

MARBLE CEMETERY

Promptly at ten minutes to three, I passed under the monumental entrance of the First Cemetery of the city of Athens.

There was a clearing and immediately to the left a large chapel. This was probably St Theodore's, where all the funeral and memorial services were held. I went up the steps and read the letter-size announcements that were posted on the entrance. Yes, Ourania Asteriadou's funeral featured amongst them. There was a mass in the chapel and the sight of a casket. I backed out of there and strolled along the wide open space beyond the entrance. It was June in Athens, and it was a bright day as only a Greek day can be. I looked back. Georgos's man had just passed the entrance and slowly walked towards the chapel. I stopped. Just in front of me there was a rough, Rodin like bronze statue. It depicted a bony woman lying dead from hunger while her small child sucked her breast.

"Do you think I'll look like *her*, one day?" said a girl's voice.

I turned around startled.

The girl was extremely beautiful. An academic had analyzed pictures of women that the male population had found desirable. He discovered that beautiful women are made up of average particulars. Their eyes, nose, ears, breasts or legs had identical proportions and dimensions with the female population median. But this girl had the average of nothing. She had cropped blond hair, blue eyes, and a face that made her look fifteen. In addition her legs were long and through her thin cotton dress I could distinguish her large breasts and small round buttocks.

"You'll never look like her," I said. "You are so unlike her."

"How do you know? Time can change everything."

"Does she sum-up your fears?"

"Not just mine. Every woman's, I think."

"I don't like her," I said. "But I do admire her. Perhaps every mother does. Even while dead, she is giving life to her child."

She laughed.

"Is that why you've come here? To admire women like her?"

"No. I am here for the three pm funeral service."

"Friend of yours?"

"I haven't even heard of her."

"That's funny."

"Isn't it? Why have you come here?"

"To meet a man!"

"Any man?"

"A numismatist."

This meeting was no accident.

"Do you remember his name?"

"It's Drake. Dr Simon Drake."

"You've found him."

"It's you?"

"None other."

"But he is a numismatist. I'd thought that he, I mean *you*, would be older."

"Disappointed?"

"You must be joking."

"What's *your* name?"

"Susan."

"Well Susan, now that you've found me, what will you do with me?"

She eyed me up and down carefully.

"I can think of several things, but let's discuss business first."

"Are you a numismatist as well?"

"No."

"What do you do?"

"I am a private secretary."

I looked at her. I've been around long enough to know what a private secretary did, if she was as beautiful as Susan.

"Like the work?"

Her eyes opened brightly.

"I absolutely love it" she said.

I felt sorry for her. "I hope he pays you well," I said. "Does he have a lot of money?"

"Quite a lot."

"Really? What's he in?"

"All sorts of things."

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Oil, natural gas, telecommunications, computer software."

"What's his name?"

"You won't know him."

"If he's in shipping and he is Greek, is he one of those guys we keep hearing about who run their empires from their yacht?"

"He is not Greek" she said. "But he does have a yacht."

Her English was excellent but there was a trace of an accent. It was Slavic, I think. She took out a slim cigarette from a leather case and lit it with an engraved lighter.

"I like your lighter."

"This?" she held it up unnecessarily. "It's a Cartier."

I looked at her more closely. With a couple of glances I caught sight of a gold Rolex, a pendant by Lalaounis that held a Russian imperial rouble, and the Gucci cigarette case.

I rubbed the parts of my body where she wore expensive things.

"He does pay you well," I said.

"He only puts up the money."

I had to say something nice about her.

"Your taste is exquisite."

She was smiling all over.

"Oh, I just love expensive things. They are the best, you know. I don't know how I'd live without the feel of a Calvin Klein or the sureness of a Sebago."

I wondered how indeed.

"So you brought me to the Rolls Royce of cemeteries!" I said.

"Is that what this is?"

"More or less."

"It does look like a museum. Is it very old?"

"Not much. Two hundred years, maybe."

"What makes it so special then?"

"Money and power, mostly. But they'd do nothing without *la figura*."

"What's that?"

"It's Italian. It means attracting attention. You see, Greeks and Italians have been rubbing shoulders for thousands of years. They are first cousins by now and *la figura* is what being Greek or Italian is all about."

"What are you saying? That the people buried here are trying to attract attention?"

"Precisely. When they were young, they spent most of their lives with fancy clothes and noisy scooters. As they got older, they bragged loudly at dinner parties and built swimming pools, even though they didn't like to swim. Why should this process stop with one's death? Will it not continue in the afterlife, if you buy a plot here?"

"A plot here," she said, "costs almost as much as an apartment in Athens."

"And a small plot at that. Of course you can't build a pyramid in such a small space, but a mausoleum will fit very nicely. Wouldn't it be great when your friends come and visit? You'd be centrally located, just a breath away from the ancient monuments. They'd walk under the monumental entrance and on the well raked paths. They'd see the sprinklers, circle the professionally trimmed bushes, admire the various sculptures and bump into a zillion caretakers! Then they'd look up at your monument and say: Wow! What a man!"

She smiled. "*La figura* in the afterlife!"

"It will be great for your boss and just right for you. I can't even afford the gardener, so why bring me here?"

"Now there you are quite wrong. Five decadrachms are a lot of money."

Of course I never had any doubt that we would get to *that* sooner or later!

"Susan, why did you meet me here? Do you want to sell me a plot?"

"I am a saleswoman," she said, "but I don't sell graves."

"What do you sell?"

"Come, I will show you."

She took my arm and we walked along one of the paths. Just to the side, there was a life size marble statue of a seventeen year old girl. She was sleeping on a half raised couch and held a Greek cross on her chest. There was something about her drapery, angelic face and half open mouth that held you. I stopped and looked on her chest to see if she breathed.

She was made of marble.

"Doesn't she look like you, with longer hair?" I said.

"She does, doesn't she?"

"Well, if her cross was a Bulgari, I'd say it was you for sure."

She laughed.

"She might look like me, but she is not me. I am very much alive."

"You are a very beautiful woman. The gods have been kind to you."

"Life has been kind to me. I was born into poverty and look at me now! I get to feel the toughness and beauty of a Rolex and the elegance and strength of a Hartmann."

Is that what life was? The combed cotton of a Lacoste and the athletic feel of a Fred Perry? How would life be without the perfect fit of a Nina Ricci or an Armani?

It was a funny feeling.

I was holding one of the most beautiful girls I had ever seen, and yet I began to feel as if I was holding a cold piece of marble. Would it feel any different if I took off her jewellery and put it on the statue of the seventeen year old girl I had seen earlier? Susan wasn't alone. Vanessa had spent all her money on a gold Rolex. There were hundreds like them, even millions! All were running through life with no further goals than to own and collect expensive belongings. Was there something beneath their marble skin? Was there a beating heart? But even if there was a heart, and lungs and blood running through their arteries, and even if they were made of flesh, I was sure that they weren't human. For if one searched their soul, one would find a big nothing, a vacuum. An emptiness! And all the nerves and muscles were controlled by a series of expensive brand commercials.

I didn't know Susan very well, but I had loved many women like her. Vanessa wasn't far. Neither were all the co-eds I had been with. Still, I kept sampling. What finally mattered to me? What did I ultimately want? Make love to a string of beautiful marbles?

She steered us up an inclined path till we found ourselves on the higher ground, immediately behind the chapel. She stopped in front of the gap between two large monuments.

"Here we are," she said.

We stood in front of an open grave. It wasn't deep, and the sides were smooth near the bottom. They had obviously been shaped by a casket. I looked more carefully. I think I made out the outline of a skull, right where it should have been.

I felt my stomach churning.

"You know," she said, "most people bury their dead, and let them lie. The Greeks have a nasty habit of digging theirs up. I don't know why it has come about. Is it ritual, or are they simply short on space? In any case, cemeteries normally rent you a grave for three years. It is an adequate time for the process. There is no point to dig much, if you take precautions. You

see, in about a year the top of the casket caves in. That's why it's important to put a marble slab on top. People don't want to see the cave-in. It's also important that the casket is entirely made of wood. Plastic doesn't decompose quickly. Then, if one hasn't died from cancer and been injected with too many chemicals, in about three years everything but his big bones would have decayed."

I couldn't believe what was happening. I was feeling sick. How could such a pretty girl do something like this?

"They make a ceremony out of it here," she continued. "The cemetery mails you a card, and you are expected to bring a large white sheet and a bottle of wine. The day before your three years are up, they send a worker over and he removes the marble monument and digs down to the rim of the exposed skull. Then it is up to you to remove your kin's bones, wash them with wine and lay them in the white sheet. Now you can take them home with you, or most likely, put them in an appropriate box and place them in one of the specially made rooms."

I was in shock. I was witnessing exactly what she had so amply described. Yet she looked so beautiful, so cool.

She was the perfect marble girl.

"What makes you think that I am interested in all this?" I said.

"Most people aren't."

"So why are you telling me? What do you want me to do? Rent this spot now?"

"That won't be necessary. You see, my boss is a very rich and powerful man. He doesn't fancy this cemetery for himself, but he was sure you'd love it. It's not cold like in Canada, and it's got plenty of shade. He contemplated the protestant section for a while with its dense cypresses and pines but he has finally settled on this spot. From here you can see the Acropolis. He told me it's the sort of thing you'd appreciate! So he has bought it for you."

"He bought it for me?"

"Yes. Wasn't it kind of him?"

"You are joking!"

"I am not. That's why I brought you out here, to show it to you. It is really yours. You can check up on it in the cemetery archives, if you like."

I wished I had it in me to slap her on both cheeks and kick her with all my strength. Attila the Hun would have done both and maybe a couple more. I just took a deep breath.

"Please thank your boss for me," I said, "but it really wasn't necessary. Why did he go to all this trouble?"

"Because it's a useful thing to have. Everybody needs one, sooner or later."

"I don't think I'll need mine for quite some time."

"Well, he asked me to tell you that no one knows exactly when they'll need it. You might need yours tomorrow. That's why he bought it for you now."

"Agreed, but why did he spend his money on me? What does he want from me in return?"

"He wants you to be sensible. It's OK to move here if it can't be helped because of a disease or an accident. It wouldn't make sense however to move here this week on your own accord."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Because we are all human and make mistakes. Let me be more explicit. You and my boss have one thing in common. You both like coins. He has learned that you have acquired five Athenian decadrachms and understands that you are looking for a buyer."

"What if I am?"

"As I said, my boss is a powerful man. He has the means to take them from you. But he is also civilised and very rich. He would prefer to buy them. In fact, provided these coins are genuine, he will match your highest bidder in cash. In addition, he has already given you an excellent and useful bonus, as a down payment."

"So, if I have these coins, why would I want to look any further?"

"Exactly. But if, for reasons of your own, you do look further, and make the mistake of selling to someone else, he wants you to know that you'll only manage to get here sooner! He said that if I showed you the exact spot, it would help you reach a wise decision."

I felt my hairs stand on end.

"What if I don't have these coins?"

"He knows you have them. If you really don't, well I guess you are terribly out of luck. You'll be back here in a couple of days."

"What if I go to the police?"

"Why go to them? They'll arrest you."

"I can trade in the coins for my protection."

"You'll lose the money and get nothing in return. What's police protection? In the United States there is a special agency whose main job is to protect the president and his family from being assassinated. It's called 'the Secret Service'. Do you know how many American presidents have been killed since it was formed? Do you think that the Greek police will fare any better in protecting you? How can they stop a professional?"

"Are you making me an offer I can't refuse?"

She smiled.

"You have missed the point. We are not vulgar, like in the old days. You *can* refuse. In every case, our gift is yours for keeps."

She was enjoying herself. I had been wrong about her soul being empty. It was full. It was bursting to the seams with evil.

"How do I contact you?" I said.

"You don't have to. We have your mobile. We'll tell you where to bring all five decadrachms. If the coins are genuine, we'll make a fair exchange. You'll have your money and make my boss a happier man."

"What is to stop your boss from just taking the coins and sending me here anyway?"

She actually blushed. I couldn't believe it.

"Really, Dr Drake! I didn't think that a man of your interests and calibre would ever say that. He is a civilised man, you know. After all, he likes coins, just like you do."

I had no doubt that coin collectors are as civilised and as honest as the rest of the human population. Treat them right and they will treat you well. I know one or two however who would not hesitate to lie, cheat and deal with thieves or robbers if there was a blank in their collection they had to fill. I wouldn't put it past them to even kill for a single coin, especially if it happened to be a decadrachm. But I had no idea how bad the worst could be. The sooner I got out of there, the better.

"Can I go now?"

"There is only one more thing I have to see," she said. "We have really bought this plot for you, but there are some doubts if it's suitable."

"What do you mean?"

"We would like you to test it out!"

I didn't see it coming.

Her open hand swung over and she covered my mouth and nose with a wet handkerchief. For a moment my stomach turned over and I felt like I wanted to eat something. Then a wave of dizziness overtook me and my head got heavy. I tried to get the handkerchief out of the way but it was difficult to even lift my arms. She pushed me backwards.

It was just before I hit the ground and lost consciousness that a thought passed like a flash of lightning and spread terror throughout my body.

I was lying in my grave!