

THE MADONNA MURDERS



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Metropolitan Anthony Bloom was Metropolitan of the Diocese of Sourozh under the Patriarchate of Moscow until his death, August 4, 2003.

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With love and gratitude for my brother

DAVID CURRIE LEE, D.Ed.

(1953-1995)

Educator and Russian Scholar

CHAPTER 1



"We must start on a real pilgrimage, a long pilgrimage."

Metropolitan Anthony Bloom
Meditations: A Spiritual Journey

Monday, October 22, 1990

It's not often that a classroom of diverse, savvy Episcopal seminarians in Berkeley, California, is ever collectively astonished by anything. But when Andrea West flashed the slide of the Icon of Kazan onto the screen, everyone sat up and gawked. "Wow!" somebody whispered from the back.

Andrea warmed with a surge of inner satisfaction. She almost felt as if she had painted it herself, as if the icon belonged to her, like the portrait of a distant family relative. She never grew tired of gazing at it.

"It's quite something, isn't it?" she said. She paused to let everyone bask in the radiance of this momentary vision.

Andrea stood behind the humming projector and studied the slide. The Russian icon of the Madonna and Child, painted on wood, depicted two figures. One was a woman with wide almond eyes, an oval face brown with age, and a long, slender Russian nose. The other was an infant, whose small face was nut-shaped and wizened, with eyes as inscrutable as an old man's.

Apart from the two faces, the rest of the icon was overlaid with an ornate covering made of pure gold, which outlined the figures of the mother and child in relief. The gold plate was embossed and studded with hundreds of rare gemstones: huge green emeralds cut in

ovals and squares, blue sapphires, tiny diamonds and large round pearls. An arch of red rubies adorned the crown over Mary's head, while white glowing pearls, encircled by diamonds, decorated the icon's bottom rim.

"This is the Icon of Kazan. Today is her feast day," Andrea said, breaking the hush to continue her lecture. "It's one of the most venerated Russian icons in the world. In fact, it will be here in the Bay Area touring the Orthodox churches soon. The gold and gemstone cover is called a 'riza' and that alone is worth over four million dollars. Money is nothing compared to its real value—it's considered miraculous. Legend has it that, during the War of 1812, General Kutusov prayed with this icon to bless the Russian army as Napoleon's troops stormed towards Moscow. Many people still believe that it has healing powers and can cure blindness."

"Do you think that's true?" Christie Matthews asked abruptly from her seat in the front. Andrea felt her stomach tighten as she heard a faint edge of belligerence in her student's flat suburban voice.

Andrea breathed deeply to center herself. "Frankly, Christie, I don't know. It's hard to say. There is such a fine line between myth and reality when you're dealing with the spiritual realm. Remember, in this course we're talking about the symbolism of good and evil. Last week we talked about how the Crystal Skull, possibly of Aztec origin, symbolizes death and possibly is the embodiment of all evil. Today we see here an image from Russia that represents the essence of life and all good—but I don't think we should be too literal about it. Sometimes, when dealing with inner truths and ancient myths, we go beyond the reach of facts."

"So you think this all is just a myth?" Christie grumbled, glancing around the room for support.

"I didn't say that," Andrea moderated her voice on purpose. "Remember what I said before: ever since I first heard of the Crystal Skull, I've been amazed at the way people project their own unwanted evil onto this inanimate object. I have some personal theories about it, but they're not important right now. What do you think?" Andrea reached into her bag of teaching tricks to dodge Christie's latest attack.

"I think you're side-stepping the fact that you have blatantly presented us with occult images under the pretense of spiritual theology."

Andrea could not see Christie's cheeks in the dimly lit room, but she sensed that, like hers, they were reddening. A few students adjusted themselves uneasily in their chairs. One or two sighed with exasperation.

Andrea smiled to herself and parried, "If an icon of the Virgin and Child is an object of the occult, then I think at least half of Christendom is in a great deal of trouble." A handful of students chuckled.

"I wasn't talking about that—I meant the Crystal Skull. It's satanic! How dare you show it in a seminary classroom?" Christie's voice raised another note on the decibel scale.

"Ahhh," Andrea said in a low soft voice. "So tell me, Christie, what is more evil: talking about evil or censoring talk about evil?"

"You weren't just talking about evil," Christie argued. "You've sanctioned the Crystal Skull by refusing to believe in its satanic power. The Bible says Jesus acknowledged the existence of Satan. Why can't you? You're just playing into the hands of the demonic."

Andrea felt herself growing defensive and feared the focus of the class might be knocked off track, but she remained composed. "I sanctioned nothing, but I think you prove my point exactly. These objects have a way of raising up our most powerful projections: the things we most deeply fear and the things we most deeply yearn for. Your reaction to my slide of the Crystal Skull clearly shows how these spiritual archetypes hook us."

Christie slammed her book shut and said, "Come on! This is a bunch of Jungian psychobabble. I can't take this anymore." With that she grabbed her books and bag, and strode out of the classroom, failing to avoid the cliché of slamming the door behind her.

"Christie!" Andrea called after her, but the troubled student had gone. The volcano, which had threatened to erupt all semester, had finally blown and there was nothing Andrea could do about it.

Everyone sat motionless in their seats, stunned with mute embarrassment. An awkward silence hung like smoke in the dark-

ened classroom. The only noise in the room was the rumbling slide projector throwing its shaft of hot white light onto the screen. Andrea felt frustration and anger rising up inside her, but she stifled these feelings for the sake of the task at hand. Everything, she believed, was a teaching moment, even conflict—or rather, *especially* conflict. All eyes in the classroom were upon her.

"John," she asked calmly, "could you please get the lights?"

John ambled over to the wall and flicked on the lights. With a click, Andrea switched off the projector. The picture of the Icon of Kazan disappeared like a mirage. Brushing back the crown of her lush, wavy black hair, she walked easily to the front of the classroom. Leaning against the edge of the table, she folded her arms and surveyed her students. Her dark brown eyes sparkled brightly behind her tortoise shell glasses, "Thoughts, anyone?"

2

After class, Andrea hurried down the corridor to her office when the faculty secretary stopped her. Sally slyly handed her a pink message slip, "Here's a voice from your past." Tall, gawky and fifty-something, Sally had the knack of making a new dress look like a rumpled bed sheet thirty minutes after she had put it on.

Andrea awkwardly juggled her load of books and took the message. "Thanks." Her eyebrows lifted slightly in surprise. The scribbled note read, "Call Michael Beech. Urgent."

An intuitive flash of foreboding raised a red flag. She recognized the number from the De Young Museum and glanced at her watch. No time to call. She always felt thwarted where Michael was concerned. What on earth could he want? He never called with an emergency.

"So." Sally placed a hand on her hip. "Don't keep me in suspense. Are you going to call him back or not?"

"Maybe," Andrea grinned. "The way things have gone between us, I'd rather get a call from my dentist. Anyway, I can't call him now, I'm looking for Christie Matthews."

"She's in the Dean's office. By the way, the Dean wants to see

you, too. What's going on?"

Andrea's lush black eyebrows furrowed. "It's too complicated," she said. "I'll explain later."

"He doesn't look very happy," Sally warned her. "You know what happens when he gets mad. His neck turns red and that vein in his forehead pops out. I think he's working up to a big one."

Andrea took a deep breath and gathered up her courage. "Wish me luck."

"How about a novena instead? It sounds like you'll need it." Sally gave her the thumbs-up sign as Andrea walked stoically past her to Dean Ferguson's office. Andrea felt the muscles tighten in her back as she walked down the seminary corridor. Instinctively, she wanted to run in the opposite direction, but she kept going. She paused near the Dean's office, wiping her clammy hands on her skirt, then firmly knocked on the heavy oak door.

She could hear voices inside, and then Dean Ferguson opened the door. Andrea watched as he clasped Christie's hand and said, "Thank you for your input, Ms. Matthews. I'll be in touch with you soon." He gave Christie a salesman's smile, and then looked at Andrea sternly.

As Andrea passed Christie in the doorway, she saw that Christie's face had a set, self-righteous look about it. So it's war, Andrea thought, and fought to keep her heart from sinking to her shoes.

"Christie," Andrea paused, stopping to touch the younger woman's shoulder, "couldn't we have talked this out first?"

"It's beyond that, Ms. West. Excuse me, please, I have to go," Christie brushed past her.

Andrea sighed and stepped into the Dean's office. "What did she say?"

Dean Ferguson stood facing the window with his back to her. His hands were folded behind his back like a schoolmaster. Dressed in crisp black clericals, the Dean was a short, slight man whose closely cropped hair had lamentably begun to thin. He prided himself on descending from pure Scottish stock, and mentioned it often. Like many Scotsmen, he was an exacting man with a sense of humor

the size of a thimble. Somehow, his inordinate sense of responsibility had a way of making even ordinarily reliable adults feel negligent.

Andrea was always puzzled about why he remained committed to the Episcopal Church, known as it sometimes was for its flabby thinking. And to think he held a position as a seminary dean in liberal Berkeley, of all places.

The Dean's rigorous perfectionism was a frequent topic in the staff lounge. Andrea once quipped to Sally, "I think the Dean's going to have to spend a lot of time in Purgatory for his 'virtues.'" And she meant it. Still, he was a good administrator, and that's what the Trustees had wanted.

Dean Ferguson stared out the window across the grassy yard, then turned and looked at her sharply. "Please, take a seat," he gestured stiffly.

Andrea's body tensed. "No, thanks. I prefer to stand for executions." She hoped humor would help. "Besides, we have chapel in a few minutes."

"Yes, of course," he said dryly. "But I think you may want to sit." There was no arguing with his tone of voice. Andrea sat down on the sofa. The Dean began to pace. "I know this is a bad time to bring this up, Andrea, what with your final dissertation presentation tomorrow. But I think you ought to know that Christie has dropped out of seminary." He paused for dramatic effect. "She says it's because of you."

Andrea's mouth opened a little. She shut it again and pondered the appropriate response. "I'm sorry to hear that."

The Dean moved away from the window and sat down a little too primly in the brown leather chair behind his massive oak desk. "Are you? She says it's because of your class on the Crystal Skull. She says you've gone New Age and have introduced occult ideas into your lectures. Evidently, she was going to talk with you directly, but after praying about it, she felt the Lord was telling her to leave." He leaned in his chair towards Andrea. "What's more, Christie says she's going to tell her husband to cancel his \$50,000 pledge to the new building fund! Andrea, just what the hell have you been doing?"

"Nothing—nothing beyond teaching a regular class of Anglican

theology!" Andrea felt her own neck growing warm. "There isn't anything New Age or occult about it."

"Then what's all this talk about mystical healing, Jungian archetypes, psychic phenomena and Crystal Skulls? That sounds pretty New Age to me."

Andrea sighed. "She misunderstood what I was doing."

Andrea thought to herself that one of the unfortunate things about working for a seminary, which survived chiefly on student tuitions, was that it sometimes accepted second-rate minds with first-rate pocketbooks. Not that the students here were slow, by any means. In fact, five students in the first year class already had Ph.D.s from other professions and she admired them for having the guts to begin another career in middle age, which would slice their salaries in half.

The job of a seminary, as she saw it, was not to produce Thomas Aquinases, but to educate able pastors who could work with their hearts as well as their heads. Nevertheless, every year the administration always managed to select a few with religious glaucoma: rigid fundamentalists who refused either to think or grow.

"Obviously somebody miscommunicated," Dean Ferguson glared at her. "Tell me, what is the Crystal Skull?"

"It's a jewel, made of clear quartz crystal, about five by seven inches high, shaped in the form of a human skull. It's supposed to have evil powers. Just superstition, really. Mere projection." Andrea gestured. "Look, all I was doing was showing slides of different types of religious art: icons of the Virgin Mary to symbolize good, for example, pictures of things symbolizing evil, like hex signs, the Crystal Skull and medieval paintings of Satan, to prove how these ideas effect us beyond an intellectual level. Christie's reaction just proves my point."

"She seems to think you were promoting something akin to Satanism, especially with all that talk of paranormal experiences."

Andrea stood up. "Oh, really! You should know me better than that. I simply used material from our mystical tradition—nothing terribly unusual. Besides, all this about Satan is pure nonsense!" Andrea found herself getting angrier than she wanted.

"Christie Matthews doesn't seem to think so. She takes it all quite literally and she thinks you're desecrating the educational process. Next thing I hear, you'll be introducing the Goddess into the Creed!"

"That's next semester..."

"This is serious, Ms. West."

"I am serious. Whatever happened to the good old Anglican value of healthy doubt? Of living with ambiguity? Of being able to question and debate? Not to mention academic freedom! What do you want me to do, go after her on my knees? Change my course content?"

"You may wish to consider some modification."

"I can't believe this is happening. In an Episcopal seminary at the end of the 20th century!" Andrea glared.

The Dean tapped his pencil impatiently on his blotter and glowered at her. "I don't think I need to remind you that you're in no position to argue." She could see the vein on his blushing forehead beginning to bulge.

Andrea froze in fear at his somber tone. "What do you intend to do?"

He snapped his pencil in half, "It's not what I'm going to do—it's what you're going to do. You just lost us \$50,000. Go think about it and then tell me how we are going to clean this mess up!"

Andrea knew she was cornered. She felt trapped and bewildered. "How can I fix it?"

"You're the doctoral candidate. You go figure it out. Now get out of here before I throw you off the faculty altogether." The Dean put on his reading glasses, looked down and began thumbing through a stack of files. The vein in his forehead throbbed noticeably.

She backed towards the door. "I'll see what I can do," she said rather icily, aware that she had just caved in to his pressure. She knew this was a job for him to solve, not her. She decided to wait a week or two to re-negotiate things with him, after their tempers had cooled. But now, fuming with fury, she exited his office as fast as she could.

Andrea leaned into Sally's office. "Battered, but not beaten," she

announced with relief.

The older woman gave her a sympathetic, motherly glance. "It looks like you need a good hot cup of tea. Want to join me in my office?"

Andrea paused. Chapel was definitely out of the question now. She felt shell-shocked and angry, but she somehow collected herself. "Thanks, but what I'd really like is a good stiff drink. Too bad I hate hard liquor. No, I think I'll just go home and relax."

"Don't forget Michael's call," Sally reminded her.

"Oh, damn!" Andrea glanced at her watch. "I might as well get it over with. What else could go wrong today?"

"We could have a big quake on the Hayward fault."

"Very funny," Andrea smiled ruefully. "Thanks, Sally. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"I'm sure you'll think of something. You usually do," Sally gave her a canny look and turned towards her typewriter. "Now go home and take a nice nap for me."

Andrea walked down the hall and closed her office door. As she grabbed a wad of Kleenex from the box on her desk, she realized she was trembling. Conflict always left her drained. She kicked herself for not resigning. Quitting, however, was a step she couldn't afford to take.

Damn the Dean and damn the almighty dollar! She shook her head. How could Christie have done this? It galled her that people thought religion was so simple. Black and white thinking short-changed both them and God.

To her, this kind of literal thinking was like the fishermen who went trawling over an ancient oyster bed. They were content to catch the fish swimming near the surface of the water, but had no idea that a deeper and more luminous treasure lay embedded in the muddy bottom below. Ignorance and fear (which they disguised as principles)—and, perhaps, the inability to swim—kept them from diving to the murky depths. Only those willing to brave the mysteries of the unknown and the darker currents of doubting reason had a chance of retrieving the Pearl of Great Price. No pain, no gain. Life was not about being financially secure nor about having the correct answer,

but about finding one's soul. Andrea wondered if the Dean still had one.

3

Unfolding the pink message slip, Andrea thought that maybe seeing Michael would help. At least he made her laugh. She picked up the phone and dialed the assistant curator's office at the De Young Museum. Hopefully Michael was calling about her book deal. "Here goes," she murmured, and gripped the receiver nervously. She felt her pulse rate quicken as she listened to the phone ring.

Michael Beech had been an old lover of hers at Stanford. Then, after her divorce from Gareth, she and Michael had re-met two years ago and begun seeing each other again. Their relationship had run hot and cold until last year, when it ended abruptly on the night she learned that Michael was suddenly moving to West Hollywood to live with a man.

Michael's plummy voice came onto the line. "Andrea, how lovely! I was hoping it was you. How's the God business these days?" His voice lilted with a faint hint of a Yale accent, although she knew he was raised in Georgia. Michael's glib banter was one of the things she had both loved and hated about him, like having too much tinsel on a Christmas tree.

"Terrible, but no doubt better than the way the vicious world of art and museum politics is treating you." Andrea observed the icy tone in her own voice. Wishing she could pour out all her fears and anger about Dean Ferguson to Michael, like the old days, Andrea was determined to sound nonchalant. She picked off some withered violet leaves from the plant on her desk.

"Yes, isn't it awful how the supervisors always get their grubby little hands in the cultural pie?" Michael said with his usual urbanity. "This work on the new art wing is nearly driving me bonkers." Andrea sat back in her chair as her former lover treated her to a detailed account of the complications he had to suffer while building an art museum out of a rundown library. "It's like trying to turn Superior Court into a dance studio," he complained.

At thirty-seven, Michael Beech was the rising star of the San Francisco art world and, despite his silk smoking jackets and his gold rings, Andrea knew he took art and his career quite seriously. High Beauty was Michael's credo in life. He was also damned good at his work.

"But I didn't call you to burden you with my political bickerings," his tone unexpectedly changed. "I know this is last minute, but I need to see you." Andrea's heart skipped a beat. She sat up, not quite believing what she heard. She could tell he was dead serious. "I want your opinion about some work I'm doing."

"What work?"

"An icon."

"Oh." Her voice fell. "By the way," she said hoping to lighten the mood. "How is Hans?"

"The truth is, Andrea," Michael hesitated, "Hans left me. Dropped me like a stone. Then he got killed in a motorcycle accident last May."

This stopped Andrea cold. "Oh, Michael, I had no idea. Why didn't you tell me?"

"It all happened too fast. I suppose I couldn't face any of it at the time—not until it was all over. It was too humiliating and painful."

"I'm so sorry." She couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Thanks." She could hear his voice contort with grief.

Knowing that distraction would help him feel better, Andrea asked, "So, tell me more about the icon."

"I'm sorry, Andrea, but I can't say more right now. I'll explain when I see you."

"And by the way, where is your letter of recommendation for my book? My agent is getting antsy."

"We can talk about that over lunch. How does twelve-thirty sound?"

"You mean today?"

"Of course. Have you ever eaten at Greens Restaurant? They have great food and I know how you're always fretting about your girlish figure. My treat."

"You're worse than a snake charmer," Andrea couldn't keep herself from laughing. "If they serve pasta, I'll be right there. Twelve-thirty at the latest. I suppose I could make it back in time—assuming traffic isn't held up on the Bridge."

"Of course you can," Michael said. "I promise we'll be through by one. We wouldn't want any of your budding saints to feel neglected."

Andrea smiled, quite used to his teasing, "Thanks. I'll make sure they put your name on the prayer list: under St. Jude, for lost causes."

"Blessings on you, my child," he intoned. "I can use all the help I can get, just as long as they keep the Supervisors off the list." Then he said warmly, "Andrea, it will be good to see you again. I really need you on this one," and hung up.

Whatever it is, Andrea thought, he must really want it bad.

4

Glad to leave the suddenly stifling confines of the seminary campus, Andrea stuffed her papers in her brown leather briefcase and bolted from her office. Outside, the sharp autumn air felt as bracing on her face as a cold compress. She loved this time of year. She ran down the staircase, past a brick wall covered with crumbling sycamore leaves, towards her car in the parking lot below.

Over on the Cal-Berkeley campus, noontime bells rang a Bach fugue from Sather Tower. Already in full momentum, the carillon rang out its metallic melody loud and clear. Andrea loved fugues and all sorts of complicated things. Strands of contrapuntal music floated in the mild blue air like a tangled mass of invisible ivy, weaving and lacing together their braids of inextricable silver sound.

Normally, the bells gave her cause for rejoicing—a musical reminder that she had climbed the academic ladder so well and so fast. It had taken her only five years to reach her present position: a Ph.D. degree looming and a guarantee of being professor of Anglican theology and spirituality at the Episcopal Church Divinity School in Berkeley.

Today, however, she wondered gloomily if the bells were tolling

the death knell of her job. She didn't stop to listen, but hurried into her car and drove out of the parking lot towards San Francisco.

As she sped towards the Bay Bridge toll plaza, Andrea caught a glimpse of the bizarre wooden sea sculptures that locals had built in the marshy mud flats of the Bay. They were like wooden pterodactyls, antiquated and pre-historic. And here she was, one day before her dissertation defense, wondering if she was doing the right thing. Was this what she really wanted? To be a respectable seminary professor in sensible shoes and dull tweeds, with Dean Ferguson running her life?

She knew she could never fit properly into any other profession, but the image of being old and alone loomed before her like one of those twisted specters standing out in the stinking mud flats of Emeryville. It was all so very nice, so wonderfully Anglican—but it was so damn safe.

5

Twenty minutes later, Andrea drove into the huge parking lot at Fort Mason in San Francisco and parked. She surveyed the immense warehouses before her, took a deep breath to expel her nervousness and strode into Greens Restaurant. Owned and operated by an American community of Zen monks and nuns, Greens was considered one of the finest vegetarian restaurants of nouvelle cuisine in the city. The view overlooking the shimmering blue-green waters of the Bay was a big draw, too.

Through the large pane-glass windows, Andrea glimpsed the Golden Gate Bridge in the distance, dropped on the landscape like a movie set. Close by, gulls paraded the decks of sun-drenched sailboats, which bobbed and swayed in their berths in the Marina below.

Andrea slipped into the restaurant bathroom to straighten herself before proceeding further. She peered at her long oval face in the mirror, and applied some fresh lipstick to her full mouth. Michael once teased her, "You know, your lips are too sensuous for a seminary professor. Almost a bit film noir," and he touched her bottom lip. But she hadn't believed him.

Yet, as she surveyed herself in the mirror, she had to admit that there was something faintly exotic about her. It frightened her a little. "You have the most alluring eyes," her mother always said. "Of course, you get that from me. You know the saying: 'Scratch a Russian and find a Tartar.'"

Andrea brushed her thick black hair and surveyed her tall figure. She was dressed stylishly and carefully in low brown heels, a flowing tan skirt, brown tweed jacket, and a white blouse with an amber brooch at her neck. She looked every inch the Berkeley seminary professor she was preparing to become. Only today she wasn't sure if she were happy about it, or even if it would happen.

Out in the restaurant, Andrea peered past the gigantic redwood burl sculpture and searched the pine tables, looking for Michael. She spied him at the far end of the restaurant, seated by the corner window out of the sun. He was casually reading a book and when he saw her, he waved solemnly at her.

"Sorry I'm late." She glanced at a large abstract canvass of green and oranges that hung above his table and wondered if he was going to frown at her for her tardiness. But instead he stood up, came over and kissed her on the cheek.

"Not to worry, dear. I've been a real jerk recently. Are we friends again?"

"That depends on what you mean by friends." Andrea hung her purse strap on the back of her chair and sat down.

"What's the price of forgiveness?" Michael peered at her over his glasses.

Andrea crossed her arms defensively. "Is that a personal question or a theological one?"

"Both, but don't answer. At least not right now. I'm starving." He handed her a menu and scrutinized his own menu closely. "After so many people simply raved about this place, I decided I had to come here. They said it was the only restaurant in town that doesn't make tofu taste like soggy newspapers. Not that I'll order it, of course. What will you have?"

"I don't know. A salad, I think." She saw Michael looking up at her, his eyes dancing merrily. "Don't you dare say a word!"

His grin revealed a dimple. "You look great, Andrea—not a day over thirty-five."

"You always had a way with compliments..." she tossed back as he turned to his menu. She studied him discreetly. He hadn't changed much in the past year: thirty-seven, tall and lean, with a fine nose, straight blonde hair flecked with gray, he was flawlessly dressed in a gray wool pin striped suit with a fresh blue cornflower in his buttonhole. He wore a Cubist tie, a black watch, a thick gold bracelet and a gold Stanford ring on his little finger. She thought his face looked tired. Pouches and shadows brooded under his eyes.

At that moment, a well scrubbed, rosy-cheeked waiter with a shaved Zen monk head approached their table. He bowed slightly, then kindly and efficiently took their orders.

Andrea sipped lemon water from her glass. "So what's this big mystery you urgently needed to see me about?"

Michael dipped warm sourdough bread into a yogurt and cucumber sauce. "Why do these people always have to wear their health on their sleeves?" He turned and looked out the window at the boats bobbing on the blue water. "Do you think the sea lions will come back to roost on our piers again this year?"

She looked at him with amusement. "Come on, Michael. You're avoiding the subject. What is it?"

He took out a small gold snuffbox from his inside breast pocket and, with his usual mock gesture, offered some to her. She smiled and shook her head. He tapped a small pile of tobacco powder on the top of his knuckles, sniffed hard, then blew his nose with a white handkerchief.

"Ah, much better," he sniffed. "Well, dear, there is a rare and valuable icon I want you to look at."

Andrea raised her eyebrows. "You've already said that."

"Forbes over at the De Young Museum got a call a few weeks ago from a man in Spain who runs some arch-conservative society dedicated to the Virgin Mary. They want to have one of their special icons re-appraised. It's so valuable they even built a basilica for it. They plan to send this icon on a grand tour of the U.S. before they officially give it to the Pope, and they want us, or rather me, to take a

look at it for their insurance company."

The waiter set their plates before them. Andrea's plate was awash with fresh spinach, goat cheese and pine nuts. Michael raised his wineglass to her and said, "To us. And to the icon."

"Not so fast. I don't come in package deals." Andrea did not raise her glass. "I don't understand. Aren't there other people at the museum who can give you a better second opinion? After all, you're the one who's the icon expert, not me."

"But they don't have your spiritual instincts," Michael buttered his bread. "I don't need you to look at the technicalities of dating the icon. I've checked it out with a Russian colleague of mine who says it's authentic, all right, but I have my own theories about that. What I want is for you to get a feel for it. You know, what sort of spiritual baggage it's carrying, etc."

"Sounds mysterious. Tell me more."

"It's the Icon of Kazan."

"Not the Icon of Kazan?"

Andrea felt her blood trilling inside her.

"The very same, miracles and all. Even the gold riza has been restored with all the original diamonds and emeralds, and a few new sizable gems added, as well."

Andrea could hardly control her pleasure. "What do you want me to do?"

"Just come with me to the Holy Virgin Cathedral to see it."

"When?"

"Tonight. For Evensong, at six thirty."

"That soon? Oh Michael, you know I'd love to, but I can't! I have a class at two, then I have to get ready for my dissertation defense before the doctoral committee tomorrow. Can't it wait?"

"Nope."

"Why not? What makes this so important?"

"I can't say right now. You'll have to trust me."

"That doesn't give me much to go on. What if I said no?"

"Then you don't get my letter of recommendation."

"You're joking!" Andrea sat back stunned.

"Only a little." His eyes shone; but Andrea had seen that look

before. "No letter, no contract; no contract, no book. I don't imagine your Review Board at the seminary will like that much. It's as simple as that."

"You blackmailer."

"Don't be so dramatic."

"Dramatic!" The sound of Andrea's voice made the couple at the next table stop and stare at her. After this morning's encounter with Christie Matthews and the Dean, her temper threatened to unravel like a frayed rope. She shot up out of her seat. "You run off with that garden lighting expert from West Hollywood and then you expect me to drop everything just for lunch and a kiss?" She collected her purse and stood up to leave. By now all eyes in the restaurant were upon her.

"Andrea, sit down. Don't make a scene." Michael squirmed in his seat, his cheeks reddened.

"I'll make such a scene you'll think this was Lincoln Center!" She hurriedly grabbed her coat and purse, nearly knocking over a water glass in her haste. By now her Russian temper had gotten the better of her.

Unnerved by this unusual outburst, Michael coaxed her to sit down again. "Please, let me explain."

Andrea glared at him. "This better be good." She sat down on the edge of her chair.

Michael examined his fingernails with a pained expression. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry. It was inexcusable of me, I know. I screwed up with Hans, too. But my sexuality has never been a mystery to you. After all, we did have an arrangement."

"Some arrangement."

"Andrea, I never meant to hurt you." He took her hand into his and looked straight into her eyes. "We have been through too much together and I love you too much for that. You're my spiritual sister. Ever since Hans died, I've had to keep working or else go crazy. I'm desperate. I need you. I need your gift. Something weird is going on. I can feel it." A hint of fear flickered in his eyes.

She paused, sensing real urgency behind his plea. "Let me think about it."

He raised his hands in surrender. "Of course, think about it. But I promise you, it will be something you'll never forget." He mopped up his sauce with some French bread. She could smell the garlic from where she was sitting. "You should try this fettuccini sometime, the dried tomatoes are perfect. So, let me tell you about the new Matisses that have just come in..."

Michael's words washed over Andrea, an inaudible rush of babbling sounds. She suddenly had the overwhelming sensation that the two of them were falling towards the bottom of a deep well. She tried to crawl to a distant light, but couldn't reach it. Fear encircled her like a whirling tornado. Something was terribly wrong, but what? She knew she needed to get away to sort herself out.

She stood up, collecting her purse. "I'm sorry Michael, I can't stay. I'm too upset to eat right now." Then she hurried out of Greens, fighting back tears.

6

Andrea wiped the tears from her cheeks as she drove her car away from the restaurant. Strange that Michael should call when she was feeling the most vulnerable. He'd never taken the initiative in their relationship before. Was this icon business the only thing he wanted? But the more she thought about it, the more she realized how impossible it would be to ever get Michael to settle down. Unfortunately for her, no one else was even in the running.

Since her divorce from Gareth and beginning a Ph.D., time for relationships had flown completely out the window. Seminary, of course, killed all chances she had of dating anyone. First, there was no time to meet available men. Second, although there were plenty of mature straight men on campus, most of them were married. Any involvement with her colleagues or students was strictly out of the question. As her seminary ethics professor once so aptly put it, "Don't fuck the flock."

When she wasn't teaching or working on her dissertation, she was left alone at night with her cat, stuffing her face with low-cal popcorn and watching another episode of Masterpiece Theater. Her

love life had become as exciting as the history of concrete. Michael had simply served as a habitual stay against loneliness.

Andrea turned a corner onto Bay Street and headed towards the Bay Bridge. She'd first met Michael at Stanford University in the early '70s, where they'd studied together in the Art History department. She'd attended a few classes and read a handful of books to keep a "gentlewoman's" C average. Michael, on the other hand, was as cavalier about school as he was about everything else, he never studied at all yet somehow managed to get the best grades.

She remembered visiting him in his dorm. Unlike the other students who had The Who or The Doors blaring from their rooms, Michael had built his own pine harpsichord (from a mail order kit) and played it for hours. In winter, he carried around a large black umbrella, which sported a brass duck handle. And in the spring, when most students were walking around barefoot in Levi's, Michael would stroll into the cafeteria wearing a white three-piece suit—emulating Tom Wolfe.

Oddest of all, he attended church—an Episcopal Church—and volunteered on the side to wash dishes at a local soup kitchen. There had been rumors that he had even gone to his local parish priest to talk with him about ordination, but nothing ever came of it. A walking anachronism, Michael was a hopeless 19th century Romantic beached on the shores of the 20th century.

In short, to most of his peers, Michael Beech was an enigma. But Andrea was fascinated by him.

They became friends, then lovers, during the winter of their junior year abroad when they traveled to Florence, Italy, to study Classical and Renaissance art. He was the wit and life of the tour.

The Mediterranean sun, the art, the hearty food deliciously swamped in garlic, the heady red wine, and the gusto of the Italian soul had intoxicated both of them. His vulnerability and feminine sensibility had touched Andrea deeply, like the first night he tentatively kissed her fingertips.

She smiled now, at the thought of them in that upstairs room in the old Palazzo, lying naked between crisp white sheets smelling of lavender after he'd made his first fumbling efforts at lovemaking.

Since she was a virgin too, she'd hardly known how bad he was at it then, but simply was grateful for his embraces.

Their love affair continued all semester, although they had sex only a handful of times—much to Andrea's frustration. Michael always seemed to be in love with love but not with her; yet she was the one he always came back to.

It was during this time that she learned more of the truth about Michael Beech: that he was born and raised in Thomaston, Georgia, sprung from an old line of southern Dixiecrats that went as far back as DNA. His family never forgot nor forgave General Sherman for crushing their plantation in the Civil War, and still assumed they were part of the landed gentry, although they had no land.

One of Michael's favorite stories was a family anecdote that had taken place back in 1910. His grandfather and great-grandfather were riding in a carriage by the new Plaza Hotel in New York City, which was fronted by a statue of General Sherman on horseback being led by an angel. His great-grandfather looked at the statue, knowing full well who it was, and inquired, "Who the hell is that?" "Don't you know, father?" Michael's grandfather had asked. "Why, that's General Sherman." The old man eyed the statue suspiciously and snorted, "Just like the damn bastard to ride a horse and make a lady walk."

Michael's father, now dead, had been a lawyer, aloof and passive, hence not a very successful one. His mother, still very much alive, was small as a wren but like many southern women, dominating. Michael once told Andrea, "You should have met my parents: my mother was like a small tidal wave—my father was like the Dead Sea." Since Michael was the youngest and the only male child, his mother and his three sisters treated him like salt-water taffy—something to push, pull or prod for their own devices. To survive, he developed the knack of out-manipulating them all.

His father had also been a devout Southern Baptist. As a boy, Michael was sometimes made to attend a small wooden Baptist church in the woods, whitewashed by the congregation every spring because the tropical sun made the paint blister. Michael told Andrea, "It used to embarrass me to go there, but mother always said it

would help me remember what not to become. It worked."

By the time he was seventeen, Michael served as crucifer and later as part-time organist at his mother's local Episcopal church. In college he went through a devout phase, often slipping away to pray kneeling on the hard stone chapel floors for hours. As he grew older, this, too, would change. By the end of their trip to Italy, Michael had become a budding first-class art expert, specializing in Byzantine and medieval art; a passion that would eventually replace his zeal for religion.

It was Michael who, with his passion for Bach, T.S. Eliot and C.S. Lewis, first opened Andrea to the bizarre idea that God—and the church—might have anything meaningful to say to her or her soul. A year later, she had, on her own, surrendered to the Mystery and reclaimed the religion her father had raised her in. She became an Episcopalian. She would always be grateful to Michael for that, for she finally had found a place to belong.

But at that very moment, recalling their luncheon conversation, Andrea wasn't feeling very grateful to Michael at all. She didn't know whether to be angry with him or sorry for him, or both. She could always get someone else to recommend her book. But who? There was not another icon specialist around who knew her theoretical work as well as Michael did. Assuming she had done her work well, a letter from him virtually guaranteed publication.

Did he really mean he'd withdraw his letter of support for her book or was he just saying that to manipulate her? Had she overreacted? Staying home might give her a few more hours to study but, on the other hand, if she didn't know the material by now, it was too late. She was terrified that if she refused to join Michael at the Cathedral, he might really carry out his threat.

Not going might jeopardize the fruit of five years of mind-bending work. The topic she had chosen for her dissertation was on "Theological and Spiritual Parallels in the Orthodox and Anglican Traditions." Michael's letters, she had hoped, might help to turn this paper into a book. And Harper's would never accept her book without his endorsement, of this she was sure. He had been a feather in her cap, and if she decided not to play his game, she might lose it, and perhaps him, forever.