris declared decisively. "I'm going to pay a visit to Jessica Peterson. Edmund thinks it was she who killed him. While I'm away, see what they've written in the press on this story. You never know, they might have some wonderful ideas."

Around noon, when he had dealt with the agency's daily affairs, the private eye went to see Jessica Peterson. After sitting in traffic for a while, Kris finally made it to the hotel, one of the most up market in New York. Since he was on good terms in many places in the city, he had no trouble finding his way to Jessica's suite, where he knocked at the door.

"Can't you read? It says 'do not disturb'," came an irritated female voice.

"I think we might have something to talk about, Mrs Peterson," replied the detective, calmly.

Footsteps were heard approaching the door, and it was opened by a tall, slim brunette in a short, white silk robe that looked more like an evening dress.

"Kevin Kris. Private detective," said Kris matter-of-factly.

"What do you want?" Jessica asked brusquely, "although I think I can guess what brought you here."

"What then?" Kris continued, impassive.

"This is all down to Morris's crazy son. I bet your life it was little Eddie who sent you, to lock me up as fast as you can so he can get his hands on his father's inheritance. But he should be so lucky! I'm guilty of nothing!" Jessica exclaimed and, turning her back on the private eye, she strutted over to a table by the window.

The private detective, seeing this as an invitation, followed her into the room. It was a truly lovely room, although even the undiscerning eye could see that it had not been tidied for several days. This was evident

not just from the thin layer of dust on the furniture, but from the things thrown willy-nilly around the room. Clothes were thrown over chairs, pairs of shoes were left by the door, some small papers and dollar bills lay on the lamp table, and there were dozens of other bits and pieces which the experienced private eye immediately made a mental note of. Even on the floor under the table that Jessica was approaching lay a brochure, and on the table were a couple of open wine bottles.

“Edmund Peterson thinks differently. And I have to say, he’s got good cause to,” continued Kris. “Can you tell me where you were on the night of the fifth to sixth of August?”

“I’ve already told the cops. I was at Desire,” she snapped, and poured herself a glass of wine. Judging by her manner, this was not her first glass of the day.

“Do you often go to those kinds of places?”

“As you can see, I’m much younger than Morris. I still want to have fun and enjoy life to the full,” Jessica glanced over at the private detective, expecting him to reproach her for this, but he said nothing. Nevertheless, she decided to say a few things in her defense.

“Yes!” she exclaimed, “I’m young and I have no desire to waste the best years of my life in the company of his old friends and their dreary, fat wives.” Jessica finished her angry tirade and then, taking a gulp of wine, she went on:

“As you might have guessed, Morris was no fan of loud parties, nightclubs and those kinds of places, unlike me.” These words were followed by a long pause.

Jessica walked up to the window, pressed her lips to her glass of wine and stared into the distance.

“I see, Mrs Peterson. However, let’s take a look at the events of August 5th.” Kris said, breaking the silence.

“We flew to New York. Morris was extremely concerned about the upcoming auction, and I could already see myself spending another dull evening in our rooms. But I was lucky, because hubs was so worked up about the sale of the medallion that he let me go out to the nightclub without a word and without trying to stop me,” Jessica took another sip of wine. “Oh, go on, sit down,” she said to the private detective.

“Thank you,” Kris replied, and selected one of the armchairs by the table in the center of the room. “Did you go to the nightclub alone?”

“No, my friends Monica and Betsy came with me, and if you don’t believe me, I can show you the photos we took there before we left.” With these words, Jessica took a digital camera out of her purse, switched it on, and proffered it to Kris.

“Have you known them long?” asked the detective, looking over the photos.

“We were at college together. Betsy got married in her sophomore year, and Monica tied the knot just after we graduated. They live in New York now, and we always get together when I’m here so we can remember old times and have some real fun. You can have a real good time with them, not like with Morris’s friends.”

“Evidently, you were looking forward to seeing them.” Kris snorted under his breath, handing back the camera.

“Oh, yes!” Jessica clucked. “I even bought a leopard-print dress from Louis Vuitton’s latest collection, especially for that evening. And shoes to match!”

“Very interesting. My assistant Penny loves that designer too. Can I take a look at that amazing dress?”

“Your assistant has good taste,” observed Jessica, teasingly, “but unfortunately, I can’t show it to you. When I was told what had happened, I quickly changed into something else before going off with the cops, and I threw the dress in the wash basket. What with all the news, I completely forgot to send it for dry-cleaning, and it’s still soiled.”

“Soiled?”

The widow looked nervously at Kris, and then continued,

“Yeah, you know, drinks, tobacco smoke, the usual stuff. I can see that you never go to nightclubs.”

“Absolutely true.” Kris nodded, calmly. “When did you go back to the hotel?”

“At half past four,” said Jessica, thinking back.

“As far as I know, Desire closes at 3.30 a.m.,” remarked the private detective.

“You are incredibly well-informed for a man who never goes to nightclubs,” Jessica retorted. “It took me ages to get a cab. And anyway, we’d had a lot to drink, and I don’t remember much at all. When I got back to the hotel, I was knocked out by the news of Morris’s death. It was all I could do to change and go to identify him,” she spluttered.

Suddenly, the phone rang and Mrs Peterson ran to answer it. Judging from the conversation, it was the manager, insisting she come down to

reception. Jessica tried resisting, not wanting to leave her rooms, but finally gave in, slamming down the receiver.

“Give me a couple of minutes,” said Jessica to the detective, as she left the room.

When she returned, Kris was sitting in the armchair looking somewhat thoughtful, his eyes narrowed.

“Some idiot mixed me up with Jessica Jenkinson,” said Mrs Peterson angrily.

The private detective focused on the widow. There was a glint in his eye.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” asked Jessica, puzzled. “I’ve nothing more to say to you.”

“Well, that’s good to hear, Mrs Peterson. I’ve already heard enough,” said the private detective, rising slowly from his chair.

“Wonderful, because I’ve had enough of your questioning. I’d like to stop this conversation now.”

“I’m sorry I tired you, but the conversation is not over yet. You see, everything you’ve told me is a pack of lies.”

Chapter 4

Jessica had been caught off guard, and was clearly worried. She hadn't been expecting this.

"Are you sure there's nothing you'd like to add, Mrs Peterson?"

Jessica was lost for words and did not know how to react.

"I've already told you everything, and anyway, the cops are on the case. There's nothing for a prying private eye like you to do here. Get out!"

"You're right, the cops are on the case," said Kris matter-of-factly. "And I think they'd be interested in hearing what I've found out."

"You've got nothing of interest to them. I really was at a nightclub, and they've checked it out."

"I don't doubt it, but what interests me is where you went afterwards, and why you're lying about it."

"What makes you think I went somewhere else?" Jessica retorted, provoked.

"Mrs Peterson, the dress you were wearing that night had traces of..."

"What?" shrieked Jessica, without letting him finish. "My dress? How dare you go through my things!"

"Mrs Peterson, how did traces of acrylic paint get on your dress?" Kris asked, ignoring Jessica's reaction. "As far as I know, it's usually something that serious painters use."

Anger and confusion, these were the two emotions which Jessica now battled. She was ill at ease with the private detective's directness, but at the same time she desperately wanted to refute everything Kris was saying. Finally, Jessica pulled herself together and said,

"Morris loved art, and even did some painting himself. The day I bought the dress, I took it into his studio so he could admire it. That's probably when I accidentally stained it."

"But your dress is clean in the photos."

"What can you see in them anyway?"

"You'd be surprised," replied Kris calmly. "If you zoom in to these photos that you showed me, you can clearly see that there are no traces of paint on your left sleeve. In other words, the acrylic stain appeared *after* you'd been to the nightclub. But most intriguing is why the soles of your shoes are also covered with paint."

Jessica kept up her protestations.

"That can easily be explained. And anyway, I was at the club with my friends until it closed. And you can check that out too. Monica and Betsy will back me up," said Jessica, stubbornly refusing to back down.

"I've no doubt that your friends will back you up, but my next discovery makes me wonder if you're telling me the whole truth."

"What discovery?"

"This was lying on the floor by your bed," and with these words, the detective showed the sales slip that he'd picked up while Jessica had been out of the room.

"You must have dropped it in your haste, but it contains some very interesting information," continued the private detective, with enviable

calm. “On August 6th, at 1.30 a.m., someone purchased two bottles of champagne and a box of truffles in a shop just two blocks from Desire. I put it to you, that that someone was you.”

“I don’t know what slip you’re talking about and I have nothing more to say.” Jessica defiantly turned her back on the detective.

“Mrs Peterson, you do realize that the video surveillance camera in the shop proves that it was you?”

At that point, Jessica looked like a cornered animal. Her torment showed itself in her face – her raised eyebrows, her fixed, anxious stare, and the fact that she was biting her bottom lip – all this betrayed the young woman’s doubts and fears.

Kris continued his unrelenting volley of arguments.

“And I also found this brochure detailing the works of a certain Marco Paliatti under the coffee table. Where did you get it?”

“I don’t know. My husband must have brought it with him.”

“Really? Then I think you’ll be surprised to learn that this brochure was published on August 5th in New York, as a limited edition especially for the exhibition in two weeks’ time. I wonder how your husband managed to seek one out after only a few hours in the Big Apple? Judging from his self-portrait, this Paliatti guy is a pretty talented, red-haired artist, and there were a couple of hairs exactly that color in the paint on your leopard-print shoes. Are you still sure you don’t want to tell me anything?”

“Oh God! What a horrid state of affairs!” Jessica exclaimed, and she melodramatically collapsed into an armchair.

“Okay then,” she continued, calming down, “That evening, I was at Paliatti’s studio, but only to buy a painting for Morris.”

“So why didn’t you tell the cops this?”

“Work it out for yourself. Wouldn’t it be crazy, on the night Morris died, to admit that I’d gone somewhere else after the nightclub?”

“If it had made the cops suspicious, they could’ve checked with the artist and found you were telling the truth.”

“Oh yeah? They might have allayed their suspicions, but Edmund would’ve got more suspicious. That little shit would probably have deprived me of my inheritance! I bet he’s told you that if I’ve had an affair, then under the terms of the marriage contract I wouldn’t get a cent from Morris’s estate. And that’s after ten years of keeping that old bore happy!”

“So, you’ve never had an affair?” Kris focused on the woman.

“No,” Jessica mumbled.

“I’d love to be able to believe you, but in addition to your dress, I also found your bra in the wash basket, with torn clips. That’s pretty strange, don’t you think?”

Just as Jessica was about to respond to this, the private detective added,

“But before you try to explain, let me tell you one more thing I observed. That mark on your neck. It looks like the sign of a passionate kiss, but it’s not there in the photos from the nightclub. So could it be that you were doing more than just choosing a painting in Marco Paliatti’s studio?”

Jessica was crushed. She had thought her explanations were foolproof, but that illusion was now shattered, like broken glass. Jessica would have done anything to deny it all, but she no longer had the strength. She had no choice but to tell the truth.

With a deep breath, she began. “It was such a long time ago. When I graduated I couldn’t find work, and wouldn’t have made a fortune just working as a waitress in a student cafe. That’s when I saw this ad in the paper, for nude models at an art school, and that’s where I met Marco Paliatti. We had feelings for each other from the first moment we met, and we soon started dating. Our hearts were full of wild passion, and I still remember every minute we spent together. This lasted for about three months, until the patron of the art school, who happened to be Morris, saw me and fell in love. I couldn’t pass up such a chance, and without a second thought I swapped my poor artist for a sugar daddy. Things soon settled down. I became accustomed to Morris and he wasn’t so bad, you know. It’s just that we were different. He loved my youth, my innocence and candor, but stuck in the company of those old misers and their stuck-up wives, I found it harder and harder with each passing year to keep being me. Not long ago, Marco came across me on a social network site, and we kept in touch. When he found out that I’d soon be in New York, he pleaded with me to meet him and, to be honest, I wanted to as well. But Morris would never have allowed it. That’s why I decided to slip away unnoticed, when my friends had had plenty to drink. Marco was waiting for me near the club, and on the way back we went to a store for champagne, to celebrate. I spent the rest of the night with him, and when I got back to the hotel in the morning, the

cops were waiting for me. I never thought I'd end up in this mess. If Edmund finds out, his lawyers'll turn me out onto the streets. I beg you, please don't tell anyone!"

Kris looked into the eyes of this beautiful woman. They were brimming with tears. Nothing remained of the haughty and willful lady that he had been talking to at the start of the conversation. Now, there was only this beautiful woman with pleading, desperate eyes.

"All right, then," said the private detective shortly.

Jessica relaxed and poured herself some more wine. Something about Kris's calmness and imperturbability made her sure that he would keep his word. Moreover, the private detective's amazing intellectual abilities had had a great impression on Jessica. Concealing her interest and admiration for Kris, she adjusted her robe and took a small sip from her glass.

"What do you think Mr Peterson was doing in the ghetto in Brooklyn?" asked the private eye.

"I've no idea," admitted Jessica. "Morris was so absorbed in something that day..."

"Did he tell you he was going out that night?"

Jessica shook her head.

"Perhaps he was meeting someone?"

Mrs Peterson thought for a while.

"I think I might remember something. A couple of weeks ago, Morris told me that he was planning to meet a Turkish illegal called Emirhan Shahin in New York. He deals in stolen antiques and valuables,

and Morris had done business with him once or twice before. Maybe my husband had gone to meet him that fateful night.”

“I wonder,” said Kris, mulling this over. “Do you know where I can find him?”

Jessica shook her head.

After a few more questions, and without extracting any more useful information, the private detective got up.

“Well then, thank you for your honesty, Mrs Peterson.”

“I hope to see you again,” Jessica proclaimed enigmatically.

“See you later, then.” Kris left the room, leaving Mrs Peterson alone.

As he was leaving, the private detective gave a sly nod to the manager. After all, it was he who had mistaken Jessica Peterson for Jessica Jenkinson.

When he got back to his office, the private detective found Penny engrossed in a newspaper article on the death of Mr Peterson.

“Jessica didn’t murder her husband,” said Kris. “On the night of August 5th to 6th, she was with an ex-lover.”

“An interesting turn of affairs.” Penny put down the paper.

“Jessica said that Morris was planning to meet an Emirhan Shahin, a Turkish illegal, in New York. A trader in stolen antiques and valuables.”

“Do you know where to find him?” asked Penny.

“Not yet,” replied Kris, taking out his well-worn notebook. “But in the meantime, I’ve a job for you, Penny. There’s an auction tonight where Edmund should be bidding for my *katana*. Jessica will also be there, selling some kind of medallion. I want you to go there and watch them.”

Penny nodded enthusiastically. She loved the jobs that the private eye gave her, particularly if they involved her playing a part in solving a case.

Kris gave her brief instructions, and let her go home. The private detective made some coffee and began to make inquiries on where he might find this Emirhan Shahin.

The investigation was underway.

Chapter 5

Brooklyn, one of the most densely populated boroughs of New York, had once been the Dutch village of Breuckelen, on the banks of the East River.

This was where Kris was now headed in his old Mustang, in search of Emirhan Shahin. The private eye would have preferred to have been at the wheel of his beloved, top-of-the-range BMW, but despite its edge, such a car was hardly the thing for a drive around Bedford-Stuyvesant, the neighborhood where Morris Peterson's body had been found.

Darkness was falling and Brooklyn was slowly being transformed into a mass of shimmering lights, like stars in the night sky. The neon lights on Brooklyn Bridge shone, beckoning tourists and photographers alike.

It didn't take Kris long to reach Bedford-Stuyvesant, one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the borough. His target was a nightclub known to the locals as Mix, since its clientele was a mixture of people from all corners of the globe.

Mix was a favorite haunt of Brooklyn's illegal aliens, a place where they could feel relatively safe from the immigration service's spies. Mix represented the worst that Brooklyn had to offer, and fights, brawls and shootings were regular occurrences. This was also where you'd come to escape, to get high and forget that you didn't know where your next meal was coming from or where you'd be sleeping that night.

These migrants lived their lives a day at a time, knowing they could be picked up by the immigration service without warning and thrown out of the country without a penny to their names.

You could get hold of some valuable information in this club. Every night, as the mean-looking singer sang in her rough, smoker's voice, all the latest news and gossip were exchanged.

When Kris walked into Mix, after parking his Mustang round the back in the yard, he was hit by the strong odor of tobacco, sweat, hookah, and other vile smells. There was, as ever, a mixed bag of customers: Turks, Greeks, Italians, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Colombians, and most of them were illegals. They were trying to unwind after the long, hard day. The atmosphere was hardly friendly, but not hostile either.

The private detective found a seat at the bar and ordered a Scotch. Sitting a seat away from him on his right was a glum-looking Turk who was staring at the bottom of his glass as if hoping that it would somehow miraculously fill with raki. His unkempt beard and red watery eyes, together with the stench of his unwashed body, was quite revolting. His hands, tattooed, cut and bruised, were shoved into the pockets of his grubby, torn jacket in the hope of finding a couple of dollars there. But there would be no more money today.

The private detective looked carefully around the joint.

Underneath their rough exteriors, these people hid their sufferings, anxieties and fears.

Kris could feel the Turk staring at him.

“Give him what he wants,” said the private detective nonchalantly to the barman, nodding towards his neighbor.

“My name’s Mehmet Karadga.” The Turk suddenly stirred and moved closer to Kris, excitedly watching the barman pour the glass of raki.

“So, what have you done to upset them?” asked the private eye, and he nodded in the direction of a group of Turks who were smoking hookah. Kris could see at once that Mehmet Karadga was an outcast even among his own. Not an enviable position to be in. He’d been thrown out of the Brooklyn Turkish enclave, and could not rely on their help any more.

“They caught me thieving.”

“They don’t look any better than you.”

“Ah, I was stealing family money,” said Mehmet, and he emptied his glass.

“I’m looking for someone by the name of Emirhan Shahin.” Kris looked seriously at Mehmet.

“Never heard of him.” The Turk shrugged his shoulders.

“He sells stolen valuables and antiques. He’s been seen around Bedford-Stuyvesant, Chinatown, Brighton Beach, the guy to be seen with,” said the private detective, nodding to the barman to pour another raki.

“What does it matter who’s seen where? We live in New York’s shit-hole. It’s the pits, a millstone crushing hundreds of lost souls, year in and year out, when they’re only trying to make a better life for themselves,” Mehmet Karadga muttered philosophically. “People come

and go, dozens of new faces everyday, and you try to fight your way up and realize that you'll never get to see the American sun."

"How can I find Emirhan Shahin?" Kris stared at the Turk as he got more and more intoxicated.

"Never heard of him," he said, stubbornly shaking his head.

The private eye placed a hundred-dollar bill on the counter. Mehmet nearly flipped at the sight of Benjamin Franklin. Then he became surer of himself, and his head cleared too.

"Shahin hit rock bottom. They say he's got something to do with the death of that millionaire, that guy they found a couple of days ago, 5 blocks from here," said Mehmet, tucking the bill away.

"What would a millionaire be doing in a place like this?" asked Kris.

"He was asking for it," Mehmet muttered. "He didn't have the brains to keep his nose out of our part of town on his own after dark. He must've been totally fleeced. Pity I wasn't there."

"Prove it!" Kris responded suddenly.

"I didn't kill him!" spluttered the Turk. "I was unloading containers down in the port."

"I never said the rich guy was killed."

"I don't get it. How did he croak then?" Mehmet was puzzled.

"Shock. His heart stopped."

"An overdose?"

"There were no drugs in his bloodstream."

"He probably got scared by his own shadow and that's what got him," said Mehmet Karadga, with a dry laugh.

"Where is Shahin hiding?"

“It’ll cost you. Lots,” added the Turk uneasily. “My girl’s up for deportation.”

“You’ll get nothing more from me,” said Kris.

At that moment ten tall, menacing Russian skinheads, built for a fight, walked into Mix.

Kris did not miss the fact that the group of Turks around the hookah pipe suddenly looked very uncomfortable.

“Looks like trouble,” the private detective remarked calmly.

As the Russians ordered vodka, they glanced over threateningly at the Turks. The atmosphere was tense.

Mehmet Karadga was trembling, either from raki or fear.

“Maybe we should get some air,” said Mehmet forcedly.

“So, do you remember where Emirhan Shahin’s hiding now?” Kris inquired impassively.

Suddenly, the group of Turks jumped up and made for the exit. The Russians, who had been prepared for this, barred their escape and rushed at them, their fists in the air. The Turks had obviously done something to upset the guys from Brighton Beach. Gang brawls were nothing unusual in the pits of Brooklyn.

Before long, everyone in the place had been dragged into the fight. Tables, chairs, bottles, billiard balls, bodies, yelling and cursing filled the air. As the private eye had predicted, trouble reigned at Mix. Although Kris had his faithful Sig Sauer P229 under his arm, he was in no rush to use it. This gun was for emergency use only.

“I’ll ask you one more time, ‘Where is Shahin hiding?’ yelled Kris, fighting off two Russians at once.

Mehmet Karadga was about to respond, when he was kicked violently in the chest, and sent flying, scattering the bottles on the next table.

“Get me out of here, and I’ll tell you!” shouted the Turk, reeling in agony.

Kris ran over to Mehmet. He pulled him up and together they made for the exit. The private detective was a master of kung fu and could take care of himself in such situations, unlike Mehmet, who had grabbed a billiard cue and was thrashing it from side to side like a sword.

There was a crowd blocking the exit, all trying to get out at once, but Kris managed to clear a path.

The private eye and the Turk ran outside.

“Quick, over here!” yelled the private detective, running into the yard.

Getting into the old Mustang, Kris and Mehmet watched as a vanload of Russians drove up and came to a stop in the road right in front of them, blocking their escape. The Russians got out, grinning horribly, and reloaded their guns.

“We’re done for!” cried Mehmet in a panic.

The Russians were in no rush to start firing and instead waited to see what the private eye was going to do.

Kris put the car straight into reverse and backed right up to the wall of the neighboring building. Ahead lay a filthy, malodorous alley, and the exit was blocked by the Russians.

“What are you doing?” asked Mehmet fearfully.

“Hold on tight,” Kris warned.

The private detective slammed on the gas, picking up speed, and the Mustang plowed toward the Russians' van. They did not seem to believe that the private eye was actually going to mow down their van. The Mustang got closer.

In panic, the Russians opened fire. A shower of bullets rained down on Kris's car. The Turk ducked instinctively, but the next moment he noticed that the windshield was still in one piece. The word "bulletproof" went through his mind.

Mehmet Karadga pressed himself down into his seat in horror at the thought of colliding with the van. The Russians ran in all directions, still firing at the private eye's car.

Kris violently turned the wheel to the left, making the Mustang swerve up onto its left wheels, with its right wheels in the air. The Mustang sped easily through the narrow gap between the wall and the van. The private eye then slowed down a little and the car thudded back down onto all four wheels, before speeding away from Mix.

After driving crazily for fifteen minutes through the night, the private detective stopped by an apartment block. Kris and Mehmet got out of the car. The pleasant, clean night air filled their lungs.

The private eye looked at his bullet-peppered Mustang. "Lucky they didn't get the gas tank," thought Kris.

"I need a Band-Aid," said Mehmet pitifully.

No sooner had the private detective climbed back into the car for the first aid kit, than the Turk tried to make his escape.

Kris, seeing him disappearing into the shadows, scowled and gave chase. After a relentless, ten-minute obstacle race, Mehmet Karadga

came to a dead end. Seeing a fire escape on an apartment block and realizing that this was his only way out, the Turk started climbing up to the roof, forgetting his fear of heights. Kris was right behind him.

Up on the roof, the private eye caught up with the Turk and cornered him on the very edge of the building.

“I’ll tell you everything!” shrieked Mehmet in fear, turning away from the view of Brooklyn by night.

“Good, I’m listening,” retorted Kris sharply.

“Emirhan Shahin is laying low in Chinatown, at the Lao Wan restaurant with his Chinese pals,” Mehmet gabbled. “It’s a secretive place. They don’t just let anyone in. You’d do better to stay away!”

Kris nodded and was about to leave, when Mehmet Karadga added,

“I know what happened to that unlucky millionaire.” The Turk’s face grew serious and took on a strange, eerie grimace. “Belial got him.”

“The commander of a demonic army in Turkey, according to legend.” The private detective snorted.

“Precisely,” said Mehmet, deadly serious.

Kris turned and walked silently into the night.

Chapter 6

When Penny arrived at work the next day, she found the private detective practicing his kung fu on a wooden dummy.

“Good morning, Mr Kris,” said Penny, as good-natured as ever.

“Yes, after last night, this morning really does seem to be good,” Kris smiled, and told Penny the details of the previous night’s visit to Mix.

“Honestly, you just can’t keep away from trouble.” Penny shook her head.

Kris made himself a coffee, while Penny had her aromatic tea, and they breakfasted together, munching on hot toast with cherry jelly, and chatting. Afterwards, the private detective asked, in an offhand way,

“How did the auction go?”

Although Penny had worked for the private eye for a good few years, his iron will and patience never ceased to amaze her. Knowing Kris’s passion for collecting weapons, she had expected him to ask her about the auction as soon as she came in, but the private detective had been as cool and laid-back as ever.

“It went really well! Fantastic! What a show!” Penny proclaimed enthusiastically. “It was more like a high-class party. Edmund kept his word and bought the *katana*.”

“I had no doubt he would. Pity we have to disappoint him. He’d really hoped that Jessica was behind the death of Mr Peterson,” said Kris contemplatively.

“They held a private reception afterwards. Thanks to your contacts, I managed to get an invite, so I decided to hang around and see if I could find anything out.”

“Penny, I have always loved you for your great sense of duty!” said Kris, without a hint of irony.

“I kept my eye on Jessica most of the evening, and I’ve come to the conclusion that Mrs Peterson is undoubtedly a femme fatale and a bitch, but I’m with you: I don’t think she has anything to do with Morris’s death. I did meet an interesting man named James O’Connell there. He bought the medallion that the Petersons had put up for auction.”

“Could he be the one you’ve been waiting for all these years?”

“It’s early days yet, but James is such a charming man,” said Penny.

Kris reached for the keys to his BMW.

“I’m going to Chinatown to find Emirhan Shahin,” he said, as he left.

Chinatown was no ordinary neighborhood, with its Chinese culture and vibrant atmosphere. It was this that attracted hordes of tourists every year, all of them eager to experience Chinese hospitality for themselves, and to shop around for cheap buys. When the recession began in 2008, even the inhabitants of the Big Apple started visiting Chinatown regularly, keen to make savings on clothes and other items.

The streets of Chinatown were filled with signs written in Chinese, the most incredible choice of eating places, and countless stalls selling exotic fruits, vegetables, fish, and goods from Taiwan and Hong Kong. The gift shops sold cheap Chinese trinkets, balms, lucky charms, decorations, oils and candles.

In this, the busiest part of New York, you could find elderly Chinese playing intellectual board games, fortune tellers, shoemakers, street acrobats in dragon costumes, jugglers and other colorful individuals.

Despite being welcoming to outsiders on the surface, Chinatown was a shadowy place, with its own secrets and laws. This side of the neighborhood was off-limits to the rest of the world.

The Lao Wan restaurant the private detective was looking for was in Canal Street, near Confucius Plaza. This street stretched for miles, its food stalls heaving with the delights of Vietnamese, Shanghai, Cantonese, Hunan, Sichuan and Mandarin cuisines.

Kris parked not far from the restaurant and strode off in search of Emirhan Shahin. As he walked into Lao Wan, the private detective noticed that apart from the janitor sweeping the floor, there was not a soul around. Inside, the Chinese restaurant was stunning in its authenticity. It felt like another time and place, easy and laid-back.

When he saw Kris, the janitor went up to him and said politely in English,

“Sorry, we’re closed. Please go.”

“I’m not here to eat,” said the private eye calmly, and he moved further into the restaurant to get a better view of the rooms beyond the columns. The janitor followed him, trying to convince him to go.

“I’m looking for Emirhan Shahin,” said the private detective again.

“There’s no one by that name here. Please go!” the janitor repeated.

“I’ve been told otherwise.” Kris looked around carefully. The restaurant appeared to be empty, but as he was walking in, the private eye had taken note of an elaborate, wooden stairway leading to the second floor, and it was from this that a second Chinese now appeared, obviously disturbed by the noise downstairs. On seeing a stranger, the man’s face filled with anger and he said something in Chinese to the janitor. The janitor replied, and then shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

A minute later, a group of five Chinese had come down from the floor above. Their boss and the janitor started talking, constantly looking over at the private eye with obvious hostility, but he remained unruffled.

“Zhu says that if you don’t go now of your own accord, then he, Wenyan, Qiang, Liu and Tao will make sure that you do,” said the janitor to the private eye.

“Well, I’m not so sure about that,” Kris retorted.

The young Chinese translated this for Zhu, who bristled in anger and menacingly walked up to the private detective. Furious at such insolence, Zhu grabbed the private eye by the shoulder, but a moment later found himself flung to the floor. Sensing trouble ahead, the janitor backed off to the furthest recess of the room, but the others circled the private detective.

Zhu leapt up, his face red with fury. He shouted something, poking his finger at Kris, and at that point all five Chinese lunged at the private eye. The private detective fended off the first few blows and then,

fighting back, he adroitly slipped out of the circle. If he had stayed there just a few seconds more, he would probably have been made into Chinese mincemeat.

His attackers were masters of kung fu. Kris immediately realized what they were capable of, and quickly assessed the situation. Dozens of blows and kicks rained down on the private eye, but he skillfully maneuvered himself around the room, ducking and diving, so that all his attackers were doing was hampering each other. Kris was as much a master of the art as they were.

In no time at all, the Chinese started arming themselves with chairs, plates and other items close to hand. By now, the private eye had had enough of being the target, and went on the offensive. Deafening Wenyan with a blow to his ears, Kris shoved him forcefully from behind, propelling him toward Qiang. Their foreheads clashed, and for a couple of seconds they were out of the fight.

Next, Kris gave Liu a powerful kick, sending him flying several meters before landing with a thud next to a dragon sculpture.

The private detective then turned to Tao and dealt him a set of three sharp blows, in the style of Vietnamese Wing Chun. Tao's right cheek and stomach instantly reddened, swelling up like blisters.

While Kris was dealing with Liu, Tao and Zhu, Wenyan and Qiang had recovered from their collision and were creeping up from behind. Kris was given a powerful kick in the ribs, unbalancing him, but he somehow managed to stay upright. The next second, the private detective was attacked by Zhu with a flying kick to the head. Kris

ducked, and glanced at Zhu without emotion, deciding where to place his aim.

“Not overly friendly, are you?” said the private eye, feinting twice before delivering Zhu a direct blow to the nose. Blood spurted out, making Zhu even more furious. He grabbed a *jian*, a Chinese straight sword, from the wall.

Luckily, at that moment a venerable Chinese man, with a long gray beard, walked into Lao Wan. All the attackers, as if on command, went quite.

“Ni hao ma?” said Kris, greeting the old man as if nothing was wrong.

“Hao! Xie xie!” The venerable Chinese man looked closely at the private eye, then said, in English.

“I didn’t expect to see you here in my restaurant, Mr Kris. “It’s been a long time.”

“Five years, Si-Ma xiansheng,” Kris replied, smiling. “You’ve a very welcoming establishment.”

The assailants, who had been living with the proprietor, Si-Ma xiansheng, for many years, noticed the warmth in his voice as he spoke with this stranger.

Si-Ma xiansheng looked at the battlefield around him and realized what had happened at once. He calmly gave some orders and, escorting Kris to the second floor, said,

“Your kung fu is as fantastic as ever, Mr Kris!”

“I try to keep it up, Si-Ma xiansheng,” the private eye replied.

Si-Ma xiansheng and Kris were old friends. The private detective had once helped the venerable man to recover his kidnapped daughter.

After drinking tea in the elaborate room on the second floor of Lao Wan, Kris revealed the purpose of his call.

“Yes, Mr Shahin is staying with me at the moment,” Si-Ma xiansheng said, confirming what Mehmet had told the private eye.

Kris did not have to say another word. The proprietor gave a brief nod to his attendant, and a few minutes later Emirhan Shahin came into the room. He looked thin, but sinewy and strong. On his dark wrinkled face the private detective could see the signs of strain.

“Only tell this man the truth,” Si-Ma xiansheng told him.

“Tell me everything you know about the death of Morris Peterson.” Kris got straight to the point.

“I didn’t kill him! I swear it wasn’t me!” Emirhan spluttered nervously.

“He arranged a meeting with you,” said the private eye.

“Yeah, Mr Peterson wanted to buy an old statue of Buddah.”

“Had Morris ever bought anything from you before?”

“Yes, this and that: a handmade chess set, a Wehrmacht officer’s medal.”

“What time was your meeting?”

“Midnight.”

“Why so late?”

“No idea. He who pays the piper...” Emirhan Shahin shrugged. “I just turned up at the Irish House as we’d arranged, hung around for an hour, and then left.”

“You said you didn’t kill Mr Peterson. What makes you think he was murdered?” asked Kris.

“The antique collecting world is a private club with its own rules,” Emirhan replied gloomily. “Someone could have had a motive for getting rid of Mr Peterson.” The Turk looked at the Chinese tapestries hanging on the wall, collecting his thoughts.

“Mr Peterson knew me well and paid generously,” said Emirhan hoarsely. “I would never have killed him.”

Kris looked into Shahin’s eyes, deep into his soul, and knew the Turk was telling the truth.

They were silent for a while. Then suddenly Emirhan leaned toward the private detective and said:

“I saw the murderer.”

“Go on.”

“At least I think I did. When I realized that my client wasn’t going to turn up, I left the backyard and that’s when I noticed a man in black slipping into the shadows of the alley.”

“Did you see his face?”

“He was wearing a hood, but I saw him for a second in the light of the moon and was absolutely terrified. The man had no face! There was nothing there - no eyes, no nose, no mouth. Nothing at all! It was blank! I was so overcome with fear that my legs turned to jelly and I was rooted to the spot. Then he disappeared into the shadows.” Emirhan Shahin spoke as if from afar. “When I finally snapped out of it, I ran off home. The next day I heard that Mr Peterson was dead. I panicked, and decided to lay low for a while.”

All this time, Si-Ma xiansheng had been staring fixedly into space, as if in meditation. When the conversation between Kris and Emirhan came to an end he rose and, in a elevated tone of voice, said,

“You were always brave in the battle against evil, Mr Kris. May your soul still be strong now!”

The private detective nodded as he left Si-Ma xiansheng and Emirhan Shahin.

“I wonder,” thought Kris, as he left Lao Wan. “Was it the Man With No Face that made Mr Peterson die of shock in the Brooklyn ghetto?”

Chapter 7

Kris did his morning workout, took a contrast shower and then made coffee and toast spread with his favorite cherry jelly. He took this down to his office and sat at his desk.

Penny was due in soon. While he waited, the private eye drank coffee and scoured the material on the official investigation that he had obtained from Jacob, his contact at the NYPD.

The last couple of days had passed in a whirlwind, Kris was pleased to note, but he had not had time to go through the details of the police investigation into the death of the millionaire in the Brooklyn ghetto. When he had returned from Lao Wan the previous day, Kris had spent the rest of the day prizing bullets out of his Mustang.

The police reports did not tell the private detective anything new.

“So, what have we got then?” Kris wondered, munching on his toast and sipping his coffee. “At 2.30 a.m. on August 6th the body of Morris Peterson, an elderly millionaire, was discovered. The cause of death was heart failure, brought on by severe shock. A book on ancient Greek monsters was found at the scene of the crime and was open at a page on Chimera with a strange picture drawn on the page. None of his personal possessions had been touched. According to Edmund, Morris had never shown any interest in Ancient Greece and knew nothing about it. Mr Peterson was meant to be meeting Emirhan Shahin at midnight at the

Irish House. The Turk waited for about an hour before giving up, and as he left he saw a Man With No Face, dressed in black.”

The private eye’s thoughts were interrupted by the phone ringing. It was Jessica Peterson. She was calling to say that she had remembered something important, but refused point blank to speak about it on the phone and insisted on meeting in person.

“I wonder,” thought the private detective. “Could Mrs Peterson have remembered something that would throw a light on Morris’s mysterious death? Or does she know something that could explain how that book came to be on his body?”

These questions ran through Kris’s head. With determination, he picked up his car keys and left.

Back in the long hotel corridor, the private detective looked as calm and collected as ever. Anyone who had seen Kris at that moment would never have known there was anything particular on his mind. For a moment he pictured Jessica Peterson. Kris had an eye for female beauty and had always been attracted by gracefulness, coquettishness and fiery eyes, all Jessica’s virtues. However, the private eye was a true professional and could hide his emotions when needed. By the time he entered Mrs Peterson’s suite he had focused his thoughts entirely on the investigation.

The sight that awaited the private detective did not surprise him in the least. Jessica was poised on a luxurious couch in the middle of the room, a glass of white wine in her hand. Another was on the table beside

her. Crossing one leg over the other, she looked teasingly at the private eye.

Mrs Peterson was an incredibly sexy woman: black curls tumbling onto slender shoulders, eyes like gemstones, scarlet lips and a little red dress showing off her smooth pearly skin to perfection.

“Won’t you sit down, Mr Kris?” Jessica asked smiling.

The private detective lowered himself into the chair opposite without a word.

“Glass of wine, perhaps?”

“Thank you, but I prefer Scotch. So, what is this all about Mrs Peterson?” Kris got straight down to business.

“Something of Morris’s is missing after all,” Jessica said, taking a sip of wine. There was a long silence.

“I don’t suppose you’d mind telling me what?” inquired the private eye, ironically.

“It was a medallion encrusted with precious stones.”

“I was under the impression that you had auctioned it.”

“Yes.” Jessica nodded. “But I sold the *real* one, and it’s the *fake* one that’s missing.”

“Tell me more about this medallion.” The private eye was curious.

“Hubs was a prudent and superstitious man. About a year ago we were in London. In one of the antique shops there he saw a medallion encrusted with rare stones, light blue serendibites, which so enchanted him that even the story the salesman told us about its mysterious past couldn’t stop him buying it.”

“What mysterious past?” Kris probed.

“I don’t remember what the salesman said exactly, but he said that the medallion was somehow connected with a series of mysterious deaths. I don’t really believe in all this, but the strange thing was that after he’d bought the medallion, Morris lost out on several important deals and then his cousin passed away. His cousin was quite old, and he’d spent a good many years drinking, but that didn’t make Morris feel any better. He became even more frightened when a friend of ours was killed in a traffic accident on the day she’d asked to borrow the medallion. After that my husband was convinced that the medallion was jinxed. He decided to get rid of it no matter what, by selling it at the next auction in New York. He stopped wearing it and hid it in the safe instead, but to appease his vanity Morris had a replica medallion made, and this was the one he wore. So you see, that fateful night my husband was wearing the fake medallion and that’s the one that’s missing.”

“Mrs Peterson, do you remember the address of the antique shop where you bought the medallion?”

“It was somewhere near Upper Street,” said Jessica, thinking. “There was an old faded sign saying ‘Steve Matthew’s Antique Shop’.”

“So, apart from the fake medallion, nothing else is missing?” the private detective asked.

“That’s right.”

“Do you have any idea who could have wanted to steal it?”

Mrs Peterson shrugged her slender shoulders.

The private eye thought about this. Had the medallion been stolen by chance or had someone been looking for it? Did the man in black,

the Man With No Face that Emirhan Shahin had seen, have something to do with it?

Kris got up and was about to leave when he suddenly felt Mrs Peterson's hand on his arm.

"Wait." Jessica downed her wine and walked gracefully to the door, locked it and then turned to face the private detective.

"I don't think you've finished questioning me yet."

And the next minute the little red dress had slid to the floor.

"Hmm..." The private detective pondered the situation as he drove home. "This all seems to have something to do with the medallion and it looks like Mr Peterson's death really was no accident. If I were the thief and I found out that the medallion was a fake, what would I do? I'd probably try to buy the real one when it was auctioned. This needs checking out."

Back in his office, the private eye saw that Penny was as ready as ever to throw herself into the investigation. Kris had told her about the events in Chinatown, but now there was this curious detail to tell her.

When the private detective mentioned the fake medallion Penny caught on immediately.

"So, if the person that robbed Morris as he lay on the ground wasn't just a passerby, he might have made another attempt to get his hands on the medallion at the auction," Penny reasoned out loud.

"Exactly." Kris nodded. "We need to find out who was bidding the hardest for the Peterson's real medallion. The thief might have been at the auction himself."

“In any case, if we uncover anything strange about the bidding for the medallion, it’ll indicate that someone was desperate to get their hands on it and that Morris’s death was no accident.” Penny was excited and keen to get to the bottom of the mystery.

Kris smiled.

“Why don’t you get in touch with the organizers of the auction and ask for a list of people who were bidding for the medallion? You can hint that you’re willing to make it worth their while,” the private eye added. “There’s money in the agency’s account for that.”

“Sure Mr Kris. I’ll have those names here on the table for you by tomorrow morning,” said Penny eagerly.

The private detective had no doubt that she would.

“Mrs Peterson is a very arrogant lady. How on earth did you manage to get such valuable information out of her?” Penny then asked.

“It was a rather intense interrogation,” Kris replied, smiling.

Chapter 8

Penny's detailed account of the auction focused on three men: John Williams, Sam Parker and Richard Adams. It was they who had bid the most aggressively for the antique.

John Williams was the wealthy owner of several TV channels, with a scandalous lifestyle that was often the subject of reports in the press.

Sam Parker, a Texan, was the owner of a small company that produced cattle feed.

Richard Adams was a renowned academic at New York University, a Ph.D. and a member of the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World.

It was Richard Adams who had bid the highest, but who then turned out not to be able to afford the down payment.

So the bidding began again, and this time it was James O'Connell who won, immediately paying the full amount in cash. He won the bidding easily as Sam Parker had already purchased another lot and John Williams had stormed out of the auction room in anger.

Kris's intuition told him to check out Richard Adams first, so the next day the private detective set off for East 84th Street, to the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World.

On the way, Kris made a call to his old friend Hans Hartman, the former PR director at a large New York advertising agency. This wise guy had something on practically everyone in the Big Apple.

“I need you to get me something on a certain Richard Adams, a lecturer at New York University,” the private eye said, steering his beloved BMW skillfully in and out of the traffic.

“I might need a day or two...” Hartman began.

“You’ve got fifteen minutes Hans,” said Kris, cutting in.

“As uncompromising and stubborn as ever.” Hartman laughed. “Ok, wait on my call.”

Richard Adams was a law-abiding tax-payer, a bureaucrat’s dream, but there was one black mark in his biography: on April 23rd 1998 he had been implicated in the theft of a museum piece and although no charges had been made against him, some of the facts of the case indirectly pointed to his involvement.

“If it hadn’t been for his contacts, your friend would’ve been locked away as an accessory in the theft of an African relic from the Metropolitan Museum,” Hartman called back to say. “Like the thieves, he reckoned it should’ve been handed over to an African tribe as an object of worship, not put in a museum.”

The private detective thanked his friend and hung up.

Kris found Richard Adams in his study. The scholarly-looking man was sitting behind a huge desk, wearing a tweed jacket. His refined noble features and his large forehead singled him out as a member of New York’s intellectual elite.

“Kevin Kris. Private detective,” said Kris.

“How can I help you, Mr Kris?” asked Richard Adams politely.

“You can help me, Mr Adams, by telling me truthfully why you wanted to buy that medallion,” Kris replied coolly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You were at the auction on August 8th.”

“Mr Kris, I have been studying the history of the ancient world for twenty years now, so it is not so strange that I, from time to time, acquire valuable historical objects for museums, to promote the study of the science.”

“Or to make up for stealing an African relic from the Metropolitan Museum on April 23rd 1998.”

Richard Adams paled.

“What do you want?”

“Why were you so determined to get the medallion when there were items of greater historical value at the auction?”

Richard Adams was silent for a while, nervously fiddling with a button on his jacket, and thinking about what to say.

“I will tell you if you promise to never bother me again,” he said at last, frightened.

“So be it.” Kris nodded.

“When I checked the mail on the evening of August 6th, I found an unmarked envelope with a typed letter inside. Someone wanted me to go to the auction and do my best to buy the medallion.”

“Why did you agree?”

“The letter ended with words of congratulation on the birth of my granddaughter and a note saying that they knew what had happened in 1998,” muttered Adams through gritted teeth.

“How did they give you the money?”

“The letter told me to come to the lovers’ bench in Central Park at 3 a.m. on August 7th where there would be a plastic package with money waiting for me.”

“Did you notice anything suspicious when you went there?”

“I thought for a moment that there was someone lurking behind a tree,” Adams said, “but it was too dark and I could not make anything out clearly.”

“Have you kept the letter?”

“No, I burned it that same evening, as instructed.”

“How were you meant to hand over the medallion?”

“In exactly the same way: in Central Park at 3 a.m. on August 9th.”

“Why did you carry on bidding if you knew you didn’t have enough money?”

“I thought the first payment could be made later, and that whoever it was would realize that they’d have to make up the extra amount.”

“What do you think, why did someone want the medallion so badly?”

“I have no idea.” Richard Adams shrugged.

“What did you do with the money?”

“I left it in place of the medallion,” the academic replied.

“Thank you for your help,” Kris said politely. “As I promised, you won’t see me again.”

Richard Adams gave a curt nod.

“I wonder what our mysterious medallion hunter will do next?” the private eye wondered, driving back to his office. “He’ll probably switch his attention to its new owner, James O’Connell.”

“We have to warn James that someone’s hunting for that medallion!” Penny exclaimed when Kris returned and told her about his meeting with Richard Adams.

“It would be worth taking a look at this medallion,” said the private detective thoughtfully.

“Mr Kris, what if the three of us were to go out for dinner tonight?” Penny suggested. “We could have a word with James and have a look at this mysterious medallion at the same time.”

“I take it you have his number?” said Kris teasingly.

“I asked him for it for investigative purposes, Mr Kris!”

“Well, I don’t think there’s any harm in meeting him,” the private detective agreed.

Penny dialed James’s number. He was eager to accept and after they had arranged where and when to meet, Penny hung up and turned to the private eye.

“L’illusion, at 6 p.m. sharp. James promised to bring the medallion.”

“Excellent Penny! Why don’t you call it a day and go off to get ready for this evening?” Kris suggested. “And while you’re doing that, I’ll have time for a stroll through Central Park.”

“Thanks Mr Kris. That’ll be great!” Penny smiled.

“I’ll pick you up at half past five,” said the private detective as she left.

As Kris had expected, his search of the place where Richard Adams had found the money reaped no rewards. Even Lame Billy, a hobo who was a regular feature in Central Park, and who the private eye now

treated to a hamburger, had not noticed anything suspicious on the night of August 6th to 7th.

At half past five exactly the private detective collected Penny and they drove to L'illusion. Kris and Penny could easily have been taken for a married couple. They were similar in several ways: their manners, their air of intelligence and their smart and stylish dress sense. Despite her average New York earnings, Penny knew which clothes, cosmetics and accessories suited her best, and she looked as good as any of the high-society girls on Broadway. Yet there had never been anything more than platonic friendship and mutual respect between her and Kris, and they were both perfectly happy with this arrangement.

When Kris and Penny walked into the restaurant, James was already waiting for them. Seeing Penny, he got up.

James was tall, slim and dark with thin, angular features. He was wearing a perfectly fitting tuxedo and had a small leather case which added importance.

“James O’Connell,” he said, shaking the private eye’s hand.

“Kevin Kris. Private detective,” said Kris in his usual manner.

James turned out to be a sociable and knowledgeable man. He told them all about his exciting business life: after graduating from university, James began working as a salesman for the Xerox Corporation. He enjoyed his work in sales, meeting different people and earning a good commission. At the same time, James had been making significant strides in marketing. He was one of those rare managers who liked to ask themselves every morning when they woke: “How can I increase sales?” James had a creative approach to problem solving and was

constantly on the lookout for innovations. It was no surprise that he had been headhunted many times during his career.

“James, we have to warn you about something,” said Penny when she felt the moment was right. “The thing is, the medallion you bought is a bearer of doom.”

“What nonsense!” James laughed.

“Work it out for yourself. Its previous owner, the millionaire Morris Peterson, died on August 6th from heart failure. His streak of bad luck began straight after he’d bought the medallion: first business problems, then the death of his cousin, then the tragic death of a friend in a traffic accident, a friend who, incidentally, had borrowed the medallion from Mr Peterson. All of this leads to the following conclusion: the medallion is cursed,” said Penny.

“No, that’s all just a coincidence,” James responded, but he sounded unsure.

“Mr O’Connell, can I take a look at the medallion?” asked Kris.

“Sure.” James took a delicate lacquered box from his leather case. The private detective carefully took out the medallion. Anyone could see that the man who had made this had put his very heart and soul into his creation.

It was a piece of filigree work. The medallion was rectangular, an unusual shape for such an item of jewelry, and decorated with precious stones, crowned with a large aquamarine. Although aquamarine changes from green to blue when heated, this stone was an unusual shade of blue-green. In ancient times this stone was considered to have magical powers and to be a symbol of true friendship. The medallion could be

opened, and inside was a secret compartment for a photograph or portrait. The medallion was simply beautiful and so richly decorated that it was no surprise that there had been such aggressive bidding for it at the auction.

“What Penny’s told you could all be just coincidence,” said Kris, “but a fake medallion was stolen from the late Morris Peterson, an exact replica of this one. At the same time, his wallet and money were left untouched. I also discovered that one of the bidders had received an anonymous letter instructing him to buy the medallion and telling him where to go to collect the money for it.”

“Really?” said James, genuinely surprised.

“As the letter threatened to reveal some serious compromising information on the recipient, he had no choice. But there was one thing the mysterious writer had not thought about: that there would not be enough money to buy the medallion.”

“James, you don’t still think this is all just nonsense, do you?” asked Penny. “Someone really is trying to track the medallion down! You’re in danger!”

James was about to retort to this when his face suddenly changed.

“I think I’m starting to understand something,” he muttered.

Kris and Penny looked at him questioningly.

“For the last three days I’ve had the feeling that someone is watching me. Until tonight I thought I was imagining it, but now, after all you’ve told me, I can see that I wasn’t at all.”

“Did you notice anyone suspicious?” asked Penny.

James shook his head.

“I’ve only been in crowded places where it’s difficult to notice anyone in particular.” James took a pill from his pocket and washed it down with some water.

“What do you think, why is someone so interested in this medallion?” asked Kris.

“I really can’t imagine. It’s just an antique trinket, nothing special.” James shrugged.

“Mr O’Connell, you’ll have to be very careful and on the lookout from now on,” said the private eye seriously.

“Maybe I should leave the country for a while?” James stammered.

“I think this pursuer could still follow you there, and we wouldn’t be around to help. You’re better off staying put in New York,” said the private detective calmly.

“We are definitely going to solve this brain twister!” proclaimed Penny.

James seemed to relax.

When they had paid the bill, they left the restaurant. As they parted Penny made James promise that he would contact her or Kris if he felt the slightest hint of danger. James promised, with a rather drawn-out smile, that he would.

The glamorous life of Times Square was in full swing, and among the thronging crowds and the colorful lights of New York by night, Kris felt, just for a second, that someone was watching them.

Chapter 9

At 7.40 p.m. exactly the Boeing 747-400 made a smooth landing on the runway at Heathrow.

Britain greeted Kris as he had expected, with drizzle and fog. The gloomy gray sky meant that dusk settled in no time at all. The private detective found a cab, gave the driver the hotel address and settled back, closing his eyes and running over the details of the case in his head.

Kris intended to find this Steve Matthew in the British capital. Intuition told him that to work out why Morris Peterson had died he needed to find out more about the medallion's mysterious past that Jessica had spoken about.

When the private detective had reached his hotel and settled down comfortably with a newspaper and a cup of tea, he had a call from Penny.

"How's the weather there in good old England?" she asked.

"It's wonderful! I'm sitting in my room, enjoying a cup of English tea and watching the rain fall outside," Kris said.

"You're just an old romantic, Mr Kris." Penny smiled, and then became more serious as she got down to business. "Edmund called. He's spoken to Morris Peterson's doctor. It seems he wasn't in quite as good health as our client had thought."

"Really?" The private eye took out his notebook, ready.

“Mr Peterson had ischemic heart disease and this winter he suffered a stroke, but he was treated in a private Swiss clinic and soon recovered,” said Penny. “Maybe Mr Peterson really did die of natural causes.”

“Or someone wants us to believe that he did,” said Kris, thinking out loud.

“Plus, I spent the whole day today studying the history of precious stones and antiques,” said Penny, rustling her papers, “and I came across something quite astounding.”

“Go on,” said Kevin, listening attentively.

“It’s the story of the blue Hope diamond, formed about a billion years ago. In 1642 Jean Baptiste Tavernier, a French traveler, presented Louis XIV with precious stones from India, one of which was the blue diamond. History shows that it brought its owners terrible bad luck. On September 1st 1715 Louis XIV died as a result of gangrene. Later owners of the stone, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, were guillotined during the French Revolution and Princess de Lamballe, who had borrowed the diamond from the Queen, was torn to pieces by an angry French mob. In the turmoil of the time the diamond was lost, but it later turned up in the hands of William Fals, a Danish jeweler. Some time later this jeweler was robbed and murdered by his own son, Hendrik, who then committed suicide in 1830. So, the stone passed from owner to owner until 1839 when it was acquired by Henry Philippe Hope, after whom it was named. In 1901 the Hope Diamond was sold for 148,000 dollars to Simon Frankel, a New York diamond merchant, and brought to the US. At the time of the Great Depression it was sold to Jacques

Colot, who later lost his mind and committed suicide. The diamond then fell into the hands of Prince Ivan Kanitovsky, who died at the hands of Russian revolutionaries, but not before he'd murdered his mistress, Lorens Ladue, who had been wearing the diamond. The Hope Diamond was later owned by Simon Montherides, a Greek merchant, who lost control of his vehicle and drove himself and his family off a precipice. The mystical diamond's next owner was Habib Beye, a Persian merchant, who drowned when the French ship he was sailing on sank in 1909. Some time later the Hope Diamond became the property of Evalyn Walsh McLean and it brought disaster on her whole family: her daughter died of a drugs overdose at the age of 25, her son died after being hit by a car and her husband, a successful businessman and the owner of *The Washington Post*, left her for his mistress but then lost his mind and ended up in a psychiatric hospital. After Evelyn's death the stone was auctioned off. It was bought by Harry Winston, a New York jeweler, who donated it to the Smithsonian Institution in 1958, and that is where it remains to this day." Penny finished her story.

"Nice bedtime story," said Kris, unperturbed. The story of the Hope Diamond had had no effect whatsoever on the private detective.

"But Mr Kris, James's medallion could have similar mystical powers!" she exclaimed.

"Let's not jump to any hasty conclusions, Penny," the private detective said softly. "First we need to have a chat with Steve Matthew, then we'll take it from there."

Kris's even voice always had a calming effect on Penny. The private eye promised to call her the next day to tell her the details of his meeting with the London trader. Penny wished him a good night and hung up.

The private detective strode up to the window and stared thoughtfully into the distance. Night-time London was immersed in a thick fog. Kris felt that the next day he would be a step closer to explaining the puzzling death of Morris Peterson.

In the morning, Kris made some inquiries and found out that Steve Matthew's antique shop was in Camden Passage, not far from the Camden Head pub. This was no surprise as Camden Passage and Upper Street were the heart of London's antique market. This was where the first antique stalls had opened in the early 1960s when collecting became fashionable.

As noon approached, the private detective hailed a cab. They had gone no more than a mile before Kris noticed the excitement that had taken over the whole city, as if in anticipation of a great celebration. The private eye asked the cab driver what was going on and he was happy to explain.

That day the final of the Johnnie Johnson Amateur Pilot Competition was to take place. It was named after James Edgar Johnson, one of the best British flying aces of World War II. The competition was to take place over the Thames near the Millennium Dome.

"All London is rooting for Michael Millis," said the cabby, "Including me. He's just incredible!"

“Well then, why don’t we take a look?” Kris suggested, with a sentiment to his voice that was quite out of character. But there was a good reason for this.

Michael Millis and Kevin Kris had known each other since they were kids. They were incredibly good and loyal friends who had been through a lot together and meant a lot to each other.

In some ways Michael lived life in the fast lane. He was an inveterate lover of extreme sports and adventures, and a rock’n’roll fanatic. After graduating Michael had found work as a broker in an investment company. It did not take long for the sharks of Wall Street to see that Michael was a rising star and he was offered the position of financial analyst with a large investment fund. Michael took up the offer but then felt that swimming around with the other office plankton in an ocean of gray mediocrity was not for him, not for an adventure-seeking nature like his. He was therefore not particularly concerned when the company went bust. He had had enough of working his butt off for others, so he put his mind to finding a way of making himself financially independent.

It only took two and a half years of not particularly grueling work before Michael’s talents for investment and business had made him a millionaire. Michael now had total financial independence and could live the life he chose.

He was always bursting with energy and had a thirst for adventure. He could spend a weekend lounging in a hammock in Hawaii and then jet off the next minute to Courchevel ski resort in France, and then a week later be collecting butterflies or hunting in Madagascar.

But nothing brought as much childlike delight to Michael's honest, open heart, as helping Kris solve intriguing crimes. Michael happened to have helped Kris out several times, and these had been among the most memorable moments of his life.

The cabby's voice as he announced their arrival brought the private detective out of his reverie. The private eye paid the fare and got out of the car.

An army of thousands of airshow fans filled the whole northeast of Greenwich. A wonderful party atmosphere could be felt among the thronging crowds of Londoners and tourists. Tents selling airshow souvenirs, children's rides, sideshows, exhibitions of flying machines - all this just added to the feeling.

Kris was greatly impressed by the Millennium Dome, which was no surprise: the O2 Arena was one of only two man-made objects that could be seen from space. The Dome had a diameter of 1,200 feet and was supported by twelve 330-foot towers. This grand construction had been part of the plans of the former Deputy Prime Minister, Michael Heseltine, to see in the new millennium with a bang.

To the roars of the crowd, the competition began. Five amateur pilots who had made it through to the final had to demonstrate stunts flying around pylons which had been installed on the Thames.

Kris watched a light airplane skillfully maneuvering the obstacles while he impatiently waited for Michael's turn. Finally Michael's name was announced and a bright red monoplane with a flame painted on its sides took off with a roar. The spectators gave Michael rounding applause.

The private detective soon realized why his friend was so popular with the locals. With his usual recklessness, he daringly flew around all the obstacles showing none of the caution that the other pilots had. Michael's spirit of adventure and the trail of his plane in the sky delighted the crowds.

The final part of the competition was comprised of four elimination rounds. As this part approached the challenges became tougher and tougher and included flying around the O2 Arena, maneuvering around the masts.

At last the final round began, a head-to-head between an Irish pilot called Alex Nelson and the young millionaire Michael Millis. The crowd held its breath, waiting to find out who would be the champion. The grand final was a pylon-obstacle race between the two pilots over the Thames. The winner would be the one whose airplane cut the finishing tape with its wings vertical.

Kris silently wished Michael luck.

The starting signal rang out and the planes roared with a deafening noise into the sky. A fierce battle between the pilots began at once and the crowd looked on, entranced. Michael Millis and Alex Nelson were neck and neck for the whole duration of the course.

But suddenly something happened. Michael's plane flew off course and started to fall down to earth. A bird must have flown into the windshield and Michael must have lost visibility. Instinctively he cut his speed and tried to pull the plane up, but the next moment it had plunged into the water.

Chapter 10

In less than a minute a lifeboat had reached the spot where the plane had crashed into the water and Michael was pulled to safety before the aircraft sank to the bottom.

The spectators crowding the Thames embankments, Kris included, greeted him as a real hero, which did little to please Alex Nelson, the actual winner. Climbing out of the boat onto the embankment, Michael grinned and began waving at the crowd, but then suddenly he spotted his childhood friend in the throng.

“Hey, that’s Kevin!” Michael exclaimed, flabbergasted. Shaking off the crowds of spectators and the lifeboat crew who were insisting he go and get himself checked out at hospital, he fought his way through to the private detective.

“Good to see you Michael!” Kris smiled.

“Hi there pal!” said Michael emotionally, and he hugged his friend.

The crowd loved this warm exchange of feelings between the two old friends and focused all its attention on them. Few remembered Alex Nelson, the champion.

“You haven’t come all the way to London just to see Big Ben now, have you?” Michael said, hazarding a guess.

Kris knew that his friend would want to join him in his investigation no matter what and that it would be useless to try to talk him out of it.

The private detective winked at Michael. This was enough, and in no time at all Michael had changed his clothes and left instructions with his managers, and the two friends were driving away from the Millennium Dome in a sleek Aston Martin, to the cheers of the crowd. Once the hero of the day was out of sight, the crowd moved on to the O2 Arena where a special concert was about to start.

Michael was at the wheel of the zippy snow-white Aston Martin, racing off to the address Kris had given him, and cutting through the wind as he drove.

“So pal,” began Michael when he had calmed down a little, “what’s brought you to London then? Don’t tell me there’s not enough romance for you in New York.”

“There’s enough of everything in New York,” smirked the private detective. “Romance, excitement, and even the body of a millionaire in the Brooklyn ghetto.”

“Wow! Go on! And why are we heading for the antique shop? Are you looking for a souvenir for your assistant? I remember you telling me she was cute.” Michael’s blue eyes sparkled and he smiled keenly.

“Yeah, Penny’s lovely, but that’s not why we’re going to this antique shop. We’re going there because its owner has some information that could be useful to the investigation.”

The private detective spent the remainder of the ride filling Michael in on the mysterious affair. Michael stepped harder on the gas, eager to find out more about the cursed medallion’s past.

Soon the two friends were pulling into the London lane where Steve Matthew had his antique shop.

Although it was only a small shop, space had somehow been found for hundreds of odds and ends which were the very essence of times gone past. Old clocks and paintings hung on the walls, there were items of furniture in the corners, and the whole left-hand wall was a glass cabinet displaying rings, brooches, pendants and other pieces of Victorian jewelry. When Kris and Michael walked in the only other customers there were a couple who had obviously just been passing. Alongside the glass cabinet stood a thin, gray-haired man with pince-nez perched on his nose, who must have been the owner. He was eyeing the couple with contempt as they cheerfully looked around the shop.

“Hello. Can I help you?” the old man asked obligingly, seeing he had some new potential customers.

“Kevin Kris. Private detective,” said Kevin, matter-of-factly. “And this is my friend, Michael Millis. We would like to speak to Steve Matthew.”

The salesman paused and then said,

“I’m Steve Matthew. What can I do for you?”

“We’re investigating the circumstances surrounding the death of a certain Morris Peterson. Have you seen this antique thing before?” The private detective took a photograph of the medallion from his inside pocket and showed it to the astonished man.

The salesman took the photograph from Kris, adjusted his pince-nez, and looked closely at the picture.

“Oh my God!” he exclaimed, astounded. “I didn’t think I would ever see Bellerophon again.”

“Is that the name of the medallion?” the private eye inquired. Steve Matthew nodded silently, staring in bewilderment at the photograph of the antique. Absolute amazement could be seen in his eyes.

Such a reaction took Michael’s breath away. The glint in his eyes betrayed his burning desire to hear as much about the Bellerophon story as soon as possible. Michael had made up his mind to hang along with Kris until the case was solved. Meanwhile the private eye, unlike his friend, remained totally calm and collected and just stared at the gray-haired man.

“The medallion’s previous owner told me that there was some kind of legend connected to it,” said the private detective.

Steve Matthew was silent for a while, as if trying to recall the events of days long past. When they were finally alone in the shop, he began to tell his story.

“Many years ago I set up this antique business with my cousin, Roger Saunder. He was a great jeweler and a specialist in antiques and I had these premises and a little capital in the bank. Together we had the means to start our own business. In those days there was huge demand for antiques and business was soon booming. In just a few years Roger had managed to put by a decent sum of money, so he got married and moved to New York.” Steve Matthew paused. “My wife and I would visit him a few times a year. On one such visit, January 26th 2002, I saw Bellerophon at Roger’s. He told me that not long prior to that a woman had sold him the medallion as her husband had passed away and she was in financial difficulty. I offered to buy it off him as I knew I could sell Bellerophon at a much higher price in London, and my cousin agreed.

My instinct was right, and literally a day after coming back to London I sold the medallion at a good profit to Mrs Baker, a highly respected, aristocratic woman. Some time later I received news that on the evening of the very day that I'd bought Bellerophon, Roger had been murdered in his antique shop."

"Mr Matthew, do you remember any details of Roger Saunder's death?" the private detective asked.

"It's a shadowy story," said Steve Matthew gloomily.

No amount of cajoling from the two friends could persuade him to tell them the details.

"Bellerophon condemns its owners to certain death," the gray-haired shop owner pronounced aloofly. "In May 2008 there were reports of the strange disappearance of Rose Baker in the papers. On the morning of May 21st, her chauffeur drove her to the family estate in the suburbs of London and neither Mrs Baker nor her chauffeur has been seen since. The car was found twenty miles northeast of London. Inside was a handbag, some money, some documents and Bellerophon, but Rose Baker and her chauffeur had vanished. Soon after, her daughter brought me the medallion and asked me to sell it for her. About a month later Bellerophon was bought by an American couple, an elderly well-to-do man with a beautiful young wife."

"Morris and Jessica Peterson," the private eye thought.

"So, is it true that the medallion's cursed?" Michael asked.

"Absolutely," pronounced Steve Matthew, with conviction.

Kris and Michael asked for Mrs Saunder's address and thanked Steve Matthew for his time. When the two friends were leaving the shop, the salesman called after them:

"Stay away from Bellerophon. It brings nothing but doom."

The two friends got in their car and drove back to Kris's hotel.

"Morris Peterson's death was no accident," the private eye said. "And his weak heart had nothing to do with it either."

"Whatever happened to the people who owned the medallion before Roger Saunder?" Michael wondered out loud, curious.

"That's a good question," smirked the private detective.

Suddenly Kris's mobile phone rang. It was James O'Connell. The medallion's latest owner informed the private eye in an anxious tone of voice that while he had been away from his hotel room someone had broken in and ransacked the place.

Chapter 11

Kris and Michael flew to New York as evening drew in the next day. When they had gone through passport control at Kennedy Airport, they hailed a cab to the private detective's office where Penny was waiting impatiently.

Kris had called his assistant the previous day and filled her in on their conversation with Steve Matthew. He had finished by saying that he would not be returning to New York alone. This intrigued Penny and she spent the whole of the next day on tenterhooks.

Hardly had Kevin Kris and Michael Millis walked through the door of the detective agency that Penny immediately realized who this was. The private eye had from time to time told Penny about his friend and their escapades, and these depictions had been so vivid and memorable that Penny could not possibly have mistaken him for anyone else.

Looking at Kris and Michael, Penny smiled. They were like chalk and cheese. Kris was wearing his stylish business suit as usual, while Michael had on a bright Hawaiian palm-tree shirt and dazzling white deck pants. The private detective exuded calmness, composure and restraint, while his friend was the embodiment of impulsiveness, spontaneity and excitement. This was shown in literally every tiny detail of Michael's appearance: his ruffled, waxed hair, his light gait, his sincere, cheerful smile and his friendly blue eyes.

But at the same time, Kris and Michael had something in common: a kind of charisma, a strong magnetism. Moreover, they both had natural athletic physiques.

“Hi Penny!” Kris greeted his assistant. “We’ve a new companion.”

“Michael Millis,” said Michael a little coyly, without waiting for the private detective to introduce him.

The private eye’s slim green-eyed assistant made a great impression on Michael, but he did his best to hide it.

“Penny,” she said, introducing herself and smiling. She liked Michael’s Hawaiian style. He looked like he had been born for it.

Michael and Penny examined each other furtively, with curiosity. An uncomfortable silence hung over the room until it was broken by Kris saying,

“I think you’ll have time to get to know each other later, but right now we need to get back onto the case.”

“Why such a rush?” asked Penny, surprised. “You’re just off the plane. Don’t you want something to eat first?”

“Great idea. I suggest going to some cheap restaurant where they’ll let Michael in dressed like that,” the private detective smiled.

“I didn’t pack any evening wear,” Michael pronounced with effect, making every effort to show that he did not plan to abandon his favorite shirt and deck pants.

“And call James please,” said Kris seriously. “We need to speak to him.”

“Has something happened?” asked Penny, alarmed.

“Yesterday evening someone broke into his hotel room and turned the place upside down,” explained the private eye.

“Oh, God!” exclaimed Penny. “Why didn’t you tell me that yesterday when we spoke?”

“I didn’t want to worry you,” Kris replied.

“James will have no peace while he has that medallion,” Penny said firmly. “We have to persuade him to get rid of the cursed thing!”

“First of all we need to meet up with him,” said the private detective in a calming tone of voice. “Tell James that we’ll collect him outside the hotel and drive over to Busy Bee to eat. We can discuss the situation there.”

While Penny was making the call to James, Michael, who found it hard to keep still for very long, wandered around the private eye’s apartment. He looked at the various antique objects that adorned the rooms and remembered happy times, for many of these items had been involved in one or other of Kris and Michael’s adventures from which they had had a lucky escape. They had rescued each other from imminent doom on several occasions, but this was the way of life that their young, vibrant souls craved.

“James will be waiting for us at the hotel in fifteen minutes,” Penny informed them.

“Excellent,” said Kris.

Soon the three friends were in the private detective’s sleek BMW, riding through the New York evening. Dusk was slowly falling on the city, which was being illuminated by tens of thousands of lights and neon signs.

They collected James outside his hotel and went to the Busy Bee restaurant, a small and cozy establishment with no pomp or pretentiousness. Kris had once helped the proprietor to find the vandals who had been breaking in at night and ransacking the place. Ever since then the private eye had been a welcome visitor to Busy Bee.

On the way to the restaurant Kris introduced James to Michael saying straight out that his friend could be trusted just as much as himself and that he would be helping them to solve the case.

James was quite content with this. He looked worried and pale and in his sweaty palms he was tightly gripping a leather case which must have contained the medallion.

“James, tell us what happened yesterday,” said Penny.

“At 6 p.m. exactly I went to see *Romeo and Juliette* on Broadway. The performance lasted about two hours. When I made it back to the hotel afterward I saw that my room had been literally turned upside down. The dresser drawers had been pulled out and their contents strewn across the floor, the bed linen and pillows were torn to shreds, the lamp table was upturned and the mini-safe had been broken into,” James recounted.

When they arrived at their destination the private detective parked not far from Busy Bee, as all the adjacent parking spaces were full.

“Did you tell anyone that you were going to see a show that evening?” asked Kris once they were settled in the restaurant and had placed their orders.

James shook his head.

“Maybe someone was watching you at the hotel, waiting until you went out somewhere,” Michael said.

“Or it might have been one of the hotel staff following someone else’s instructions,” Penny suggested.

“Let’s be honest. Someone broke into my room in search of the medallion,” James said with a strained voice, “but they hadn’t taken into account the fact that I might take it with me wherever I go. I just can’t fathom out why anyone would be so desperate to get their hands on that medallion.”

“It’s very strange indeed if you consider that Bellerophon is a mysterious harbinger of doom,” Penny uttered, thinking this through. “Mr Kris, tell James what the salesman in London told you.”

The private detective gave James a run through of the situation.

“You don’t want to end up like the previous owners of the medallion!” Penny exclaimed fervently. “You should get rid of it as soon as you can!”

“That’s good advice. This thing only brings trouble,” Michael agreed.

“I’ve invested stacks of money in Bellerophon,” said James stubbornly. “And anyway, I want to work out what’s going on here and find a logical explanation for everything.”

“That’s exactly what we all want,” Kevin smirked.

“This is one hell of a mixed up case!” Michael exclaimed. He could hardly keep himself from jumping up in excitement and pacing back and forth right there in the restaurant.

“Let’s think about what we’ve got,” said the private eye. “The body of the elderly millionaire Morris Peterson is found in Brooklyn. The

official details show that the cause of death was heart failure brought on by severe shock. The only thing missing is the fake medallion while a book entitled *Mythical Creatures of Ancient Greece*, something Mr Peterson knew nothing about, is found at the scene. Some time later our man, the unknown thief, discovers that the medallion is a fake and uses a certain Richard Adams, a lecturer at New York University, to buy Bellerophon at auction. Our man must have been very concerned about the medallion slipping out of his grasp, but his second attempt to get hold of it also failed. Mr Adams didn't have enough money and as a result of a second round of bidding, James was the lucky buyer. Our man still doesn't give in and soon Mr O'Connell notices that he's being followed and it's not long before the medallion hunter breaks into his hotel room in the hope of finding Bellerophon there. Remember that that something strange happened to the previous owners of the medallion, and all three could be linked by the same secret since Morris Peterson, Rose Baker and Roger Saunder had all owned Bellerophon at some time or other."

"It's a mystery from the past," uttered Michael thoughtfully.

"We need to find out who owned the medallion before Roger Saunder," said Penny. "Some new chilling facts might come to light."

"Exactly," the private detective said, nodding in agreement. "Tomorrow we'll deal with that."

"But what about me?" James said nervously. "They might try and get hold of the medallion again."

"I can stay with you until all this is over if you like. It's safer in twos, after all," said Michael, offering to help at once.

“Thank you Mr Millis, but I’ll manage,” James said, giving a forced smile. “I’ll probably get myself a gun.”

“Just be extra careful,” Kris advised.

The waiter soon brought the bill.

“You’ve done so much for me,” James said earnestly. “Let me get this.” With these words he reached for his wallet but Michael, with his usual spontaneity, grabbed the neat bill folder off him and proclaimed,

“It’s been a pleasure to meet you, so this is on me! And I won’t take no for an answer!” Michael placed several bills in the folder without counting them and returned it to the waiter, saying “and could you get me a couple of steaks to go? I like to have something to snack on before I turn in at night.”

Michael’s request made them all laugh, but the puzzled waiter replied politely, “Of course sir.”

Watching this, Penny suddenly remembered Kris’s brain twister about Mrs Meyer, and suddenly had the answer. She could not wait to tell the private detective, but now was not the right time.

When they left the restaurant, New York was soaked in twilight.

Michael, who all this time had been wondering, frustrated, about what it was with the medallion, suddenly said,

“What if Bellerophon is the key?”

“The key?” Penny repeated, perplexed.

“Yes. The key to some secret that mustn’t be told,” Michael pronounced animatedly.

The next moment they were blown off their feet by a powerful explosion. The furious flames shot into the sky, hungrily devouring

Kris's once immaculate car. The explosion buckled an overhead power line and it came crashing down dangerously close to James, while the nearby shop windows shattered into smithereens.

Kris, Penny, James and Michael were deafened in all the uproar and commotion, but they picked themselves up, shaken, and watched as the fire engulfed the car. Someone had meant them to be in the burning car at that moment.

Michael wiped his bruised shoulder and said, in shock,
“Christ! Someone is trying to kill us!”

Chapter 12

When the dew in Kris's garden was glistening like diamonds and the morning sun had already filtered into every corner of the cozy house, the private eye's trusty assistant opened the front door and made her way quietly to her desk. Penny had had no sleep that night. She had not been able to take her mind off the events of the previous day and the mysterious medallion and was impatient to get down to working on solving such an intriguing case. However, there was another reason why Penny had come to work earlier than usual: she could not wait to tell Kris her answer to the brain twister. Without knowing if he was in or not, she walked up to the door of his office and knocked gently.

"Mr Kris, are you there?"

"Come in Penny," rang out the private detective's voice.

Usually, if the door to his office was closed it meant that the private eye was working on something important.

When Penny opened the door she saw Kris sitting at his hand-crafted baroque desk, the pleasant smell of freshly brewed coffee filling the room. The private detective looked vibrant and energetic, but it was clear that he had not had any sleep that night. His desk was piled with papers and newspapers, while new cuttings and notes had appeared on the walls.

"You're early today," said Kris, smiling.

“I’ve worked it out,” whispered Penny conspiratorially, and she sat down opposite the private detective. The fire in her eyes and her mysterious smile showed that she was eager to tell him her answer to the brain twister.

Kris said nothing. He just smiled at his assistant’s innocence and openness as she continued,

“This is a classic mathematical sophism where misleading information is given. You said that the total debt amounted to 150 dollars. When Mrs Meyer returned to work she gave her colleague 30 dollars, so she still owed 70 to her colleague and 50 to her friend, making a total of 120. Plus she had 2 hamburgers at 10 dollars apiece, making 140. But actually 120 dollars is what Mrs Meyer owes. The cost of the hamburgers shouldn’t be added. As an accountant would say, 120 dollars is her liability and the hamburgers are an asset. In other words, in order to work out the total debt the amount she repaid (30), and not the cost of the hamburgers, should be added to the remaining 120, making a total of 150. It all adds up.”

“Well done Penny. That’s it exactly. You’ve shown once again that I was right to take you on,” Kris and Penny laughed, easing the tension from the previous day’s shock.

Just then footsteps could be heard on the stairway and a couple of seconds later their young millionaire friend appeared in the room.

“Buenas días!” If there was anyone who was laid-back and light-hearted it was Michael. It looked like the previous day’s events had only made him more eager to solve the chain of bloody crimes.

Kris nodded in response.

“Hi Michael!” Penny smiled.

“Is there any news about yesterday evening?” the young millionaire asked.

The private detective put his finger to his head thoughtfully and subconsciously began to massage his temple.

“The cops reckon it was a homemade car bomb. According to initial reports the BMW was targeted by a group of local radicals,” said the private eye. “Obviously, that is not the case. The car was blown up by someone who doesn’t want us to solve the case of Morris Peterson’s death. And the fact that someone wanted us out of the way is proof that we’re on the right track.”

“Mr Kris, we mustn’t give in. We’ve had worse cases than this, but we’ve always won in the end!” said Penny defiantly, clenching her fist.

“We have to unmask this son-of-a-bitch!” Michael exclaimed emotionally.

“We need to talk to Roger Saunder’s widow to find out how and why he died. Steve Matthew wouldn’t tell us and he must have his reasons for that.” The private detective looked at his notebook. “I’ve already called Mrs Saunder. It turns out that it’d be useless to visit the address the London jeweler gave us. Despite being of retirement age she hasn’t settled down to knit socks or babysit her grandchildren like many other pensioners. Instead, she’s set up her own business.”

“That’s just what I’d like to do!” said Penny in awe.

“And so you shall, when you retire,” the young millionaire joked.

“Judging from her voice, she’s quite a feisty lady. She said that she devotes all her time to business and is practically never at home. So I’ve arranged to meet her at her office at 10 this morning.”

“There’s definitely something about this lady that I like,” Michael said, laughing.

“Penny, see if you can find out anything about any other murders connected with antiques or ancient myths while Michael and myself pay Mrs Saunder a visit,” the private detective said.

“Darn,” Penny sighed, realizing that she would not have the chance to meet this smart businesswoman. “OK Mr Kris, I’ll do that and tell you the results as soon as I have them.”

It turned out that Mrs Saunder owned a flower shop. The building’s unusual architecture attracted passersby and judging by the lively atmosphere inside the shop, business was booming.

Kris and Michael walked into a fragrance of many different flowers. It was the type of rich and sweet bouquet that could only exist in a flower garden in the south of France in spring. By the left-hand wall an improvised waterfall had been set up and next to this were a couple of cages with loudly singing songbirds inside. Sales assistants in green T-shirts were rushing around the place, dressing the windows, while others served the customers.

“Hey there, we’re looking for Mrs Saunder,” said Michael to the nearest assistant.

“Mrs Saunder is in her office,” he replied. “Can I help you instead?”

“Could you tell her that Kevin Kris is here?” the private detective asked.

“Sure,” and on that word the assistant disappeared through a door leading to the proprietor’s office. Before long he appeared briskly out of the same door and announced, “You may enter.”

The two friends went into Mrs Saunder’s office. Its center was dominated by an enormous desk which seemed to give importance to everything that happened in this room. At the table itself was an old woman whose gray hair was tied up neatly in a bun. She had huge earrings in her ears and countless bracelets adorned her arms. Her alluring, inquisitive brown eyes had a spark to them and stood out against her white face.

“Kevin Kris. Private detective,” said Kris, introducing himself.

“Good morning Mr Kris! I must say, I was surprised that you called. What can I do for you?”

“I’m investigating a death that might have something to do with your husband’s murder. This is Michael Millis, my friend and companion.”

“I see. I knew this day would come.”

Michael stared at the woman in surprise.

“Come on, don’t look so surprised, young man. There’s too much in this story that needs explaining.”

“What story is that?” Michael asked with excitement.

“Well then.” Mrs Saunder motioned toward two chairs. “Please sit down and I’ll tell you everything I know. Then you can draw your own conclusions.”

The two friends lowered themselves into two of the sumptuous soft armchairs that were placed around Mrs Saunder’s desk and prepared to listen.

“Roger was quite a laid-back man, maybe even too much so. Surprisingly, this great composure was of real use to him in life. Roger could get on with anyone, and never got into quarrels. He’d probably never had a single argument in all his life.”

“Yeah,” thought Michael to himself, “I don’t think we could say the same about you.” Her bright sprightly eyes, lively speech and many commanding gestures were proof indeed of who had worn the trousers in the Saunder family.

“He was a quiet and relaxed man and I just cannot believe that his murder was the result of some personal differences or a dispute, as the police first stated.”

“Mrs Saunder, could you tell us what exactly happened on January 26th 2002?” the private detective asked.

“That evening Roger needed to finish his quarterly report and stayed on after the shop had closed. I decided to go home earlier as I wasn’t feeling well. When I got there I took a sedative and didn’t wake all night. In the morning I was woken by the police.” Mrs Saunder fell silent.

She pursed her lips and looked away. Her eyes shone even more from the tears that were filling them and it was obvious that despite her feisty character and strong aura, she was finding it hard to continue. Michael did not know how to react in such a situation and felt awkward, but the private eye, maintaining his composure, said,

“Mrs Saunder, we know that it’s hard for you to speak about this, but it just might help us to find the person who murdered your husband.”

“Yes, of course,” said the old woman, and taking a deep breath she continued. “When I walked into our shop, I was horrified. There was

blood everywhere, the windows had been smashed and there were dents all over the doors and walls. It seemed like someone in a mad fury had torn up everything he'd laid his eyes on. Roger's body lay in the centre of the shop. He had fifty two stab wounds. The police immediately closed the case, putting it down to the gangs that frequent our district, but several things keep preying on my mind: not a cent had been stolen from the cash register, and the takings that day had been good. All the shop windows had been smashed but none of the jewelry had been stolen. And then there was that strange picture."

Michael's eyes shone and he made to rise from his seat.

"What picture?"

"On one of the walls I could clearly make out a clumsy carved picture of a scorpion. The police were sure I had imagined it but I was sure I hadn't. I found out the significance of the picture and it turned out that the scorpion is a symbol of unfaithfulness, ungratefulness and revenge. In medieval art the scorpion is often shown as a sign of Judas, the embodiment of betrayal, envy and hatred. I told this to the police, who by then had found out that Steve and Roger had been in business together and that Steve had been deeply hurt when my husband left to go into business alone. Since Steve happened to be staying with us at the time they decided to pin the murder on him. It took a lot of effort to stop the proceedings and prove Steve's innocence and I had to change several of my testimonies and agree to the gang version. In other words, the case was closed and the real murderer was never found."

"I do feel for you," said Michael sincerely. "We'll do all we can to get to the truth!"

While Mrs Saunder had been speaking, Kris had been deep in thought and was interested in one question in particular.

“Tell me, is it true that on the day before Roger’s murder a woman came to the shop and sold him a piece of jewelry?”

“As if I would remember! People often came to the shop to sell white elephants and old jewelry.”

“Mrs Saunder, please think. This is very important,” said Michael seriously.

The proprietor of the flower shop looked away and was silent for a minute before saying,

“Yes, actually, one did come in. The woman needed money and sold some kind of medallion to Roger. We didn’t keep it long as Steve bought it off him immediately.”

The private eye took a photo of Bellerophon out of his case and handed it to Mrs Saunder.

“Yes, that’s the medallion,” she said at once. “Encrusted with unusual blue-green aquamarines.”

“Mrs Saunder, do you have any contact details for this woman?” the private detective asked.

The shop owner shook her head.

Kris and Michael exchanged glances. The thread of the investigation into the medallion’s bloody past had just been lost.

“Thank you for your valuable information,” said the private detective politely.

“Wait. I’ll show you out,” said the shop owner.

They all went back into the shop. As before, the birds were singing and a sweet flowery scent was in the air, but the shop was much busier. Surprised by the rush, Michael remarked,

“It looks like you’re doing excellent business Mrs Saunder. On the way here we saw three more florists but none of them had as many customers as you.”

“Because no one offers the services that I do.”

Michael’s eyes widened in surprise and the private eye looked with interest at the shop owner.

“Would you mind if I asked what services they might be?” the young millionaire asked with a smile.

“You must know that the world has its own energy, and flowers are part of that. Flowers are in the energy system of the universe. Many people don’t even think about the role such a minor detail as a flower can play in interiors. Plant anything and it will start to absorb energy and transform it for you. Figs protect the house’s atmosphere from negative energy and violets bring luck. Bougainvillea is considered a powerful symbol of money. It’s a good idea to use it in the interiors of financial institutions. In Asia many banks use these flowers as part of their decor to heighten financial energy. And if you want to find love, you just can’t do without peonies. We advise our customers and select plants to help them achieve their aims and improve the area of their lives that they’re concerned about. And it works!”

Kris smiled tactfully and the shop owner continued,

“You, for example, young man,” she said to Michael, “have practically everything, except that which is most important. Take this bouquet of peach blossoms and your life will be complete.”

Kris left the shop deep in thought while Michael followed with the peach blossoms and a happy smile. When the two friends got into the car the private detective’s cell phone started vibrating. It was a text message from Penny.

“Get here as soon as you can. I’ve discovered another murder like this.”

Chapter 13

To the sounds of rock'n'roll Kris, Penny and Michael prepared dinner in the office kitchen, chatting, laughing and joking. Although the detective agency was Penny's main place of work, the cozy surroundings made her feel that she was not at the office. This informal, friendly atmosphere had reigned since her first day of working with the private detective.

Michael was more of a hindrance than a help. He kept hanging around Penny and asking her about the news. But as Kris had stated in the calmest tone imaginable that first they needed a good meal to boost their energy, Penny was patently not giving in to any of Michael's pleas. She could hardly keep herself from laughing because he looked so let down.

Kris's imperturbability was driving the impatient and edgy Michael crazy but from long experience he knew that until they had eaten the private eye would not get down to business and that his assistant would not reveal the news.

Finally, they had eaten, tidied the kitchen and were reclining in the office hall.

"A journalist friend of mine has uncovered some interesting details," Penny began. "On December 15th 2001 a certain Frankie Dacort was found dead in his apartment. On his chest was *Mythical Creatures of Ancient Greece*, opened at the page on Chimera. Furthermore, someone

had drawn a picture on the page, like the ones on Ancient Greek amphorae. Nothing had been stolen from the apartment. The official cause of death was heart failure brought on by some chemical substance. The murderer was caught quickly and his guilt was proven beyond doubt in court. Moreover, he confessed to it himself. This was 31-year-old Jeffrey Wilson who'd been a close friend of Frankie Dacort. The press didn't get wind of it and my friend only found out because her husband was at that time friends with Josh Leman, the detective investigating the case." Penny finished.

For a while all was silent in the room. Kris said nothing as he was thinking this over but Michael was simply left speechless.

"Could it really be the same murderer?" he asked finally, excited.

"It's totally possible," Kris uttered slowly. "What was the substance that made his heart stop?"

"I couldn't find that out, but I did find out where Josh Leman lives. He's retired now and spends his time in his suite at Beekman Tower in Manhattan."

"Well I never!" Michael whistled in amazement. "If I'd known that cops made so much money I'd have had second thoughts about going into finance."

"Well, actually Josh's kids have done well for themselves and they support him."

"We need to speak to him," the private detective proclaimed. "Come on, we're going to see Mr Leman."

The next moment Michael's cell phone rang. He left the room and when he returned ten minutes later he was a sorry sight to see.

“I can’t go with you,” he said, disappointed. “That was my broker. He needs to see me. The stock market’s changing and I have to sort out my securities portfolio immediately. His analysts reckon that if I don’t sell off some of my shares now I could lose millions of dollars.”

“Don’t worry pal.” Kris said calmly.

“Why do I always have such bad luck?” Michael moaned.

“We’ll call you as soon as we can and let you know what’s happened!” Penny added.

If only Michael could have known that it was actually *good* luck that prevented him from going with Kris and Penny to see the ex-cop that day.

The Beekman Tower skyscraper was one of the tallest apartment blocks in the western hemisphere. This work of art by the architect of Frank Gehry rose 870 feet into the sky and had a floor area of over 1 million square feet. The locals nicknamed it *New York by Gehry*, hinting at the designer’s unusual style.

The skyscraper’s wave-like walls and numerous bay windows gave the impression of expensive cloth fluttering in the wind. Its uneven surfaces meant that the facade changed over the course of the day depending on the weather and natural light.

Kris and Penny soon reached Spruce Street in Lower Manhattan, the location of Beekman Tower.

Josh Leman was remarkably happy to see them and welcomed them eagerly. The ex-cop must have been spending too much time on his own and was simply bored in this luxury residential tower.

Mr Leman was a smart, thin man wearing horn-framed glasses with thick lenses. He was dressed in corduroy trousers and a blue shirt. He held himself proudly upright, inducing respect. Penny could imagine the younger version of Josh Leman fighting the criminal elements on the streets of New York.

Kris and Penny politely listened without interrupting as Mr Leman told them a couple of stories about his time on the NYPD. Finally, he asked them himself why they were there, and the private detective gave him a rundown of the situation.

“The murder of Frankie Dacort,” Josh Leman muttered thoughtfully. “Yes, I remember that case.”

“Mr Leman, could you tell us some more about it?” Penny said with an irresistible smile. Her charm had often come in handy when investigating crimes.

“Sure I can!” Josh nodded. “Mr Dacort’s body was found by his wife Liz on December 15th 2001 in their apartment. Mrs Dacort had gone to her friend’s for lunch and found Frankie’s lifeless body when she returned in the evening. She immediately noticed something strange: a book on his chest, *Mythical Creatures of Ancient Greece*. According to Liz, it wasn’t a book of his and she had never seen it before. Mrs Dacort called the ambulance but the doctors couldn’t do anything to help Frankie. He’d been poisoned with mandaratoxin.”

“Is that a type of neurotoxin?” Kris inquired.

“Sure is,” Josh Leman confirmed. “As an entomologist friend of mine explained, this toxic substance is part of the poison of the *Vespa Mandarinia*, the largest hornet in the world. The insect can reach over 2

inches in length with a wingspan of 3 inches. Its poison has a complex chemical composition and can cause paralysis of the nervous and cardiovascular system.”

“Was the poison administered in food?” asked Kris.

“No, the mandaratoxin was injected into a vein in his left arm,” Josh Leman replied.

“Did it act instantly?” the private eye inquired.

“Within ten minutes the substance had paralyzed his heart and caused it to stop,” Mr Leman explained.

“Where on earth did the murderer manage to get his hands on such an exotic poison?” exclaimed Penny.

“On the black market in Chinatown,” the cop replied.

“What happened next?” asked Kris.

“When Mrs Dacort was testifying she pointed out that not long before his death, Frankie had fallen out with his best pal Jeffrey Wilson. His apartment was searched and a glass jar with extract of hornet’s poison was found. A few days later, Wilson confessed to the crime.”

“What was his motive?” asked Penny.

“Mr Wilson suffered from an unusual form of schizophrenia and had some kind of a split personality disorder. This had been a secret for many years and Jeffrey kept his dangerous illness so well hidden that no one had an inkling about it. Mr Wilson taught religious studies and theology at the New York Seminary and was something at St. Patrick’s Cathedral. He thought that Frankie Dacort was a danger to society and he needed taking out.”

“How exactly did the murder take place?”

“On December 15th 2001 Jeffrey went round to Frankie’s place. They were having some sort of discussion when Mr Wilson suddenly attacked his friend. They started fighting. Frankie hit his head on a wall and knocked himself out. Jeffrey then gave his friend the fatal injection.”

“Why did he leave the book on Frankie’s body?”

“Mr Wilson thought that Frankie was an ancient Greek monster that needed destroying.”

“And what’s the significance of the drawing in the book?”

“Jeffrey never explained that.”

“What did the court decide?”

“Despite his obvious signs of insanity and psychiatric illness, Wilson was declared of sound mind and sent to a high security jail, although he was finally transferred to the Adelbert Dunste psychiatric unit in 2005.”

“Mr Leman, does a valuable antique medallion have anything to do with this case, by any chance?”

The ex-cop shook his head.

“What do you think of all this?”

“It didn’t take long to solve the crime. All the evidence pointed to Jeffrey Wilson. I remember him being questioned. Jeffrey was a typical lunatic. His type have their own motives for crimes that we just can’t understand,” said Josh thoughtfully.

“Mr Leman, what did Frankie do?” asked Penny, curious.

“He was a scientist working in the field of psychoacoustics or electroacoustics. I don’t remember which exactly. Frankie worked in a secret research lab at Colombia University. His wife mentioned some

project codenamed *Chimera*. Frankie was working on it when he was killed.”

Kris and Penny exchanged glances. They could feel they were getting close to finding out some kind of secret. The private detective and his assistant were sure that the murder of Frankie Dacort was somehow connected to the death of Morris Peterson and the other mysterious cases. The fact that Bellerophon had not been part of the official inquiry only meant that the cops had missed something important, some detail, a link in the chain of bloody events.

“So what was this *Chimera* project about?” asked Kris.

“No one knows.” Josh Leman shook his head. “It’s classified information.”

Suddenly an explosion was heard in Mr Leman’s apartment. The next moment a wall of flames roared up. Someone must have planted a time bomb, starting a fire on the 62nd floor. At once the fire and smoke started spreading up and along the skyscraper.

Chapter 14

The first to come to his senses and see what was going on was Kris.

“The exit is blocked,” said the private eye. “The only way out is through the window.”

“But we’ll kill ourselves if we do that! Wait for the sprinklers and smoke ventilation system to work!” Josh Leman yelled.

“The fire system’s probably broken down” Kris retorted. “If we stay here we’ll either die of smoke inhalation or be burnt alive.”

“But even if we smash a window and climb through it, where can we go from there?” asked Mr Leman in bewilderment. He could feel the flames getting nearer and nearer.

Suddenly Penny remembered an article called *Fires in Skyscrapers* that she had written the year before.

“Mr Leman, is this skyscraper divided into fire compartments?” she asked.

“Sure.” Josh Leman nodded.

“Well done Penny!” The private detective immediately realized what his assistant was getting at. “The fire compartments in skyscrapers are separated by fire-resistant partitions to stop the flames spreading upward. In other words, if we can get to the nearest fire compartment below us we can get out of the building via the fire escape.”

“It’s just a question of how many floors down we have to go,” said Penny.

Just in time, Josh Leman remembered the fire drill that had been held for the residents of the skyscraper six months before.

“We’re in compartment F. It starts on this floor,” the ex-cop told them.

“So the previous fire compartment ends on the 61st floor?” asked Penny.

“No, the 61st is a service floor built with highly fire-resistant walls and ceilings. We can’t get out there as we don’t know the access code. We need the 60th floor. That’s where the nearest compartment ends,” Josh Leman explained.

Kris, Penny and Mr Leman were starting to be overcome by the heat. The smoke burned their eyes, making them water heavily and it became harder and harder to breathe. Their skin reddened and they sweated profusely. The ex-cop’s apartment now resembled a real furnace and the lack of air made their heads throb. The fire was consuming everything in its path and it would soon reach the three people trapped on the 62nd floor.

“How can we make it to the 60th floor?” Penny spluttered.

“You two, pull down the curtains and tie them together, quick!” cried Kris, reaching for his gun. He fired a few shots from his Sig Sauer P229. The window shattered and, as is often the case when there is a rush of oxygen, the fire grew stronger. The private eye cleared the shards of glass from the hole in the window while Penny and Josh Leman made a decent enough length of rope from the curtains. Kris tied it securely to the central heating pipe.

“Listen to me carefully,” said the private eye seriously. “We’ve only got a few minutes left to get out of this room before the fire destroys our improvised rope so we need to go down it quickly and carefully. Penny, you go first.” Kris gave his assistant the gun.” When you get down there, smash the window and get inside. The window’s too narrow for us all to fit in at once.”

Penny had barely made it to the edge of the curtain cornice before she caught her breath and her head span from the overpowering fear. She was 492 feet up in the air. Below her, small dots of people and cars swarmed like ants.

Penny took a deep breath, pulled herself together and started lowering herself out, holding tightly onto the rope. She did exactly what the private eye had told her. Then Mr Leman began to climb down, making it to the 61st floor quickly and easily. By the time Kris grabbed the rope the fire was almost upon him.

“Now what?” asked Josh Leman when they had all made it to the 61st floor.

“We do the same again,” and with these words Kris rolled up his left trouser leg and pulled out a knife from a small sheath attached to his calf. With the ex-cop’s help he climbed up as high as he could and cut the rope, saving it from the flames above. The private detective tied it to a pipe by the window.

“It’ll be harder this time,” said Kris. “The rope’s too short to just lower ourselves down again. It’s only long enough to get to the top of the 60th floor.”

“What are we going to do?” exclaimed Penny. “Can we get out on this floor?”

“There’s no way in.” Josh Leman shook his head.

“We’ll have to do this: go down as far as we can, dig our feet into the side of the building then kick out with all our might to swing ourselves diagonally into the 60th floor window, as we let go of the rope,” said Kris seriously.

“You’re out of your mind!” shrieked Josh Leman. “We’re not stuntmen!”

“There’s no other choice if you want to survive,” Kris cut in. “I’ll go first so I can break the glass.”

The private detective turned round and was about to start lowering himself down when he felt Penny’s hand on him. He turned around.

“Mr Kris, be careful!” Penny hugged him tightly. She now realized how dear he was to her.

The private detective began making his way down. He had to hold on with one hand so the other was free to fire the shots, but the glass in the window shattered and the way was open. The private eye kicked himself away from the skyscraper’s steel panels with all his strength. There was no room for error as he would have only one chance to make it through the window of the 60th floor or to at least grab the cornice. Kris released the rope and... flew in through the window. The shards of glass slashed his sides making blood gush from the wounds. The private detective looked around. There was no one home.

“It’s OK!” Kris cried, ignoring the pain.

Josh Leman was the next to make his way down. Suddenly he shrieked.

“What’s going on Mr Leman?” Penny leaned out through the window of the 61st floor.

“I’ve dropped my glasses! I can’t see!” cried Josh Leman in a panic, hanging on the rope. “I can’t see a thing!”

Penny went cold.

“Mr Leman, you’re nearly there,” Kris shouted up. “Put your feet against the side of the building and kick yourself backward. When I say ‘jump’, let go of the rope at once. D’you hear me? At once! Are you ready?”

“Yeah!”

The ex-cop kicked himself back from the steel panel of the skyscraper with both feet.

Penny closed her eyes.

“Jump!” shouted the private eye.

The next moment Josh Leman let go of the rope and flew through the window of the 60th floor.

“Penny, you go now!” yelled the private detective.

His assistant averted her eyes from the 492-foot drop. Fighting off her icy terror she began climbing down.

“Excellent. Now push yourself backwards as hard as you can and as soon as I say ‘jump’, let go of the rope! “Are you ready?”

“Yeah!” Penny cried. She was seized with terror, an all-absorbing wave of fear. If she did not hurry she would go plummeting down to the ground.

“Jump!”

For a millisecond Penny stalled and a moment later she realized she had let go of the rope too late. She flew diagonally and at the last moment feverishly grabbed the cornice with both hands, painfully knocking herself against the skyscraper’s steel panel. Suddenly she began to lose her grip.

Just then Kris grabbed Penny by the wrist. For a second she looked down. Her fear of heights had a numbing effect on her. Her shoes slipped off and disappeared into the distance.

“I’ve got you!” Kris shouted.

The private detective pulled her in through the window.

For a few seconds Kris, Penny and Josh Leman lay on the glass-strewn floor, breathing heavily.

“What a day!” said the ex-cop.

Their calculations were right. There was no fire on the 60th floor. Supporting Josh Leman, who could not see anything, Kris and Penny soon found the fire escape and hurried down it. It seemed that they would never get to the end.

Finally they made it to the lobby. Firefighters and medical staff were already there and one of the firefighters led them outside. Kris gave him a brief rundown of what had happened.

“Why didn’t the fire system start up?” Josh Leman inquired.

“It started up on all the floors of compartment F except the 62nd. Something must have gone wrong in the central server,” the firefighter explained.

Kris and Penny exchanged glances. An interesting coincidence indeed.

A crowd of onlookers had already gathered around the skyscraper. In the evening light the blinking lamps of cars and ambulances flashed in their faces. The police moved the crowd on, booming instructions through a loudspeaker for them to clear the space around the skyscraper. The firefighting helicopter had almost put out the fire on the 62nd floor. Thanks to the lightening reaction of the New York Fire Department and the fire safety system, tragedy had been avoided. As Kris and Penny later discovered, no one had been hurt.

Suddenly Penny was overcome with exhaustion.

“Come on, I’ll take you home,” said Kris.

Leaving Josh Leman in the care of the doctors, the private detective and his assistant were about to leave when the ex-cop called out,

“I didn’t tell you the most important part.” Mr Leman looked toward where he thought Kris and Penny were standing with a blurred look in his eyes. “I recently found out that Jeffrey Wilson had escaped from the psychiatric unit.”

Chapter 15

Ocracoke Island was remarkable in every way. It had once been part of Hatteras Island, an island of the Outer Bank, a small, long clump of land separating the Atlantic from the Pamlico Sound, but in 1846 a powerful hurricane had split the island into three: Bodie, Ocracoke and Hatters itself.

In the early 18th century this island was an outpost for the notorious pirate Edward Teach, also known as Blackbeard. Legend had it that he died in Ocracoke in 1718 when Maynard, a naval captain, tricked him into a violent battle there.

The island had an amazing variety of plant and animal life. Many of the birds living on Ocracoke were protected species found nowhere else on earth and there was a particularly interesting herd of wild ponies, wonderfully adorable and playful horses.

However the main feature of Ocracoke Island was its isolation. It was only accessible by boat, private airplane or ferry and cell phones, computers and other attributes of civilization were not welcome. The sandy dunes, here and there sprouting grass, the wild beach and never-ending stretch of the Atlantic Ocean, all these came together to create a sense of serenity, peace, harmony and a certain distance from the empty world of mortals. Here it was possible to really take it easy far away from the crazy pace of life, the city crowds, everyday worries and problems.

On Ocracoke Island there reigned an atmosphere of peace and life-affirming faith in the higher meaning of all things living.

This was where Kris, Penny and Michael had now headed. In the last two days they had twice been a hair's breadth from death and the private detective knew from experience that at such moments a break was needed to think things over properly. Non-stop stressful work would only lead to total mental fatigue and an inability to work effectively. Therefore, the three friends had hired a small light aircraft and taken off for Ocracoke Island. It was the ideal place to escape from the noise of New York and civilization in general.

Evening was drawing in and the scarlet disc of the sun was slowly sinking into the horizon. The orange rays had a wondrous effect on the surface of the water. On the empty, untamed beach, as at sea, all was calm and quiet without a breath of wind.

While Kris prepared a barbecue Penny and Michael strolled unhurriedly along the Atlantic coast. Penny's gorgeous dress was a fitting match to Michael's colorful wide shorts and Jamaican shirt.

"I just love coming here," said the young millionaire. "This place changed my life."

"Really? How?" Penny asked.

"There was a time when I was one of the most enthusiastic members of the rat race. Obsessed with the race to achieve financial freedom I devoted every minute of my life to business and the stock exchange. I used to dream about profit and loss reports, the dates of news on the state of company affairs and reports by the chairman of the Federal Reserve System. I would fall asleep at night hugging company balance

sheets and wake in the morning wondering which stocks I should buy that day before they leapt up in price. I knew the dates of annual shareholders' meetings by heart, but couldn't remember the birthdays of my friends. I had three cell phones, four PCs and a laptop so that I could be constantly up to date with the prices of shares, oil, gold and could grow my business. I was a marvel of attention and observation in technical analysis but at the same time I managed to totally ignore the basic joys of life. Until one day when that all changed. Here," said Michael reflectively.

Penny was astonished to hear the young millionaire's story. She had just discovered a completely different side to Michael's personality. Kris's usually happy-go-lucky, somewhat child-like friend had suddenly been transformed into a man wizened by his years, seriously contemplating things which also concerned Penny. She often thought about the frailty of existence, trying to understand what her life meant beyond the limits of basic material wealth. Penny suddenly felt that she and Michael had much in common.

"And then what happened?" she asked, with baited breath.

"I once helped Kevin to investigate a perplexing crime in Cuba. When the villain had been tracked down and handed over to the cops Kevin suggested taking a few days off somewhere quiet before heading back to New York. We flew to this island," said Michael. "I just loved strolling along this sandy beach watching the ocean, sometimes calm, sometimes rough. I breathed in the fresh, invigorating air and the drops of sea water left a pleasant tickling sensation on my skin. I could hear the sounds of nature and watch the birds, and at some point I realized

that I had never ever been so happy. That was the moment of revelation. By that time I'd already amassed a decent sum of money but hadn't realized how poor I actually was. I'd been ignoring the beauty of the world around me and had been unable to take delight in each day. That was when I really found freedom and it changed my outlook on life forever."

"That's wonderful Michael!" exclaimed Penny. "Most people go their whole life without realizing that!"

"It's such a pity that all those people who spend their lives rushing back and forth can't just stop for a moment and say out loud: 'Hey, everything's great! I'm alive!'"

"Maybe they need help? You could write a book about your experience," Penny suggested.

Michael picked a large pebble up from the sand and skimmed it across the surface of the water.

"Maybe one day I will, but not now." There was a playful glint to Michael's eyes indicating something mysterious. He shook off his wistful mood and with a wide smile asked cheerfully,

"Do you want to hear about the time me and Kevin dressed up as stunning women for a Brazilian carnival?"

"Sure I do!" Penny smiled.

"Christ, that was funny! I got so into character that a certain honorable European made a pass at me!"

Picturing this, first Penny and then Michael burst out laughing.

They continued unhurriedly along the sandy beach and Kris's friend started recounting the story of one of their many amazing adventures together.

The last rays of the bright orange sun melting into the horizon kept Penny and Michael warm.

Two days later Kevin Kris and Michael Millis were passing the evening in the private eye's office. The private detective was engrossed in his work, seeking out all the information he could on Jeffrey Wilson, but Michael was aimlessly propping up the walls. He kept himself busy with some chocolates, unwrapping them and throwing the papers into the wastepaper basket. Penny had gone to the publisher's, promising to return as soon as she could.

"We don't have too much information on our friend," said Kris, stretching the numbed joints of his hands.

"What do we know?" Michael asked.

"Jeffrey Wilson was born in New York on March 13th 1970 in the family of a Catholic priest. When he graduated from school Jeffrey went to study at New York Theological Seminary. Mr Wilson was obsessed with the idea of heightening morality in society, strengthening spiritual and moral values. In 1999 he arranged several *How to Raise the Religious Consciousness of Modern Americans* seminars. In addition, he also studied ancient Greek mythology. On May 25th 2000 Jeffrey attended a *Monsters of Ancient Greece* conference in Athens under the auspices of the Association of World Historians. On December 15th 2001 Frankie Dacort was murdered. It wasn't long before Mr Wilson was put behind

bars. In 2005 Jeffrey was transferred to the Adelbert Dunste psychiatric unit, and that's about it." The private detective finished.

"Everything about this case has some sort of connection with Ancient Greek myths," Michael exclaimed, and started to count them on his fingers. "Copies of *Mythical Creatures of Ancient Greece* were found on the bodies of Morris Peterson and Frankie Dacort. In each one, something had been drawn on the page on Chimera. Jeffrey Wilson had an interest in myths of Ancient Greece and had attended a conference in Athens. *Chimera* was the name of the project that Frankie Dacort had been working on just before he died. Mr Wilson, in his deluded state, thought that his friend Frankie was an Ancient Greek monster that needed destroying."

"Yeah, and the medallion, the false copy of which was stolen from Morris Peterson, is called Bellerophon," added Kris and, seeing the bewilderment on his friend's face, explained: "Bellerophon is an Ancient Greek hero who killed Chimera."

"Ye-eah. It might be an idea to refresh my memory on this legend," Michael said, scathing his head in puzzlement.

The private detective decided to fill him in.

"Bellerophon was a handsome, irrepressibly brave fighter but his looks played an evil trick on him. While he was in Agros at the court of King Proetos, the king's wife Anteia fell madly in love with him and begged that they run away together. However, the youth refused and Anteia, in a fury, told her husband that Bellerophon was guilty of terrible crimes. Proetos was enraged but had no desire to kill his guest with his own hands so he sent Bellerophon to Iobates, King of Lycia, with a

sealed tablet containing the message that its bearer should be put to death. King Iobates, however, became so close to the youth that he could not kill him, but at the same time he could not refuse the request of King Proetos. Iobates therefore gave Bellerophon the task of killing Chimera. Many brave men had already perished attempting to defeat the beast and so King Iobates intended to dispose of the youth in this way. Chimera was an evil, bloodthirsty monster with the head of a lion, the body of a goat and a snake for a tail. It was the offspring of two no-less terrible creatures - the hundred-headed dragon Typhon and Echidna, half woman half snake. Chimera was one of the ancient symbols of evil and over time it has become the symbol of unattainable dreams, idle fantasies and empty fabrications. Bellerophon would probably not have defeated the monster were it not for Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, who gave the youth a golden bridle with which to harness Pegasus.”

“Pegasus?” Michael repeated, with interest. “That sounds familiar. I think it’s a popular brand of cigarettes in Eastern Europe.”

“Pegasus was a winged horse,” said the private detective. “It was born from a drop of blood from the decapitated head of Medusa, which fell onto the sea foam. When he had saddled the magical horse, Bellerophon went up into the mountains in search of the monster. He flew so high that the flames exuding from the monster’s mouth could not reach him. Bellerophon threw his spear at Chimera which gave a terrible roar and then fell dead, black blood seeping from its wounds.”

For a while Kris and Michael were silent.

“What was Frankie working on then if he called his project *Chimera*?” Michael wondered out loud. “Perhaps he was doing genetic

interbreeding experiments? What if it went so far that it began to be a threat to others, and Jeffrey Wilson decided to kill the scientist? You remember what he said when he was questioned: 'Frankie Dacort was a danger to society and he needed taking out.' Could Morris Peterson have died at the hands of Jeffrey Wilson on the run from the psychiatric unit? What did he want with the medallion? What was so unusual about Bellerophon and why did its owners perish?" Michael pondered. "My head's spinning from so many questions."

To take his mind off things for a moment, Michael went off and made some strong coffee and toast with cherry jelly. He had just begun to eat when the doorbell rang.

"Penny has her own keys," proclaimed Michael, puzzled, and went to get the door.

However, it was not the private eye's assistant but James O'Connell who stood there. He looked amazingly energetic and full of life. When Michael asked what his good mood was all about, James replied smugly,

"I feel safe at last!" and with these words he pulled a gun out from his jacket.

"A Walther TPH. 11.5 ounces. 5.3 inches. Shoots .25 ACP calibers and .22 LR's. Holds 6 cartridges. Not a bad example of a pocket gun, although it has its drawbacks," said Kris knowledgeably.

"Wow!" Michael's eyes burned with his typical child-like curiosity and without asking he grabbed the gun from James and began turning it over in his hands.

“Now I’ll have something to say to the guy hunting for my medallion if I meet him,” said James with assumed bravado, enjoying the effect it had on Michael.

“Mr O’Connell, did you buy this gun on the black market?” asked Kris.

James nodded.

“You do understand the liability of carrying an illegal weapon?”

“But at least I can protect myself,” James said, shrugging.

Mr O’Connell soon left, politely refusing the offer of coffee and toast.

“If I were him I’d probably buy a shooter too,” said Michael thoughtfully.

When the two friends had had a bite to eat and tidied the living room, Penny walked in.

“I can smell freshly brewed Arabica,” said the private detective’s assistant, smiling.

“Hi Penny!” said Michael welcoming Penny cheerfully, as did Kris.

“I have news for you!” Penny pronounced conspiratorially.

“Go on!” Michael jumped up and nearly grabbed her.

“Like I told you, the case of Frankie Dacort’s death was overlooked by the press, but I decided to check it out again and found a small article in the archives on the scientist’s death. It didn’t tell me anything I didn’t already know except for one thing.” Penny paused for effect, testing Michael’s nerves. “At the autopsy it was discovered that Frankie Dacort’s blood was black.”

Chapter 16

Penny nipped along the wisteria-lined avenue in her smart Volkswagen, neat little houses with white fences flashed past outside.

The day before it had been decided that Kris and Michael would check out the clinic where Jeffrey Wilson had been sent, while Penny would pay a visit on Liz Dacort.

However, when the private eye's assistant arrived at the address listed in the phone book she discovered that all the previous tenants had long since moved away and no one could remember the Dacorts. Fortunately Penny managed to get hold of the new address of one of Liz's former neighbors and remaining optimistic, the intrepid young woman set off.

After driving down a street of identical buildings she came to a bright pink house with toy windmills, cute garden ornaments and an enormous parasol right in the middle of the yard. This seemed to be what she was looking for. Penny stepped onto the porch and rang the bell, hearing an 80s hit play in return. After a while the door opened and out came a kindly-looking old woman with wavy gray hair, oval glasses and an enormous bundle of balloons tied to her wrist. Penny looked at her in astonishment but the old woman just said, without batting an eyelid,

“Yes?”

“Good morning, I'd like to talk to Mrs Dawson.”

“Oh my,” the old woman breathed, “Maggie Dawlson is no more. Only her pale shadow remains.”

Penny frowned. It was entirely possible that this woman was not all there and could not give an intelligible response, but she had no intention of giving in. She continued talking, loudly and clearly, pronouncing every word as if she were speaking to someone who was hard of hearing.

“My name is Penny. I work for a private detective. Could I ask you one or two questions?”

“Come in dear. It’ll be lovely to have a chat with you as I get so lonely here in this house on my own. And you don’t have to talk like that. I can hear you perfectly well.”

Penny was a little embarrassed, but at least she had got through to the woman. With a sigh of relief she stepped into the house. The room would have looked like a perfectly normal, average American living room were it not for the fruit machine Penny noticed in the corner, several huge plush toys and a cotton candy machine on the coffee table.

“Have a seat dear. Would you like some tea? Or perhaps I can offer you some cotton candy?” the old woman suggested politely.

Hardly able to contain her amazement, Penny replied,

“No, thank you. I suppose this is for your grandkids?”

“I do have grandkids, but they, like my own kids, live a long way from here,” uttered the woman sadly.

Mrs Dawlson took a few steps toward the sofa and the huge bunch of balloons tied to her wrist floated along behind her.

“When they do visit, my grandkids love all this stuff but they’re the new generation and used to it all. It was different in my day. My family used to be so poor that my entire wardrobe consisted of my big sisters’ hand-me-downs, and the only thing I ever got for my birthday, if anyone remembered, was a five-cent candy.”

Penny was discomfited by the old woman’s sudden candor.

“Yes dear. That’s what things were like, but I would dream about a big stuffed bear and balloons.” Tears welled in Maggie Dawson’s eyes. “No one believed that I would ever come to anything, but I overcame all the obstacles and, more to the point, myself, and did everything I set my mind on. I guess you thought I was crazy, but take it from me, I’m in sound mind and have a solid memory. My problem is that as soon as I managed to achieve anything I’d get caught in the maelstrom of life and never really managed to see any of my dreams fulfilled. All my life I worried about work, kids, money. Until now...”

Penny remembered her conversation with Michael on Ocracoke Island. Despite his youth, Michael also knew the value of life and could take delight in every moment of it. Luckily for him, he had realized this earlier than Mrs Dawson had.

“Make the most of your life, young lady!” The old woman’s impassioned speech was interrupted by the chimes of a clock, and Penny came to her senses. However much she would have liked to carry on listening to Mrs Dawson, she had come here determined to find out more about Frankie Dacort and the circumstances surrounding his death.

“Yes, you’re right, but I really would like to talk to you about your friend Liz Dacort. This morning, I was at the apartment block where you used to live. All the old tenants have moved out but I was fortunate enough to be given your new address.”

“Ah,” sighed Mrs Dawlson. “Poor Liz. What a sad fate!”

Penny got ready to listen.

“The Dacorts were such a lovely couple, happier than most even though Liz couldn’t have kids. Her beloved Frankie was a real support but when someone killed him she couldn’t go on and on January 25th 2002, God bless her, she threw herself from the window of her apartment.”

It was hard to put into words how Penny felt, after all, she had come in the hope of finding out where Liz Dacort now lived. Penny was staggered by the news of her death and felt that the last clue to unraveling the medallion’s secret had slipped from her grasp.

“But let me tell you this,” the old woman continued. “I can’t really believe that Liz killed herself. They found a pearl necklace that someone had snapped by the window she fell from. Liz treasured that necklace. It was a present from her husband, and she would never have done that. What’s more, the apartment was turned upside down with things strewn around everywhere and books knocked off shelves. And Liz’s secret casket had vanished.”

“Secret casket?” Penny repeated.

“A little box that she kept in her safe, behind a painting. When Liz died it disappeared.”

“Maybe she gave it to someone, or sold it?”

“I don’t know.” Mrs Dawson shrugged.

“When was the last time you talked to Liz?”

“I saw her the day before she died.”

“Can you remember exactly what happened that day? What did you talk about, what did Liz say exactly?”

“She was depressed. After Frankie’s death she had to shoulder the burden of all the household woes herself.”

What Penny heard next was incredible and she could not wait to share it with Kris and Michael.

“Jeffrey Wilson.” Dr Mulligan held his hands behind his back as he paced the room, like a lecturer speaking to his students. “A classic case of paranoid schizophrenia.”

“Like a split personality?” Michael asked curiously.

Dr Mulligan stared at the young millionaire and said,

“Schizophrenia is not a split personality. It is a form of psychiatric illness where the patient cannot differentiate between the real and the imaginary. Mr Wilson suffered from a form of schizophrenia characterized by the domination of fantasies.”

“Dr Mulligan, what kinds of fantasies exactly?” the private detective inquired, listening carefully as the head doctor of the Adelbert Dunste Psychiatric Unit spoke.

“Mr Wilson thought he was being pursued by Chimera, an Ancient Greek monster.”

“Jeffrey was found guilty of the murder of Frankie Dacort in early 2002. If he had been suffering from psychiatric problems then, why was he only transferred to a clinic in 2005?” Kris asked.

“Any system can break down,” said Dr Mulligan thoughtfully. “Although maybe the commission was right.”

“What do you mean?” Michael did not understand.

Dr Mulligan paused and then said,

“This is one of the most interesting cases I’ve ever seen. When Mr Wilson came here in 2005 I had no doubt that he had paranoid schizophrenia, but 6 months ago something strange happened. I noticed that Mr Wilson was no longer having fantasies and he seemed to be completely well. I took it upon myself to stop the psychopharmacological treatment and carried out my own observations instead. My conclusion was astounding: Mr Wilson was of sound mind! Yet in psychiatry schizophrenia is thought to be incurable!”

“So Mr Wilson had been faking his illness from the very start,” Michael suggested. “To avoid jail, for example.”

“Well, who knows?” Dr Mulligan said resignedly. “It could be a coincidence, but in psychiatry Chimera is an allegory for the deformation of the psyche leading to total fragmentation of the mind and final loss of personality.”

“Dr Mulligan, when did Mr Wilson escape?” asked Kris.

“On July 27th.”

“10 days before the death of Morris Peterson,” thought the private eye.

“How did he do it?”

“I wish I knew,” Dr Mulligan responded sullenly. “Block 3 is the perfect example of discipline, order and security. Since Mr Wilson’s escape a cloud of doubt has been hanging over its reputation.”

Kris and Michael thanked Dr Mulligan for his time. As they were leaving the private detective said,

“If you remember anything else about Mr Wilson, please give me a call,” and he handed him a card.

“Of course,” said Dr Mulligan solemnly.

Michael immediately had the feeling that he would.

When Kris, Penny and Michael met back to the office they saw at once that they all had something to report. Penny had bought some fresh cream chocolate eclairs on her way back to the detective agency and the three friends now settled down in the cozy living room in anticipation of the news and this treat. Michael had made coffee for Kris and cocoa for himself and Penny.

“On January 25th 2002 Liz Dacort committed suicide,” Penny began, and told them everything she had learned from Mrs Dawlson.

“So, there are two cases here,” said Kris, concentrating. “Case one: on December 15th 2001 Jeffrey Wilson kills his friend Frankie Dacort by poisoning him with an injection of a neurotoxin. By the way, a biochemist friend of mine told me that blood is turned black by the complex chemical reaction of hornet’s poison on leukocytes. So, obsessed with fantasies about Chimera, Mr Wilson leaves *Mythical Creatures of Ancient Greece* on the scientist’s body, opened at the page on the monster of the same name. Unable to cope with her grief, Mrs

Dacort kills herself. Case two: on August 6th 2009 the body of Morris Peterson is found in the Brooklyn ghetto. On his chest is *Mythical Creatures of Ancient Greece*, opened at the page on Chimera. Bellerophon vanishes from Mr Peterson. It later emerges that there is a bloody trail of mysterious events linked to the medallion.”

“So is it just a coincidence and there’s no link between the two cases?” Michael offered, disappointed.

“No, there is a link!” Penny announced. “Mrs Dawlson told me something incredible. *Frankie and Liz Dacort had owned Bellerophon!*”

“What?” exclaimed Michael, leaping up and nearly knocking over the coffee table. “That can’t be true!”

“Yes it can! I showed a picture of the medallion to Mrs Dawlson. She recognized it from its unusual design,” Penny said.

“Two cases become one,” the private detective uttered thoughtfully.

“Mr Dacort was given the medallion as a birthday gift. It was of great sentimental value to him and he treasured Bellerophon more than anything else on earth. Not long before Frankie died he started to think the medallion was at risk. Liz was very concerned about her husband’s state of health but she couldn’t work out what was happening no matter how hard she tried. After Frankie’s death, Mrs Dacort needed money, so she decided to sell the medallion that had driven her husband crazy. Maggie Dawlson herself recommended Roger Saunder as a reliable and honest antique dealer.”

“So she was the woman who came to Mr and Mrs Saunder’s store the day before Roger’s death!” exclaimed Michael, remembering the story that the unusual flower store owner had told them.

“And what did you learn at the psychiatric unit?” asked Penny.

Kris and Michael briefed Penny on the few facts that Dr Mulligan had told them.

“But if Jeffrey Wilson escaped on July 27th and Mr Peterson died on August 6th...” Penny said, working out the dates.

“Exactly!” Michael exclaimed excitedly. “The Man With No Face is Jeffrey Wilson! It was he who killed Morris Peterson, blew up Kevin’s car, started the fire in the skyscraper and ransacked James’s hotel room! He’s the one after the medallion!”

“So it was Jeffrey who tried to buy Bellerophon at the auction through Richard Adams! And it was he who sent that threatening letter to the lecturer!” Penny suddenly understood.

“To be honest, my head’s spinning from all these facts!” said Michael, pacing the room.

After thinking about this for a moment, Kris decided to put the events in order.

“The story begins with Frankie Dacort being given Bellerophon as a birthday gift. On December 15th 2001, the scientist dies from hornet’s poison injected by Mr Wilson. Struggling to make ends meet, Mrs Dacort sells Bellerophon to Roger Saunder, a New York antiques dealer on January 25th 2002. That same evening Liz commits suicide. The next day Steve Matthew, who is staying with Saunder, comes to his New York cousin’s store and offers to sell the medallion for him. Roger agrees and Bellerophon is passed on to the London trader. On the evening of January 26th Mr Saunder dies in mysterious circumstances. Steve Matthew sells the medallion in London to Rose Baker, an

aristocratic lady, who mysteriously disappears on May 21st 2008. Mrs Baker's daughter asks Mr Matthew to sell Bellerophon and in June 2008 it is bought by a visiting American couple, Morris and Jessica Peterson. A year later, on July 27th 2009, Jeffrey Wilson escapes. Ten days later, on August 6th, the body of Mr Peterson is found in the Brooklyn ghetto. He had come to New York with his wife to sell the medallion at auction. A certain Man With No Face steals Bellerophon from Morris, but it turns out to be a fake. He then approaches Richard Adams to make him buy the medallion at the auction, but his plan fails and the antique is bought by Mr O'Connell. The Man With No Face starts following him. On August 16th he breaks into James's hotel room hoping to steal the medallion but doesn't find it there as Mr O'Connell has taken the cursed thing with him. On August 17th the Man With No Face tries to kill us by blowing up my car. On August 19th he makes a second attempt, starting a fire in the skyscraper. And that's what we have so far," the private eye said, summing up.

"This is one hell of a mixed up case!" said Michael, suddenly feeling very hungry. He took three eclairs from the bowl at once.

"Mr Kris, what do we do next?" asked Penny.

"Josh Leman said that Mr Wilson taught religious studies at the New York Seminary. Let's try to find out something about Jeffrey there," the private eye decided.

"But I won't be able to sleep easily now until I've discovered the secret of Bellerophon!" said Michael. "This is a real brain twister!"

"By the way Penny, I've another brain twister for you," Kris remembered.

“I’m listening carefully Mr Kris!”

“At her grandmother’s funeral a girl notices a handsome, well-dressed man who she had never seen before. She falls in love immediately - love at first sight! A few days later the girl kills her sister. The question is, why does she do this?”

Penny and Michael exchanged glances. Why indeed?

Chapter 17

The next morning Kris, Penny and Michael went to BMW of Manhattan. Since Kris's previous car had been turned into a pile of scrap metal he needed a new mode of transport. Before their trip to Ocracoke the private detective had called the sales manager and arranged the purchase of a new car.

At the auto salon they were offered coffee, but Kris politely explained that they were in a hurry. The sales rep ceremoniously handed the private eye the keys and, lowering his voice conspiratorially, asked,

“Mr Kris, have you caught that villain who blew up your car yet?”

“We're on to him!” said Michael fervently.

Seeing the private eye's new car Penny and Michael were amazed - its elegant, streamlined design, its gleam and polish emphasized the status of its owner. In this car you could feel the power and force passing in invisible waves to the person at the wheel.

As the three friends drove away, Kris pronounced,

“Let's head for the New York Seminary!”

It did not take them too long to find it as the seminary was in Manhattan, between Claremont Avenue and Broadway. It was a tall imposing building with beautiful arches and bay windows hung with decorative cloth showing the seminary's symbol.

In the main block of the seminary the atmosphere was one of spirituality and serenity, like in a church.

The Dean of the Faculty of Bible Studies, Thomas Kuoko, was a stern, elderly man with a piercing stare as sharp as a dagger. He grudgingly asked Kris, Penny and Michael in, making it clear from his every movement that he was doing them a great favor. The private detective laconically explained the situation.

“Brother Jeffrey,” cawed Thomas Kuoko, as if he was sinking into meditation. “May the Lord restore his sanity!”

“Dr Kuoko, perhaps you could tell us something about him that would help the investigation?” Penny asked tentatively.

The Dean of the Faculty of Bible Studies told them quite a lot about Jeffrey Wilson, but none of it was of any use to the investigation.

“Dr Kuoko, did Mr Wilson ever mention a medallion?” With these words Kris showed the dean the photo of Bellerophon.

Thomas Kuoko shook his head.

“Does a project named *Chimera* mean anything to you?” asked Penny.

“I’ve never heard of it before,” the dean replied scathingly.

“Mr Wilson was a very religious man. He devoted a large portion of his life to serving Our Lord. How could he have killed Frankie Dacort on December 15th 2001?” The private detective asked, fixing the dean in his stare.

Thomas Kuoko’s expression became somewhat pale and drawn. He was as still as a stone image and his eyes portrayed evil estrangement and lifelessness. Penny shivered: the room had grown cold. It seemed to Michael that the dean’s office had darkened as if before a terrible storm. Only Kris remained calm and unruffled.

“His mind was destroyed by fantasies and his soul blackened, while the last remnants of his sanity rotted away. Brother Jeffrey was taken over by the forces of evil and only God can save his soul now,” said Thomas Kuoko distantly.

The private detective sensed that this man was hiding something. His intuition told him that there was a stain on Jeffrey Wilson’s unblemished past, some strange fact or unclear detail which would bring them one step closer to solving the awful mystery.

“Dr Kuoko, do you really have nothing more to say about Mr Wilson?” asked Kris finally.

“No,” said Thomas Kuoko steely.

The three friends thanked the dean for his time and were about to leave when Thomas Kuoko suddenly uttered,

“Mr Kris, it was you who solved the case of the theft of Saint Peter’s sword, was it not?”

The private detective nodded silently.

The Dean of the Faculty was obviously stalling, trying to decide whether to say anything more or not. Finally he gave a deep sigh and said,

“Six months after Brother Jeffrey started helping the priest at St Patrick’s Cathedral strange things started to occur. At the end of October 2001 Brother Isaiah lost his mind and slashed himself with a dagger. A month later Brother Mikhail began to draw strange pictures on the cathedral walls. Later still Brother Isaac cut off his ears in a fit of madness. It was decided that all three should go to Saint Kenning’s Abbey rather than be sent to a psychiatric hospital. I cannot say if it was

a coincidence or not, but when Brother Jeffrey was arrested there were no more cases of insanity at Saint Patrick's."

Kris nodded his thanks and as they were leaving Thomas Kuoko proclaimed,

"You have set foot on the path to do battle with evil. May God help you!"

The Adirondacks were a dome of mountain peaks in the northeast part of New York State, part of the Appalachian range and said to be the largest national park in the USA with an area of 6 million acres. The Adirondacks were a disorderly set of rocky mountains, the highest of which was Mount Marcy at 5,343 feet. Most of the park was comprised of virgin forest, hills, rivers, lakes and ponds. The name 'Adirondack' itself was a corruption of the native American word *ratirontaks* 'they eat trees', which is what the Mohawks once called the Algonquian tribe for their habit of eating tree bark.

This was where the private detective and his friends were now racing off to. Hidden among the dense forests of the Adirondack Park was Saint Kenning's Abbey where, according to Thomas Kuoko, the insane brothers from St Patrick's Cathedral were. Kris thought that talking to them could shed some light on what had really happened in the cathedral that fall of 2001.

"There's no mention of the abbey anywhere on the Internet!" said Michael, his laptop open.

"Maybe it doesn't exist?" Kris smiled, turning into New Jersey Route 3 West.

“Here’s something!” exclaimed Penny and she started reading from her laptop screen. “Saint Kenning’s Abbey was founded in 1891 by a German emigre, Gerhard Von Straub, the grandson of a landmeister of the disappearing Order of Truth and Faith in Germany. Basically, the monastery in the Adirondack Park is the last stronghold of a lost order of monks. It has a very bad reputation in certain circles. They say that strange supernatural things happen within the abbey’s walls.”

“Oh great! Sounds like a nice place!” said Michael.

Meanwhile, dark black clouds were filling the sky and a fresh wind was blowing up. With the first rays of twilight the rain began to fall, getting heavier the closer they drove to Adirondack Park. Looking out at this and envisioning the visit to the sinister abbey that lay in store, Penny and Michael felt ill at ease.

When the three friends arrived at their destination a real storm was blowing. The sky, mountains and trees all seemed to tremble under the powerful crashes of thunder. A blinding fork of lightening pierced the dark blue blanket of sky angrily as the rain poured relentlessly on to the pavement and the strong gusts of wind furiously attempted to uproot the centuries-old trees from the depths of the earth. Kris, Penny and Michael found themselves at the heart of the storm.

The three friends were drenched the instant they got out of the car. They ran across to the massive door in the stone wall surrounding the abbey and to their surprise found that it was not locked.

“Hmm. Those brothers would have been better off in a psychiatric hospital than here,” Michael thought, looking around the courtyard.

Saint Kenning's Abbey looked abandoned and completely uninhabitable. The unbelievably chilling and sinister atmosphere that reigned around the monastery made the mood ominous. The Gothic stone sculptures, the enormous, centuries-old trees, the cracked stonework, crawling with insects, and not a soul to be seen: this was the perfect location for a horror film.

Suddenly the sky was pierced by lightening, there was a crash of thunder and the next moment a black monk appeared, crossing the abbey courtyard like a ghost. No matter how hard they tried, Kris, Penny and Michael could not attract his attention.

"You're wasting your time trying to speak to him," the three friends suddenly heard and before them stood a tall pale man with a thick-set forehead like a caveman and rough, hard features. "He has taken the vow of silence."

"Father Sharon, humble servant of our Lord" said the head monk with underlying hostility in his voice and he led Kris, Penny and Michael into the abbey without speaking. The atmosphere inside was even more sinister and gloomy. On several occasions they were passed by groups of 4 or 5 monks dressed in black robes who seemed not to be walking, but gliding across the stone floor like inanimate dolls. The three friends could sense that they were not welcome at the abbey.

Kris briefly explained why they were there.

"So what do you want from me?" the head monk asked coldly.

"Father Sharon, we need to talk to Brothers Isaiah, Isaac and Mikhail," the private eye said nonchalantly.

“I’m afraid that is not possible.” A meager candle flame lit up Sharon’s ugly face. “Brother Isaiah has gone to the Kingdom of Heaven. He passed away in terrible agony on February 2nd 2002. Brother Mikhail has been in a coma for six months and we are all praying for his soul.”

“What about Brother Isaac?” Michael asked.

“Brother Isaac cut off his ears in a fit of madness,” said the abbot somberly. “He will not be able to hear you.”

“But Father Sharon, he can still read and write, can’t he?” Kris inquired calmly.

The head monk of Saint Kenning’s said nothing.

“I don’t think you need any unwanted attention from the press, do you?” said the private detective, upping the ante.

The head monk looked at the private eye coldly and, giving this some thought, reluctantly gave an order to one of the monks.

“Take them to Brother Isaac’s cell. You have fifteen minutes,” this to the private detective and his friends.

When Kris, Penny and Michael entered the cell the kneeling monk rose and turned to face them as if he had heard the strangers’ steps. His face was hidden beneath a wide hood.

Kris took a notebook from his case at once and wrote down the purpose of their visit in a few sentences. The private detective held out the notebook to the monk who read it and returned it to him, nodding almost imperceptibly.

Their conversation continued in writing.

“What happened to you in the fall of 2001?”

“I began to hear terrible maddening voices.”

“Where exactly did you hear them?”

“In St Patrick’s Cathedral.”

“Anywhere else? Outside? At home?”

“First I only heard voices in the cathedral, but later I lost control of my senses.”

“Was it the same for Isaiah and Mikhail?”

“Not really. Brother Isaiah did not hear voices but instead heard some kind of sound from beyond the grave that terrified him. He slashed his body in terror and the sound went away. Brother Mikhail lost his mind and began speaking in strange tongues.”

“When exactly did you hear the voices?”

“They could come into my head at any moment, but most often it was a Sunday.”

“Were they trying to tell you something?”

“I could not understand them. It felt like a muddle of words in different languages.”

“Who do you think they came from?”

- No response.

“Did you know Jeffrey Wilson?”

- No response.

“Have you ever seen this medallion?”

“May God have mercy on me, sinner that I am! I just could not bear those voices any longer! They were eating away at me from inside!” Isaac wrote with a trembling hand.

Suddenly the monk threw off his robe and fell to the stone floor in a fit.

There was a deafening crash of thunder.

The candlelight flickered over Isaac's incredibly thin, tortured face and his terrible wounds. It seemed that his frail body could not take any more. Penny and Michael started.

"You have only made him worse." The abbot appeared in the cell. He walked up to Isaac, took his hands gently and embraced him comfortingly. Like a child, Isaac reached out to the head monk and, sobbing, hid his face in Sharon's robe. Watching this Penny's heart was filled with sympathy for the monk.

"It's time you left," said Sharon.

The private detective and his friends thanked the head monk and left Saint Kenning's Abbey. The place had left a bitter taste in all their mouths.

Kris, Penny and Michael drove back to the highway silently mulling over what had really happened in St Patrick's Cathedral in the fall of 2001. How were these events connected with Jeffrey Wilson, Bellerophon, the murders of Frankie Dacort and Roger Saunder, the disappearance of Rose Baker and the deaths of Liz Dacort and Morris Peterson? *What* could Isaiah and Isaac have heard to make them maim themselves in such desperation? What was the secret that connected all these links in the bloody chain of mysterious events?

The three friends had barely had time to think about the day's events when things took a new twist. Half way back to New York, Penny's cell phone rang. It was James O'Connell.

"What?" exclaimed Penny. "Are you sure? The thing is, we're out of town. Could you email it to me?" She hung up and turned to Kris and

Michael. “James has been sent some kind of message. He’s going to email it to me.”

Penny downloaded her emails, opened the message and read out loud:

“If you want to discover the secret of Bellerophon, be at coordinates 43.21384 N and 77.63575 W tomorrow at 1 p.m. The Man With No Face.”

Chapter 18

Late that night Kris, Penny, Michael and James got together in the living room at the office to discuss the new state of affairs. On the coffee table were dainty little cups of coffee, cocoa and a large plate with a mountain of cream doughnuts on it. Outside the wind was growing stronger and the clouds were thickening.

“I was sent the message by email at 6.32 p.m. and it’s impossible to tell who sent it,” said James gloomily. “It’s also unclear what lies at 43.21384 N and 77.63575 W.”

“It’s the Holy Sepulcher Cemetery in Newark, New Jersey,” said Michael, checking the details on an online map. “Or, to be more precise, an old abandoned chapel there.”

“This psycho is luring us into a trap!” exclaimed James with fervor.

“We have no choice. If we don’t go to the abandoned chapel at the indicated time we may never find out the secret of Bellerophon,” said Penny determinedly.

“You can all stay here. I’ll go alone,” said the private detective calmly.

“Oh no you won’t!” proclaimed Penny and Michael together.

“It’s too dangerous!” The young millionaire looked at Penny. “It’s best if me and Kris go together.”

“I’ve been a hair’s breadth from death before,” the private eye’s assistant said proudly, hurt by this.

Penny and Michael started arguing over who would go and who would stay. It was surprising, but peace was only restored by James uttering in a distant, sepulchral voice:

“We have all got ourselves into this. I hope it will be over tomorrow.”

“Mr Kris and myself are armed. I think we can give as good as we get!” he added with glum determination.

The private eye and his friends could tell that they were getting close to solving the mystery of the bloody medallion and the chain of mysterious deaths. They would discover the secret of Bellerophon the next day.

Kris knew that at the moment of truth he would have to do battle with the Man With No Face.

The private detective drove at an almost lawbreaking speed along the Newark highway. Michael was unusually serious and James was evidently nervous, gripping his gun in his sweaty palms. To relieve the tension and distract them from their anxious thoughts, Penny told them Kris’s brain twister about the funeral.

“I just can’t work out why the girl killed her sister,” said the private eye’s assistant, puzzled.

“I guess it was so she could see that handsome guy again at another funeral,” James suggested.

“Exactly,” said the private detective.

“Well that sure is some logic!” exclaimed Penny indignantly.

“Kevin, give us another brain twister. I didn’t even have a chance to think about that one,” Michael urged.

“OK,” the private detective said, nodding. “The one who makes it doesn’t need it, the one who buys it doesn’t use it and the one who uses it never sees it. What is it?”

The car went quiet. Penny, Michael and James thought about the puzzle but no one could come up with an answer. This could have been because their thoughts had returned to their imminent meeting with the Man With No Face.

Before long, Kris drove into Newark. Thanks to his GPS he had no trouble finding Holy Sepulcher Cemetery where the old chapel was. The private detective looked at his watch. It was 0.30 p.m. If the message was correct, then in half an hour he, Penny, Michael and James would discover the secret of Bellerophon.

The abandoned chapel was dim in the dull ghostly light. The stale smell, the thick layer of dust, the huge cobwebs, the disorder and trash on the floor were all signs that the chapel had long been abandoned. The moss-covered walls were alive with a seething mass of vile insects.

“Now what?” Michael broke the silence. “It’s already 1.02 p.m. We’re at the right coordinates.”

“Maybe the Man With No Face left some instructions?” James looked around and walked into the center of the chapel. There was a sudden crack and the next moment Mr O’Connell disappeared into the darkness with a cry.

“James!” Penny exclaimed, trying to run up to the edge of hole that had formed in the center of the room, but Kris gripped her hand tightly.

“You don’t want us all to fall through that, do you?” said the private eye.

“The old floorboards must be rotten all the way through,” Michael supposed.

“I’m OK!” James’s voice echoed. “It’s not far down!”

“James, can you see anything?” asked Penny.

“Let me light a match,” James shouted back. “There’s a narrow tunnel leading downward.”

“The Man With No Face wants us to follow it,” said Michael suddenly. “This chapel is not our final destination.”

“What do you mean?” asked Penny in surprise.

“The coordinates in the message are surface coordinates, but in 3 dimensions this point can be as high up or as deep down as you like,” the young millionaire explained.

“So the point we’re looking for is here, only underground,” said Penny.

“Exactly!” exclaimed Michael, his eyes burning with excitement.

“Let’s go down,” the private eye decided.

One after the other the three friends began to lower themselves down into the hole that had appeared in the center of the room. When they were all safely down Kris turned on his pocket flashlight and beamed a ray of light into the dark. The tunnel led off into the unknown. Nothing was visible except the surrounding gloom. The

private detective was the first to set off down the corridor, and the others followed.

About a hundred and fifty feet along the tunnel became flatter and a little wider. The further Penny, Michael and James went, the more they were gripped by the troubling, worrying sensation that something bad was about to happen. Little by little they became entangled in a sticky web of fear where it impossible to think straight.

The tunnel soon led them to a large vaulted room with a stone pedestal looming up in the center. Mysterious patterns on the walls had dulled and grown faint. Four intricate arches led off in unknown directions. The heavy, tense atmosphere that reigned here got deep into the mind and threatened to take it over. The deathly cold chilled the four friends to the bone and you could almost touch the sinister, evil energy.

“It’s like a crypt,” said Penny, remembering an article she had written about the Basilica of St Sernin in Toulouse.

“A crypt?” Michael repeated.

“A room under the altar and choir in a church where the relics of saints and martyrs are laid out for worship,” the private detective pronounced.

“What’s this? A coffin?” Michael poked his finger at the stone pedestal.

“It could be,” Kris said. They went closer to what they thought could be the site of a saint’s grave. James took out a cloth to wipe the dust and dirt from a rectangular sign and read what was written on it, but no sooner had he wiped it than they all heard something suspicious. The

next moment the arches leading out were sealed with stone slabs which sent clouds of dust into the air as they hit the floor.

“We’re trapped,” uttered James nervously.

“Don’t panic yet,” Kris responded coolly, looking the stone slabs over carefully. “We can’t get out through the arches. They’re sealed tight.”

“There must be another way out!” said Michael.

“Shhh!” James put his finger to his lips. “Can you hear that?”

They all listened. It was hard to believe, but a strange, almost inaudible sound was coming at them from all sides. It grew horribly louder as if telling of impending doom.

Suddenly water began gushing from the walls and ceiling, pushing lumps of stone from its path. The next moment they all heard a crash and from the ceiling fell first one boulder and then another. The water level in the crypt kept rising.

“Penny! No!” cried Michael hysterically, seeing the ceiling crack above her and a stone block about to fall. He made an incredible leap towards her, knocking her off her feet, and they both went flying just a second before an enormous stone came crashing down where Penny had just been.

“We must have started some kind of hidden mechanism,” said James.

“What are we going to do?” Michael asked urgently.

“There’s got to be another exit,” Kris pronounced.

Right then Penny remembered that in burial vaults in Medieval France it had been common to leave a secret passage under the coffin as a place to hide in times of war. She shared this with the others.

“Well done Penny!” shouted Kris, and the next moment they all began to push on the stone pedestal. Michael and James growled from the effort like crazy wild animals. Kris’s steel muscles pumped to amazing proportions and it seemed that his veins would burst under the colossal pressure.

One of the walls began to crack threateningly under the powerful force of the water.

“Push!” cried the private eye through gritted teeth. The adrenaline flowing through their veins gave them strength usually far beyond that of mere mortals.

The stone pedestal began to move. When they had pushed it aside they were all ecstatic to see a secret passage underneath. The water had almost reached their waists and the walls were ready to collapse at any moment. One after the other they jumped into the black hole. There was a tunnel there. Kris, Penny, Michael and James had gone no more than about sixty feet when there was an almighty crashing sound behind them and the water burst into the tunnel. With a wild roar it got closer and closer, wiping everything from its path. Using all their remaining energy they started to run. This was a real race against death.

Their strength was waning, their lungs were bursting from mad unbearable pain and their legs felt as if they had weights tied to them. There was a dull ache in their heads.

“The tunnel leads up ahead!” cried Kris. “We’re almost there!”

Encouraged by this news the four of them made a final spurt, running through a vaulted arch and seeing that the tunnel really did lead sharply up.

“I’ve dropped the medallion!” cried James suddenly.

“Just leave it!” Michael yelled.

But James ran back a few feet to find Bellerophon. Suddenly there was a clanking of metal and a steel grill lowered into the vaulted arch, cutting off James’s escape. Mr O’Connell ran up and began pulling at it with all his might. Kris, Penny and Michael helped, but it was no use: the metal grill would not budge.

“Just leave me!” cried James hopelessly. “The water’s about to flood the tunnel.”

“No! We’re not going without you!” Penny furiously gripped the metal bars and began shaking them so hard that her knuckles went white. Kris and Michael used all the strength they had to try to break the grill. It seemed that their muscles would burst under the strain.

Before long the rushing water reached them, submerging the tunnel. Penny began to cry tears of desperation.

“No, James! We’re not going without you!” Penny grabbed James’s hand. “There’s got to be some way out!”

“That cursed medallion has caught up with its owner,” said James, smiling. “Bellerophon has come for me!”

“James, no!” sobbed Penny, looking into Mr O’Connell’s sad, wretched eyes.

The water had reached his neck.

“I have no regrets! It’d have been nice to see mom again though,” James pronounced sadly. “And I haven’t finished fixing the neighbor’s kid’s bike.”

James lifted his head, swallowing his last breath of air.

“Farewell...”

James was completely underwater and the water was starting to flood the tunnel leading up. Penny held his hand tightly and looked into his eyes. The life was seeping from him and her heart filled with grief. This was the first time in her life that Penny had watched someone die and been unable to do anything to help. James’s hand grew weaker and weaker. Kris and Michael were trying to say something to her, but she was not listening. Soon they were all underwater.

The moment that James released his grasp on Penny’s hand, she realized that he was dead.

Kris and Michael dragged her to the surface and pulled themselves out of the water. They continued their way out of the tunnel in silence. Who knows how long it took the three friends to make their way through the maze of corridors before they stumbled across a room which was lit with a dull light? As they walked in Kris and Michael were amazed to see there were some kinds of tools, a map, plans, safety helmets and safety gear there.

“Hey, this is a metro works site!” Michael exclaimed. “We’ve made it!”

At once all three were overcome by incredible weariness. Soaked through and exhausted Kris, Penny and Michael sat down on the floor. Penny put her face into Michael’s shoulder and sobbed. The private

eye's distraught assistant could not stop the tears from flowing. Michael hugged Penny and said thoughtfully,

“James was right after all. It really was a trap.”

Chapter 19

The next morning the three friends gathered at Kris's house.

Penny was sitting in an armchair hugging a hot cup of tea with both hands. Michael nervously paced up and down the room and Kris watched this thoughtfully from his private office.

"We need to tell James's relatives," said Penny at last, breaking the silence.

"Yeah," Michael joined in.

"We know so little about him. He might have had a wife or even kids. Mr Kris, I'll call Hans Hartman and ask him to find out where James lived," the private detective's assistant offered.

But no sooner had Penny reached for the phone than it rang. She jumped in surprise.

"Hello? Yeah, sure. Mr Kris, it's Dr Mulligan, Jeffrey's doctor," whispered Penny, her hand over the mouthpiece.

Hearing this, Kris rose from his chair and hurried to the phone.

Penny and Michael listened in to the conversation with baited breath. A few minutes later the private eye hung up and in an even voice said,

"Just as I expected, Mr Mulligan has remembered something interesting. In his deranged state Jeffrey repeated one phrase over and over: 'The key to the secret lies at Frankie's grave'."

Penny and Michael exchanged glances, their eyes full of surprise and disbelief.

“What could that mean?” the private detective’s assistant wondered.

“I don’t know,” Kris replied calmly, “but whatever it is, I think we should go and take a look at Frankie’s grave.”

“I guess, but how will we find it?” Michael asked, puzzled.

They all thought about this until Penny suddenly announced, “I can call Mrs Dawson. She was the Dacorts’ neighbor so she might know.”

Twenty minutes later the three friends were rushing off to Greenwood Cemetery. It was in the western part of central Brooklyn and one of the oldest in the country. Reaching their destination, they found Frankie Dacort’s grave with no real trouble. It was adorned with a large gravestone which read: ‘Here lies an eminent scientist and loving husband, Frank Dacort’. Next to it, it turned out, was the grave of his wife Liz.

“It’s worth having a good look round here,” said Kris.

They got down to work. Penny took photos of anything that might be useful while Michael decided to look around the nearby graves and study the area.

All the gravestones in Greenwood Cemetery were more like architectural monuments than symbols of the fragility of life. Each was made to its own, unique design, beautifully executed.

“I wonder if their ‘owners’ had such beautiful lives?” thought the young millionaire as he looked around.

The dates showed that both those who had lived good long lives and those who had been cut down in their prime were buried here.

“I wonder if they managed to do everything they intended?” Michael continued his philosophical reverie. “Did any of them go white water rafting, parachute jumping or try jelly from a lotus flower?”

For some reason Michael was convinced that most people put their dreams aside until later, waiting for different circumstances, a different salary, a different life...

Reflecting on this, a half hour passed without noticing. In this troubled mood the young millionaire made his way back to Frankie Dacort's grave. His friends had some interesting news. They had found a tiny engraving on the reverse side of the gravestone but pieces of the stone had chipped off and it was impossible to read what it said.

“I can call Mrs Dawson again. She might be able to remember it,” Penny suggested and started to dial the number.

However all the old woman could do to help was give her the address of the funeral home that had ordered the gravestone.

Kris, Penny and Michael made their way there without delay. The Ray of Light funeral home was, for some reason, not far from the maternity hospital. The private detective was soon talking with the owner, but how great was their dismay when they found out that it was probably just the maker's logo on the reverse side of the gravestone! Disappointed, Penny and Michael were about to leave when the private eye decided to talk to someone who had been directly involved in Mr Dacort's funeral. Despite his obvious displeasure, the owner called in his assistant Ramir Salvado.

A short, well-built, middle-aged Mexican came into the room.

“What is it?” he asked worriedly, averting his eyes.

“These people want to have a few words with you. Just don’t be long, we’ve still got plenty of work to do today,” said the owner and he left the room.

“There’s nothing for you to worry about Mr Salvado,” said Penny sympathetically. “We only want to ask you a couple of questions.”

“Have you worked here long pal?” Michael asked.

“Yeah, nearly ten years,” Ramir replied, relaxing a little.

“In late 2001 you arranged the funeral of a Frankie Dacort,” said Kris. “Can you remember if the relatives had any unusual requests? The design of the gravestone or any kind of engravings?”

“Nothing comes to mind.”

“Maybe you noticed something strange at the funeral?”

“It was a pretty long time ago,” said Ramir Salvado, furrowing his brow. “I’d gone to my sister’s when they called me and said Rodriguez, my co-worker, had been taken to hospital with appendicitis. I had to drop everything and come in to work to cover Rodriguez at that scientist’s funeral. They say that when they did the autopsy, his blood was black. I’m a superstitious kind of guy, so I was a little afraid, but it all went smoothly. Just another ordinary funeral: the Mass, the speeches, the mourners, the inconsolable wife. There was only one moment when I got really scared. It had started to rain heavily and we were about to lower the coffin into the grave when there was a mighty crash of thunder that sent shivers up my spine. Anyhow, right then the scientist’s wife threw herself onto the dead man and began to wail. It was hard to calm her down. Finally she took off his wedding band, put it on her

finger and promised to see him again in Heaven. I heard that she killed herself soon after.”

“Ramir, some customers are here,” came a shout from somewhere in the corridor.

“I’m sorry,” said Ramir Salvado. “I have to go. I can’t remember anything else. Just another ordinary funeral.”

By the evening Kris, Penny and Michael, deep in thought and down at heart, were back in the private detective’s office. They seemed to have come to a dead end.

The friends were perturbed that they hadn’t been able to find out anything new. Kris decided to spend some time alone in his office and think over the day’s events while Penny went into the kitchen with Michael, who was famished.

“What a day!” sighed Michael, crashing into an armchair.

“Yeah,” said Penny, getting the burger buns, “It’s been a miserable day.”

“You don’t seem to be worried by all these cemeteries, graves and stuff.”

“I’ve got used to many things since I started working for Mr Kris. The things we’ve been through!”

“Wow!” exclaimed Michael, who loved to hear about the private detective’s adventures. “Tell me about them.”

“Oh no. There are some of them that I don’t even want to think about,” said Penny, putting a generous layer of sauce on the buns.

But the young millionaire's curiosity had been aroused and he was determined to get at least one of these horror stories out of Penny, whatever it took.

"How about I make you some aromatic tea while you tell me about one of your interesting cases." Michael suggested what he thought was a good deal. "But make it one of the more horrific ones! With zombies and flying coffins!" he added.

Penny laughed.

"I'm telling you about real events, not what's in the movies. Although..." she thought for a moment. "I know! Let's go in to see Mr Kris!" she exclaimed.

When Penny and Michael rushed happily and enthusiastically into his office, the private detective was slightly puzzled by their appearance.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Mr Kris, I've solved your brain twister!" cried Penny fervently. "The one who makes it doesn't need it, the one who buys it doesn't use it and the one who uses it never sees it. It's a coffin. See, I managed to get to the bottom of it after all!" said Penny, pleased with herself.

For some reason, the private eye did not share Penny's enthusiasm. On the contrary he frowned and lowered his head.

"Well done Penny!" Kris uttered. "A coffin. That's where the key to the secret lies!"

Not understanding what was going on, Penny and Michael stared at the private detective in bewilderment.

“Judging from the words of Dr Mulligan, Jeffrey had been muttering that the key to the secret lay at Frankie’s grave. However, it was not actually *at* the grave, but *in* the grave,” Kris explained.

“Hold it.” The private detective’s observant assistant interrupted. “You said ‘was’, so where is it now?”

“Correct Penny. It seems that Jeffrey thought the key to the mystery was Frankie Dacort’s wedding band, but during the funeral Liz removed it and put it on her own finger. Mr Wilson could not have known this as he’d already been arrested. So what we are looking for is actually in Liz’s grave.”

“Christ!” said Michael, amazed. “There’s only one way to check that out.”

They exchanged glances.

“But that would be an illegal exhumation!” exclaimed Penny.

“We’ve no choice,” the young millionaire said, shrugging.

It was already twilight when the private detective’s BMW hit the road leading to Greenwood Cemetery. The prudent private eye had brought two spades, an ax, several sacks, gloves and some formalin. Kris, Penny and Michael were fully aware that they were about to break a federal law in order to get to the truth.

By night Greenwood Cemetery looked even more mysterious and sinister than by day. The pale light of the moon, sometimes disappearing behind the clouds, lit up the gravestones and memorials. The ominous silence created the eerie sense of an invisible threat.

Finding Liz Dacort’s grave, Kris and Michael got down to work. It was a long time before their spades hit on something solid.

“The coffin,” Michael whispered, feeling a wave of fear overtake him.

Kris cleared the lid of lumps of earth, took the ax and began striking the coffin with it where he thought the remains of Mrs Dacort’s hands should be. Penny could not look and turned away, feeling a wave of nausea. The private detective put on his gloves.

“Michael, shine the flashlight down here,” said the private eye calmly.

Kris pulled up the broken slats of wood and threw them aside. Michael had to try hard to stop himself vomiting. Amongst the remains of the corpse was a swarm of vile, disgusting insects. The private detective put his hand in and carefully felt for the fingers of the left hand.

“Got it!” said the private eye, lifting up the wedding band. “We’ve found it!”

Kris and Michael crawled out of the hole.

“So what is that?” asked Penny, her hand still over her mouth.

“The ring! And there really is something engraved on it!” exclaimed Michael, pointing the flashlight at it.

Suddenly there was a noise from within the bushes and a dark silhouette appeared, lit up by the pale light of the moon. Penny shrieked, feeling the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. Where the stranger’s eyes, nose and mouth should have been there was nothing. Absolute darkness, emptiness, lifelessness.

Standing before the three friends with his gun aimed at them was the Man With No Face.

Chapter 20

“Good evening Mr O’Connell,” the private detective said coolly.

The next moment the man in black pulled off his horrible mask and there stood James.

“That’s impossible!” exclaimed Penny in shock. “I saw you die in the underground chapel!”

“It was a very touching moment,” James smirked and turned to the private eye. “It’s symbolic that I bought this mask in Chinatown, the same place I bought the poison of the *Vespa Mandarinia*. I must confess, Mr Kris, that I am confused. Did you realize that I am the Man With No Face when you saw my gun, or are there other reasons for such a correct assumption?”

“Sure there are.” Kris nodded. “First of all, it was your stubborn determination to keep hold of the medallion which had brought such misfortune on its previous owners. Despite Bellerophon’s bloody past and the fact that there seemed to be someone following you to steal the antique, you still kept it.”

“But don’t you agree, Mr Kris, that that is insufficient evidence to suspect me?” James probed, listening carefully.

“As it happened, the drawing in the book on Frankie Dacort’s body was the same as the one in the book found on Morris Peterson’s chest: Proetus on his throne and his wife telling him something. That scene seems to be the embodiment of Antea’s betrayal and revenge. The scorpion, meanwhile, left at the scene of Roger Saunder’s murder, is a

symbol of unfaithfulness. So the murders of Frankie and Roger followed the same psychological motive: an obsession for revenge. However, when Roger was killed Jeffrey Wilson, the man who had murdered Frankie, had already been charged and sentenced. That's when I began to doubt that Jeffrey was the real villain," said the private eye. "But your biggest mistake was the email which you signed 'the Man With No Face'. I had a good question about that: how could the sender have known that myself, Penny and Michael had given that name to the medallion hunter?"

"I must admit, Mr Kris, I really did blunder there," said James. "To be honest, I had really wanted my message to make an impression on Penny and Mr Millis as I knew you were a man with a clever mind and cold logic."

"There was something else too," the private detective pronounced thoughtfully. "You solved the brain twister about the funeral."

"So what does that mean?" James was curious.

"That test was thought up by a famous American psychologist. He'd studied the thought processes of people who were psychologically unbalanced. You solved this riddle in the same way as most convicted murderers," Kris explained.

"Thank God I couldn't work it out!" sighed Michael with relief, not losing his sense of humor even with a gun pointed at him.

"I must confess Mr Kris, you have not disappointed me. The very first time we met in L'illusion I realized that you were a clever and courageous man, and I respect you for that."

“But James, what is all this about?” asked Penny, finding it hard to believe what was happening.

“I guess you deserve to know the truth before you die,” said Mr O’Connell and he began his story, still keeping the gun aimed at the three friends. “Me, Frankie and Jeffrey were the best of friends. In early 2001 Frankie created the greatest invention in the history of humanity. It was a discovery that could have created the ideal world, a world with no evil or violation. We were about to open the door to great change.”

“The *Chimera* project,” Penny guessed.

“Frankie named it that himself.” James nodded. “Worried that this secret could have been stolen, he hid it in the medallion that we’d given him as a birthday gift. However, Frankie later decided to destroy his creation which could have been of great use to the world. I simply had to stop him. But I was too late. On December 5th 2001 Frankie and Jeffrey told me they had destroyed Bellerophon and the *Chimera* project along with it. My friends betrayed me, condemning all my plans and dreams to nothing. So I decided to get my revenge. Frankie and Jeffrey had denied humanity something great and I had to make sure they got their just deserts. I worked out a plan and went to buy the poison of the *Vespa Mandarinia* in Chinatown.”

“But why such an exotic poison?” asked Penny.

“It was highly symbolic. Frankie gave his invention the codename *Chimera*. The mandaratoxin would turn his blood black like Chimera’s when it was slain by Bellerophon. What’s more, it was a very convenient way of letting the shadow of suspicion fall on Jeffrey. He was interested in Ancient Greek myths and had been to conferences on the subject.

That's why I decided to leave *Mythical Creatures of Ancient Greece* on Frankie's body. Just to make sure the cops would have no doubt about who'd killed Frankie, I planted a jar of the poison in Jeffrey's apartment. All in all it was enough evidence for the court."

"Your revenge on Frankie and Jeffrey is clear. But Liz's death was no accident either, was it?" the private detective asked.

"I had no wish to kill her! Liz was like a sister to me," James retorted. His eyes filled with blood and his face pulsed. "At the end of January 2002 she asked me to call by. That turned out to be a fateful evening. While we were talking she let on that the medallion hadn't been destroyed. Frankie and Jeffrey had lied. I was again filled with hope. But Liz said that she'd needed money and had sold Bellerophon to some New York dealer. I was absolutely dismayed. We were both emotionally drained and edgy. Somehow we started fighting and in the skirmish I ripped her pearl necklace. We were on the balcony and I pushed her by accident. Liz started to fall. Realizing that any moment now Liz would fall from the balcony, I grabbed her, but couldn't hold on to her."

Penny's eyes filled with tears. Her heart went out to Mrs Dacort.

"You looked for evidence of the medallion in her apartment," Kris affirmed.

"Yes, I tried to find at least something that would point to where Liz had sold Bellerophon. In her desk drawer I found a receipt signed by a Roger Saunder, the owner of an antique store. I also found a small casket in her safe behind a painting and took that too. When I opened it up at home there was nothing in it. It must have been where Liz had kept the medallion before she sold it."

“So you looked for Roger Saunder’s antique store,” the private detective said.

“It wasn’t hard to find. I waited until Mr Saunder was alone in the store and then went in to explain the purpose of my visit. He said he’d sold the medallion and couldn’t help me. In a fit of anger I grabbed Mr Saunder by the shoulders and threatened to strike him, but he retaliated and punched me in the nose, making it bleed. I was furious and threw myself at him. A mad fight broke out between us. I was armed with an old dagger and Mr Saunder had a saber. We totally wrecked the store, but I still managed to get the better of him. After a few feigning maneuvers I slit his throat and then couldn’t stop, stabbing him with the dagger again and again.”

“You’re not human,” said Penny, looking at James with hatred.

“What is the life of one man compared to what Bellerophon can give?” Mr O’Connell shrugged. “And anyhow, fate punished me for this. I lost track of the medallion and spent the next 8 years living a pathetic, pointless, worthless existence. Just the thought of Bellerophon being within my reach and slipping from my grasp drove me crazy, tormented me. I carried out fruitless searches and had almost given up hope of ever seeing the magical glint of that aquamarine again.”

“So you had nothing to do with the disappearance of Rose Baker?” Michael asked.

“Not a thing.”

“Mr O’Connell, how did you get back on the trail of the medallion?” asked Kris.

“This summer, when I was seriously contemplating suicide, I happened to pick up a business journal advertising an upcoming auction in New York. I saw Bellerophon amongst the lots. At first I thought I was hallucinating as I’d been taking strong anti depressants, but when I realized that it was true I knew I was being given a second chance. In no time at all I had booked a hotel, bought a ticket and flown to New York.”

“You really had been given a second chance,” agreed Kris. “You had the luck to stay at the same hotel as the owner of the medallion.”

“That was an incredible coincidence!” James nodded. “First I wanted to buy the medallion at the auction, paying for it fair and square, but over breakfast in the hotel restaurant on the morning of August 5th I saw Bellerophon in the hands of a respectable elderly gentleman. That moment, as if in the power of the magical glint of aquamarine, I decided it wasn’t worth the risk. After breakfast I went to Chinatown to buy some more hornet poison and I also bought the mask that you named the Man With No Face. In one of the stalls there I saw *Mythical Creatures of Ancient Greece* and knew it was a sign. In the evening I settled in at a cozy cafe near the hotel from where I could see the entrance. I started waiting in the hope that Mr Peterson would come out and I could follow him. At around 8 p.m. Mrs Peterson left the hotel. I ordered another meal and waited patiently. I had almost given up hope when Mr Peterson appeared with *my* medallion around his neck. To my surprise he headed off to the most rundown neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, all the time looking over his shoulder and checking his watch.”

“He had a meeting with Emirhan Shahin, a guy who dealt in stolen antiques,” said the private detective.

“When Mr Peterson walked into a deserted alley I realized that I had to act at once. I put on the mask and jumped out on him in the dark. Mr Peterson jumped with fright and collapsed on the ground. I thought he’d fainted but when I was removing Bellerophon from his neck I realized that the old guy wasn’t breathing. I didn’t even have to use the poison. And at last I had the medallion back!”

“But it turned out to be fake” Kris smirked.

“Yes, a very skillful fake. There was no secret locket for storing the information on the *Chimera* project. I put the book on Mr Peterson’s chest and ran off.”

“The Turk saw you,” said the private eye.

“The poor guy nearly died of fright too!” said Mr O’Connell with a twisted smile, recalling the expression on Emirhan Shahin’s face. “I started watching the hotel again but Mrs Peterson didn’t come out and I had no chance to break into her room to find the real medallion. So then I decided to go for the auction and put all my savings on the line.”

“You really had to sweat it out to get your hands on Bellerophon,” said the private detective.

“That’s very true! But I won and the medallion is now mine. However, the euphoria passed when I opened Bellerophon’s secret locket and took out the tiny data storage unit and connected it up to my computer. It turned out that Frankie had encoded all the data on the *Chimera* project with a 256-bit key and that means there are around 1.15×10^{77} code combinations to decipher. I went to a cryptologist and he

said that even the most powerful computer in the world would take around 289 years of constant selection to crack the code.”

“So obtaining the medallion did not mean that you could get your hands on Frankie’s invention,” said Kris.

“Exactly.” James nodded. “When Penny introduced me to you, Mr Kris, I realized at once that you were a dangerous enemy and sooner or later you would get to the truth. That evening I put a secret bug on Penny and from that moment on I knew everything you were doing.”

Penny and Michael were stunned at James’s cunning.

“Nice move!” the private detective nodded.

“When you heard of the mysterious death of Roger Saunder I realized that you wouldn’t stop there and would dig further into Bellerophon’s past. That’s when I decided that I had to kill you.”

“So you phoned Kevin specially when we were in London and said that someone had wrecked your hotel room!” Michael proclaimed.

“Actually, I wrecked it myself,” smirked Mr O’Connell. “When you picked me up outside my hotel I had a bomb in my case and a miniature detonator in my jacket pocket.”

“Christ!” Michael whistled in amazement. “If we’d crashed then...”

“I left my case in your car and after we’d eaten I planned to call a cab and leave alone. On the way back to the hotel I would have simply pressed the button and blown up your car! But outside Mr Millis said something that astounded me, ‘What if Bellerophon is the key?’ At that moment I had a revelation. Frankie couldn’t have encoded all the data without leaving a decoding key! I was convinced that there was a key to

attaining my friend's invention. I decided not to kill you there and then, but I blew up the car to cover my tracks."

"You decided you'd wait for us to lead you to the key," said Kris.

"That's right. Judging from your intellect and sharpness it would only be a question of time before you cracked the code. And as I was almost killed with you, there was no way you would suspect me," James said. "But I have to admit, I did have a moment of panic. When Penny dug up that case about Frankie Dacort's murder I was worried that things had gone too far."

"And you decided to kill us again!" Penny cried angrily.

"I guessed that you'd want to talk to Mr Leman. While you were preparing lunch at the office and playing your rock'n'roll I hurried out to buy another explosive device. This time it was a time bomb."

"But how could you buy a bomb in such a short space of time?" Michael asked, incredulous. "It's not a popsicle!"

"When I was in business I often had contact with the criminal world of New York," said James. "Thanks to my old connections I could easily get my hands on a wide variety of weapons. It was much harder to damage the central fire safety server in the skyscraper and switch off the sprinkler system."

"But you managed it," noted the private detective.

"Yeah, but it was still no use! You got away again! When you disappeared to Ocracoke Island for a few days I started making a new plan to kill you and even bought the Walther TPH."

"So when you came to show off your gun you were planning to shoot us?" Michael asked, curious.

“I couldn’t do that as I knew Penny would be back from the publisher’s soon,” James replied. “But on August 24th everything changed. That morning you went to the nut house and Penny went to see Liz Dacort assuming her to be alive. Eavesdropping on your conversation in the office I heard a very interesting detail: Jeffrey Wilson had escaped, and not long before the death of Mr Peterson! It couldn’t have been better! Then I understood who had used Richard Adams to get Bellerophon at the auction. You thought he was being blackmailed by the Man With No Face, whereas the real Man With No Face had nothing to do with Richard Adams!”

“So you were delighted that we’d mistakenly identified Jeffrey Wilson as the villain!” said Penny.

“Exactly. I didn’t even need to direct you towards such a wonderful conclusion,” James pronounced.

“And then you changed your mind again and decided not to kill us,” Kris smirked.

“Since you were convinced that Jeffrey Wilson was the Man With No Face I had no need to rush. However, I then had a fantastic idea: to fake my own death and then spy on you until you’d worked out the key, when I would snatch it from you and disappear off to Europe.”

“But how could you plan all that?” Michael asked.

“Oh, it wasn’t difficult Mr Millis.” James smiled. “To lure you into the chapel all I had to do was send myself a message with the meeting place indicated. Then, falling into the secret passage on purpose I could show you that we needed to go underground. In the crypt I put the secret booby trap mechanism into action. If Penny hadn’t been quick-

witted enough to realize that you needed to move the coffin pedestal I would have told you myself. The rest was easy: pretending that I'd dropped the medallion I went back under the vaulted arch and secretly pulled a hidden lever. The metal grill slammed shut and I was trapped!"

"But I saw you die!" exclaimed Penny. "I was holding your hand! I could feel the life seeping out of you!"

"That was the most important part of the whole performance. I had to convince you that I'd drowned. Fortunately, my years spent diving paid off. I can hold my breath for a very long time," Mr O'Connell explained. "When you were out of sight I swam back a few feet and opened another secret exit that led up. So the fact is I got out and was now dead as far as you were concerned."

"But how did you know about the secret tunnels and mechanisms?" asked Penny.

"Five years ago I used to spend my evenings with a glass of whiskey in some New York bar or other in an attempt to dull the depression eating away at me at least for a while. In one of these bars I met Old Charlie, a complete dropout whose wife had thrown him out. We used to get wasted and then crash out by some trash bins or in a gutter somewhere. Once Charlie told me a curious story. When he was young he'd worked as a designer for a large construction firm. At one point he was approached by the boss of a big criminal gang that traded weapons on the whole East Coast. This guy needed someone who could design a system of secret underground tunnels in Newark for a drop off point in their arms distribution chain. Old Charlie took them up on it and did a great job. He made a fortune from it. But in 1989 the criminal gang was

completely exposed by undercover CIA officers. They were going to concrete over the entrance to the underground chapel but never did, maybe it cost too much, or maybe it wasn't worth it. Anyhow, the chapel and its underground passageways were handed over to the municipality which was not particularly pleased with this extra strain on its already limited budget. The years passed and the underground chambers were forgotten. Old Charlie told me all its secrets. Out of curiosity I went to Newark and checked out the chapel in the Holy Sepulcher Cemetery. It was completely abandoned. In those dark, empty, cobwebbed corridors I felt at peace for a while. I spent hours walking through the underground tunnels, gradually losing track of reality. As if I was drifting away I felt a frightening lightness in my heart. Everything seemed unreal. The darkness gave me relief for a while, but only for a while as the pain soon returned, tormenting my soul. I felt that only death could free me." James's voice sounded sad and somewhat strange.

There was an uncomfortable pause.

"When Dr Mulligan called you and said that Jeffrey had been muttering the phrase 'The key to the secret lies at Frankie's grave', I rushed to the cemetery," James continued. "I quickly checked out the grave but couldn't find anything. I guessed that we were practically there. There was only one more thing to do and the key to the code would be found. It all came clear when you paid a visit to the funeral home. Back then eight years ago at Frankie's funeral, I hadn't seen the significance of Liz retrieving his wedding band from his finger just before the coffin was lowered into the ground. Now I feel so stupid. The ring - that was where the key to Frankie's invention was hidden! My

pal had engraved the single correct code on it!” James reached out his hand meaningfully.

“But if you realized that the key was in Liz’s grave before us, why didn’t you just come and get it yourself?” Penny asked, slowly handing the wedding band over to James.

“Why get my hands dirty? I knew that Mr Kris would soon come to the same conclusion!” Mr O’Connell smirked.

“A genius has been lost in you,” Michael said, desperately trying to work out a way of tricking James and getting the gun off him.

“You’re wrong Mr Millis.” James smiled. “The genius in me is only just awakening and will show the world Frankie’s invention and change the face of civilization forever. You just have no idea of the importance of what is to come.”

“Mr O’Connell, what did Frankie invent?” asked Penny.

“You’ll see it from Heaven my dear Penny. Soaring higher and higher your soul will be able to appreciate the scale of change in the life of communities. Frankie created the greatest thing ever but didn’t know how to use it. I will be humanity’s messiah and put an end to pain and suffering. I will build the ideal world. People will worship me and sing songs of praise for me, but I will be humble. I simply want to change the world.” James’s eyes took on a strange glint, just like the aquamarine on the medallion.

“Mr O’Connell, you are not in your right mind,” said Kris, preparing to make his move. The private detective realized that this was it. James had finally lost his mind and did not understand what he was doing.

Bellerophon had totally possessed him. Mr O'Connell now looked even more horrifying than he had in his mask.

“It's such a pity to say goodbye like this.” James took aim.

“No!” cried Michael, shielding Penny with his body.

Kris took a huge leap towards James, but it was too late.

A shot fired out in Greenwood Cemetery.

Chapter 21

The next moment James's legs buckled under him and he fell to the ground. Kris knocked the gun from his hand. Penny and Michael looked at Mr O'Connell stupefied, not understanding what had happened.

Suddenly a suspicious rustling was heard in the bushes and a short, bearded, middle-aged man appeared. The premature wrinkles on his forehead and the first signs of gray were evidence that this stranger had had a difficult fate. He lowered his gun and threw it aside.

"You must be Mr Wilson." the private detective said, turning James over carefully. When Penny saw the blood pouring from him, she cried out.

"Yes," Jeffery responded, approaching his friend.

"It's bad. You hit him in the liver. That's why the blood is dark, almost black," said Kris. "I can't stop the bleeding. He needs a doctor."

"We need to call an ambulance!" exclaimed Penny. She could see from James's face that he was in terrible agony.

"No..." croaked Mr O'Connell.

"We've only got about fifteen minutes," Kris said gravely.

"We can still save you Mr O'Connell." Tears welled in Penny's eyes. She held his hand tightly. Penny no longer thought about the fact that a minute earlier this man had wanted to kill her. The private eye's assistant was determined to do everything she could to save Mr O'Connell.

But looking into his eyes she realized that he had decided to end his time on earth.

“Blood... my blood’s black!” James croaked. “Bellerophon has come for me!”

The strange glint in Mr O’Connell’s eyes, like the blue-green of the aquamarine, slowly faded. He squeezed Penny’s hand. This time James really was dead.

The private detective closed James’s eyes. There was a horrible uncomfortable silence.

“You didn’t mean to kill James,” Michael told Jeffrey, looking carefully at his sad face.

“I’m a terrible aim,” Mr Wilson pronounced. “But that is no excuse for committing yet another sin.”

“But you saved us!” exclaimed Penny.

“You cannot do a good deed if it goes against God’s commandments.” Jeffrey shook his head.

“You were once punished for something you didn’t do,” the private detective said thoughtfully.

“It’s no accident that you are known for being a great private eye, Mr Kris,” said Jeffrey, smirking almost imperceptibly. “You uncovered an eight-year-old secret.”

“Not entirely,” Kris said. “Some questions still need answering.”

“We still haven’t found out what hides behind the codename *Chimera*,” Michael muttered.

For a long while Jeffrey just stared silently into space. He was as still as a stone sculpture, and not a single muscle on his face flinched. Finally Mr Wilson looked at the friends and said,

“I suppose you deserve to know the whole truth.”

Kris, Penny and Michael held their breath. Now the last veil would be removed from the secret of the mystical medallion.

“Frankie, James and I were dreamers. We spent all our carefree childhood years together and were known as the inseparable threesome. When we were young we had an almost painful desire to do something great for the good of humanity. When Frankie was 14 his mother died of brain cancer and that’s when he decided he’d become a scientist and discover a cure for this scourge. Frankie devoted himself to psychoacoustics, the science of the effect of sound waves on the electromagnetic action currents of the human brain. In November 1999 James had the idea of creating an acoustic signal, the spectral characteristics of which would invisibly contain information of a hypnotic character. As James was a businessman and not a scientist and didn’t have the necessary knowledge to carry this out, he told Frankie about it. Thanks to his charm, James convinced his friend that such a signal could be used for good, including in curing severe mental and neurological illnesses.”

“You mean the sound waves could contain information that would invade someone’s mind without their knowledge?” Kris wanted to know.

“That’s right. I didn’t believe that Frankie would be able to pull it off. But I underestimated him! In April 2001 the experimental audio

cassette was ready. Frankie encoded the acoustic signal with a command to buy something in a store. We hid the device in a supermarket owned by James and the effect was amazing: sales grew significantly. James immediately realized the potential power of the invention. He suggested we make 7 types of audio cassettes with different sets of commands to buy these or those goods. His supermarket turned into the testing area for our experiments. It turned out that Frankie's sound waves affected different customers in different ways. For example, teenagers were the most susceptible. Frankie suspected that the level to which the commands were effective depended on the electroencephalographic rhythm of the brain as well as the temporal and frontal brain lobes." Jeffrey paused for breath.

"So Mr Dacort had created a mechanism for breaking into the subconscious, feeding information and making people obey," Kris said.

"Wow!" Michael whistled. "That's one hell of an invention!"

"Realizing the importance of this discovery we decided to make a spare copy of the project that Frankie had named *Chimera*. We copied all the data to a portable storage unit and hid it in the medallion we'd given Frankie for his birthday. At first, everything was fine. James's supermarket was practically the most popular place to go shopping in New York. Without knowing why, people came specially to our store. Meanwhile James had another idea. He suggested making an audio cassette with an encoded incitement for people to go to church more often and bring their family and friends with them. I fought this idea for a long time. I couldn't concentrate on my prayers knowing that there were sound waves spreading around God's house. James kept trying to

persuade me, saying, ‘*You will not hear it*’. In the end, I decided to give it a try. It was amazing! Within a month the congregation of St Patrick’s Cathedral had increased significantly. Our hearts were full of pride. We felt like gods, making mere mortals do our will. James became obsessed with the idea of the perfect society, a society where the model for the behavior of every individual would correspond to a set algorithm suggested over sound waves.”

“So that’s what James meant when he talked about large scale changes in the life of the world!” Penny exclaimed. “A world with no evil or violation! Yet just using such a cassette would be a violation in itself. Wouldn’t this have denied people the freedom of choice?”

“It was all much more complicated than we’d imagined. In November 2001 after many experiments strange things started to occur. In James’s supermarket one of the cashiers lost her mind and was sent to a psychiatric hospital for treatment. Another staff member had an epileptic attack, although she’d previously been the picture of health. On November 24th in St Patrick’s Cathedral, Brother Isaiah slashed himself with a dagger, from his throat to his groin, and drew a strange symbol on the cathedral walls in his blood. Then, on December 1st, Brother Isaac cut off his ears. We realized that Frankie’s sound waves were a great danger to the human psyche and would have a destructive effect on it. The *Chimera* project was initially intended for good but it had begun to go beyond ethical standards. Frankie decided there and then to stop using the audio cassettes in the supermarket and the cathedral. James kept trying to make him change his mind. I later found out that he’d been secretly seeing a shrink. His mind had started to change. Now

I understand that that was when I lost my friend James. He's been dead since the fall of 2001."

Jeffrey was quiet for a while, feeling great torment.

"On the evening of December 10th Frankie and I decided to destroy all the data on the *Chimera* project. We wiped the information from the computer in his research lab and then damaged the magnetic audio tape secretly installed at St Patrick's Cathedral. Frankie suggested going to James's supermarket and destroying the remaining audio cassette, but it was late and so we decided we'd do it the next morning. But then it turned out that we didn't need to do anything anyway. On the night of December 10th to 11th there was a massive fire in the store. Practically the whole supermarket burned down. On December 12th Frankie and I told James that the *Chimera* project had come to an end and that all the data had been destroyed."

"But there was the last copy hidden in Bellerophon," exclaimed Penny.

"Yes! We lied to James. Frankie thought it was for his own good. James was obsessed with fantastical ideas. We thought that after all that had happened he would forget his warped Utopian ideals and return to his usual life. But the exact opposite happened. James fell into a deep depression. In August 2001, euphoric about his incredible profits, he'd refused to extend his insurance policy, so no one covered his losses after the fire. James thought that this was the end - no business, and no magical cassette making his customers spend their money. His deranged mind decided that Frankie and I had conspired to start the fire."

“That’s when Mr O’Connell decided to get his revenge. He arranged Frankie’s murder so that suspicion fell on you,” said Kris.

Jeffrey nodded in silence.

“But why were you so prepared to confess to something you hadn’t done?” exclaimed Penny.

“It was me who was guilty,” Jeffrey pronounced sadly. “I should have stopped the *Chimera* project right at the start. I destroyed the lives of two women from the supermarket and the brothers from St Patrick’s Cathedral. It was because of me that Frankie, and then poor Liz, went to meet their maker too soon. I had to be punished.”

“But then you changed your mind,” the private detective said.

“Yes I decided to escape,” Jeffrey pronounced. “I wanted to devote the rest of my life to serving God in a Canadian monastery where my friends from a New York Catholic church had promised to send me.”

“You pretended to be schizophrenic so they would transfer you to a psychiatric unit,” the private eye stated.

“I had to trick them with my reactions to all the tests designed to identify fake symptoms of psychiatric illness. In 2005 I had my first success and was transferred to the Adelbert Dunste psychiatric unit. But when I heard that Bellerophon was in New York, my plans changed.”

“But how did you find out about that?” asked Penny, surprised.

“Old Joe in the next ward and was only calm when he was shredding paper into tiny pieces, so his son would bring him different journals, papers and brochures. Once he brought him a color catalog of a New York auction and I saw Frankie’s medallion on one of the pages. It was an incredible coincidence but I knew I was right. You couldn’t get

Bellerophon's design and magical color wrong. I decided to buy the medallion before going to Canada."

"So it was you who made Richard Adams bid at the auction," said Penny.

"If it hadn't been for my friends at the New York church I wouldn't have been able to escape from the hospital or move around town, not to mention bidding at the auction. They gave me the lead on Richard Adams. I know it was base and low to blackmail the lecturer, but I had no choice. When I found out by pure chance that James was in New York, I realized that he wanted to get his hands on the medallion too. That meant that James had somehow realized that the secret of Frankie's invention hadn't been lost. I started following you."

"So that's who was watching us on Times Square that evening after we'd eaten at L'illusion," the private detective smirked.

"I have to admit, just a couple of seconds more and I think you'd have spotted me Mr Kris," Jeffrey said. "I had to be very careful."

"But your plan to get the medallion failed," Michael noted.

"Yes, I didn't have enough money. But it turned out that all was not lost. James got Bellerophon but he didn't have the key."

"Did you know that Mr Dacort had encoded the data?" asked the private eye.

"I guessed as much. Not long before he died Frankie was on the brink of insanity. He tormented himself trying to decide which of his fellow scientists he could entrust with the secret of this amazing discovery. Frankie started to imagine there were foreign spies around

determined to get their hands on it. Eventually he stopped trusting anyone. His invention's remarkability turned out to be his curse."

"So what did you decide to do?" asked Kris.

"Follow you and James. I knew that sooner or later one of you would find the key."

"Just think, so many people were following us and we had no idea!" Michael exclaimed.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Penny.

"You'll have to call the cops," said Jeffrey, looking sadly at James's body. "I must be passed over into the hands of justice."

"No!" exclaimed Penny.

"The law is the law," Jeffery pronounced philosophically.

"Listen pal, you've already suffered more than you deserved," said Michael. "Go to Canada and do what you feel you should."

"You can do a lot more good free than if you languish in jail until the end of your days," Kris pronounced. Jeffrey wanted to protest but fell silent, thinking about this.

"You are very generous people." The shadow of a smile flickered over Mr Wilson's sad face.

"Soon it'll be dawn. We have to act," the private detective said.

"May poor James's body rest in peace. I'm sure that Frankie and Liz have forgiven their friend, for the ability to forgive is a great virtue." Mr Wilson seemed to have changed into a wandering preacher, his words were so sincere and penetrating.

Kris, Michael and Jeffrey took turns with the spades to dig a grave for James. Time was of the essence so they worked without rest. Finally the hole was ready. They carefully lowered Mr O'Connell's body into it.

"And what are we going to do with Bellerophon?" Michael asked, turning the antique over in his hands.

"Let's put it in James's grave," said Mr Wilson. Michael handed him the medallion. Jeffrey looked thoughtfully at the aquamarine overflowing with its magical color.

"Such a strange fate," he pronounced slowly. "Such a little thing, yet so much misfortune."

"So it turns out that the medallion really was cursed," Penny said at once.

"Do you remember James saying that when he saw Bellerophon on the morning of August 5th in the hotel restaurant he felt he was in the power that magical aquamarine glint?" Michael recalled. "The medallion was James's downfall."

"No." Jeffrey slowly shook his head. "James's downfall was caused by his obsessions which took over everything else in his life. James stopped enjoying things around him: the sun, the sky, the rain, the sea, other people. He was completely possessed by his obsession with Frankie's invention. He thought the best of life was to come but didn't realize that the best of life is here and now. The fate of my friend should serve as a warning to many generations as an example of a man who, in the striving to fulfill his dream, lost all he had been given by God - life, the power to love and do good. I am really sorry for James but one thing warms my heart: I truly believe that my friend's story will change many

people's lives and they will start to live in a more fulfilling and happier way, appreciating every day, every moment, every breath they take and every touch from someone they are close to," Jeffrey proclaimed.

The three friends listened to Mr Wilson, transfixed. Penny suddenly remembered what Michael had told her on Ocracoke Island. She realized that the young millionaire was in his way the opposite to James. At that moment Penny felt a special, deep feeling for Michael.

A cold breeze was blowing, letting them know that dawn was on its way. The stars were fading in the sky.

Kris, Penny, Michael and Jeffrey buried Mr O'Connell and then covered up Liz's grave after returning the wedding band to her. It was something that really did belong to Mrs Dacort. Everything was finished just in time, as dawn began to give way to daylight.

The three friends and the priest looked at each other knowing it was time to say goodbye.

"I have something to ask you," said Mr Wilson.

"Destroy the data storage unit that James took out of the medallion," Kris guessed.

Jeffrey nodded.

"Like Leonardo da Vinci, Frankie was ahead of his time. We are not ready to use such an invention purely for good," said Mr Wilson.

The three friends promised to do as he asked.

"You are very kind, brave people," Jeffrey proclaimed on leaving. "May God bless you!"

They thanked Mr Wilson. Shaking his hand Kris said,

"May your spiritual path be the right one."

And on that note Kris, Penny, Michael and Jeffrey parted ways.
The investigation was over.

Epilogue

Returning to the detective agency in the early hours the three friends all needed a nap and they slept in until lunchtime. Michael woke them when he found there was nothing in the refrigerator except yesterday's hamburger. Kris and Penny knew that the young millionaire would not be happy until he had eaten so they decided to go to the nearest restaurant. In any case, the private detective and his assistant were also famished.

"To the nearest *expensive* restaurant!" Michael stressed. "Today we are celebrating the end of the investigation!"

For the occasion he had put on a stylish bespoke suit made by one of the best tailors in Milan.

It was a beautiful day. Penny felt unexpectedly very light at heart and this overwhelming sensation made her want to dance right there and then in the street. This seemed to infect Michael too, and on the way to the car he suddenly hugged Kris and Penny.

"It's so great to have spent the last two weeks with you both!" the young millionaire proclaimed with emotion.

"I'm really pleased that we met too, Michael!" Penny smiled.

When the three friends had reached one of the best restaurants in New York they had an unpleasant surprise waiting for them.

"We're not open yet," said the doorman firmly.

“You are now!” Michael replied audaciously, stuffing a wad of dollar bills into the man’s pocket with an elegant flourish.

As if at the wave of a magic wand, Kris, Penny and Michael found themselves at a large round table with a brilliant white tablecloth and the very best offerings. Filling their cheeks with the fine delicacies the friends recalled the events of the last, very busy, weeks. Now, chatting in a relaxed and cheerful way, the Bellerophon case did not seem so sinister, mysterious and frightening. It seemed more like just another adventure.

“By the way Michael, I completely forgot to thank you for saving me when we were underground,” and with these words Penny rose, went up to Michael and kissed him.

“Well, it was nothing... really,” said the young millionaire, embarrassed.

Suddenly the private detective felt his cell phone vibrate. It was a text message: “Come to my room today at 2.00 p.m. and bring a box of truffles and champagne”.

“It looks like I’ll have to leave you,” said Kris, looking at his watch.

“Was that Edmund?” asked Penny.

“No, I’ve arranged to meet Mr Peterson tomorrow. This is an old friend,” the private eye said with a smile.

Michael was not sure how to feel. On the one hand he wanted to be alone with Penny but on the other hand he was flying to London that night and did not know when he would next see Kris.

“This isn’t goodbye pal!” Michael grinned, firmly shaking the private detective’s hand.

“Hasta pronto, then!” Kris replied, smiling.

Watching this, Penny felt sure that it was not the last time she would find herself mixed up in something with these two.

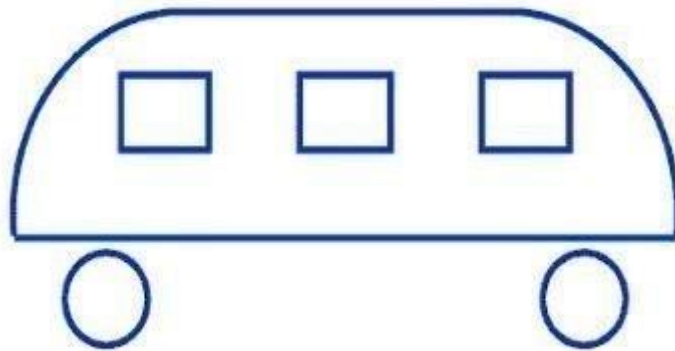
For your amusement

Kevin Kris: “Once I was in Moscow, buying an antique Russian gun for my collection. One kindly antiques trader offered me a cup of tea and some gingerbread. When he heard of my passion for brain twisters he told me a riddle that had been posed by one of the great Russian writers. I knew the answer at once. What about you?”

“A hat is on sale in a store for 10 rubles. A customer tries it on and wants to buy it but he only has a 25-ruble bill. The salesman sends his assistant next door to get change and he returns with two 10-ruble bills and one 5-ruble bill. The salesman gives the customer the hat and 15 rubles change. Later the neighbor calls in and says that the 25-ruble bill is a forgery and demands her money back. The salesman has no choice but to take the money from the cash register and give it back to her. The question is, what was the salesman’s loss?”

Penny: “Once I was staying with my aunt in a beautiful village in Dorset. One morning, as I was going for my usual jog around the pond, I noticed that there were more and more lily pads in it every day. That’s when I thought of this puzzle: let’s imagine that it takes 30 days for the lily pads to cover the whole pond, and we know that they double in number each day. How many days does it take for the lily pads to cover half the pond?”

Michael: “When I was being interviewed for a job with an investment bank, in addition to the usual mundane tests they asked me to solve this logic problem: which way is the New York bus in this picture travelling?”



Conclusion



We are going to continue writing stories about the adventures of Kevin Kris. If you want to know about the release of a new book, please subscribe to the newsletter on our website - <http://www.jkpersy.com/subscribe>

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Jake and Kate Persy

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