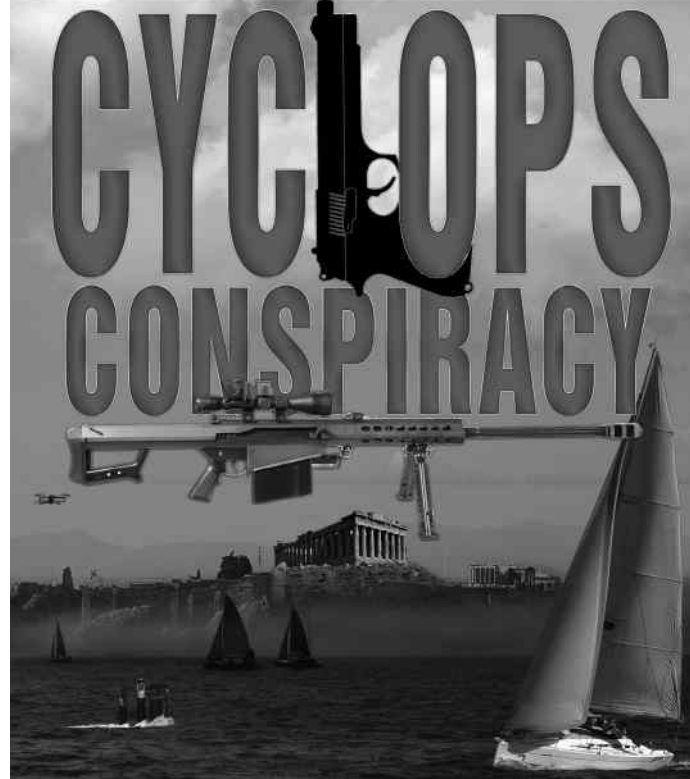


AN ADAM WELDON THRILLER



**WILLIAM
MCGINNIS**



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El Sobrante, California

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is available in print, ebook, and audiobook from your favorite retailer.

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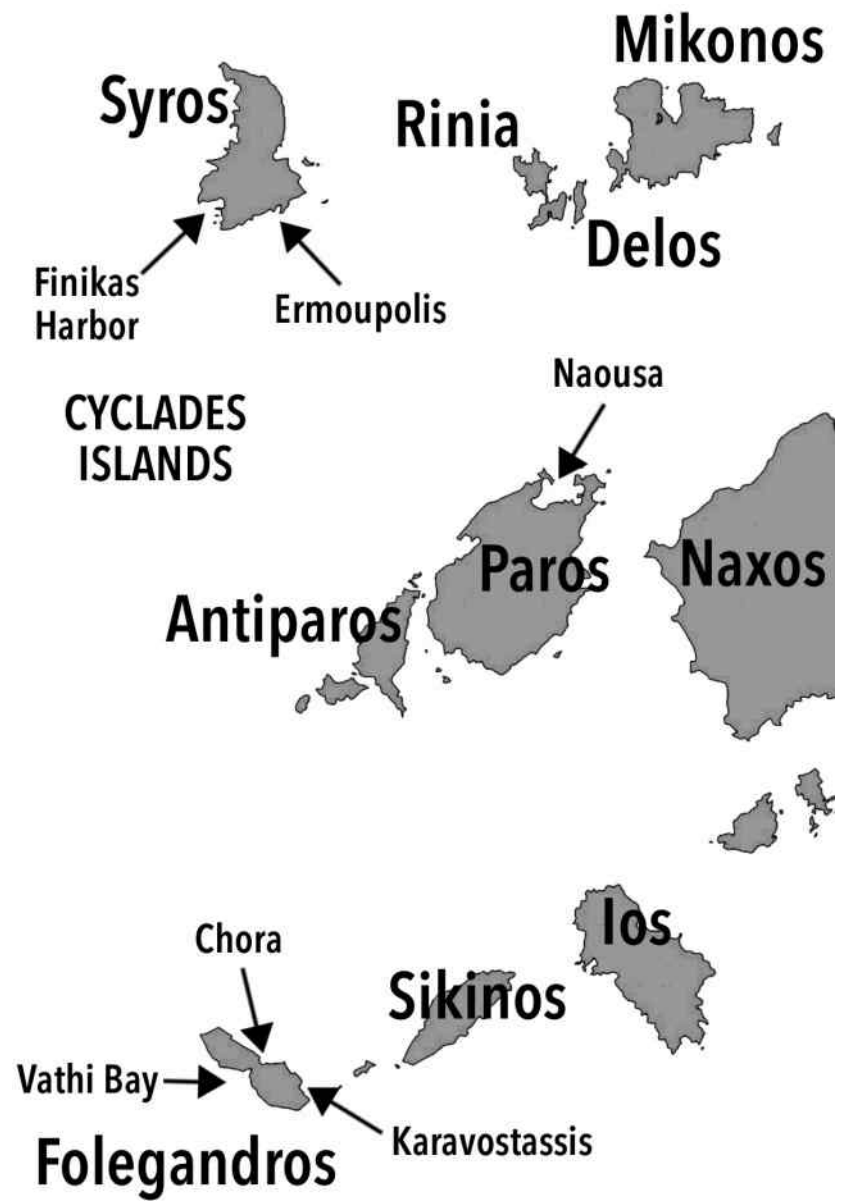
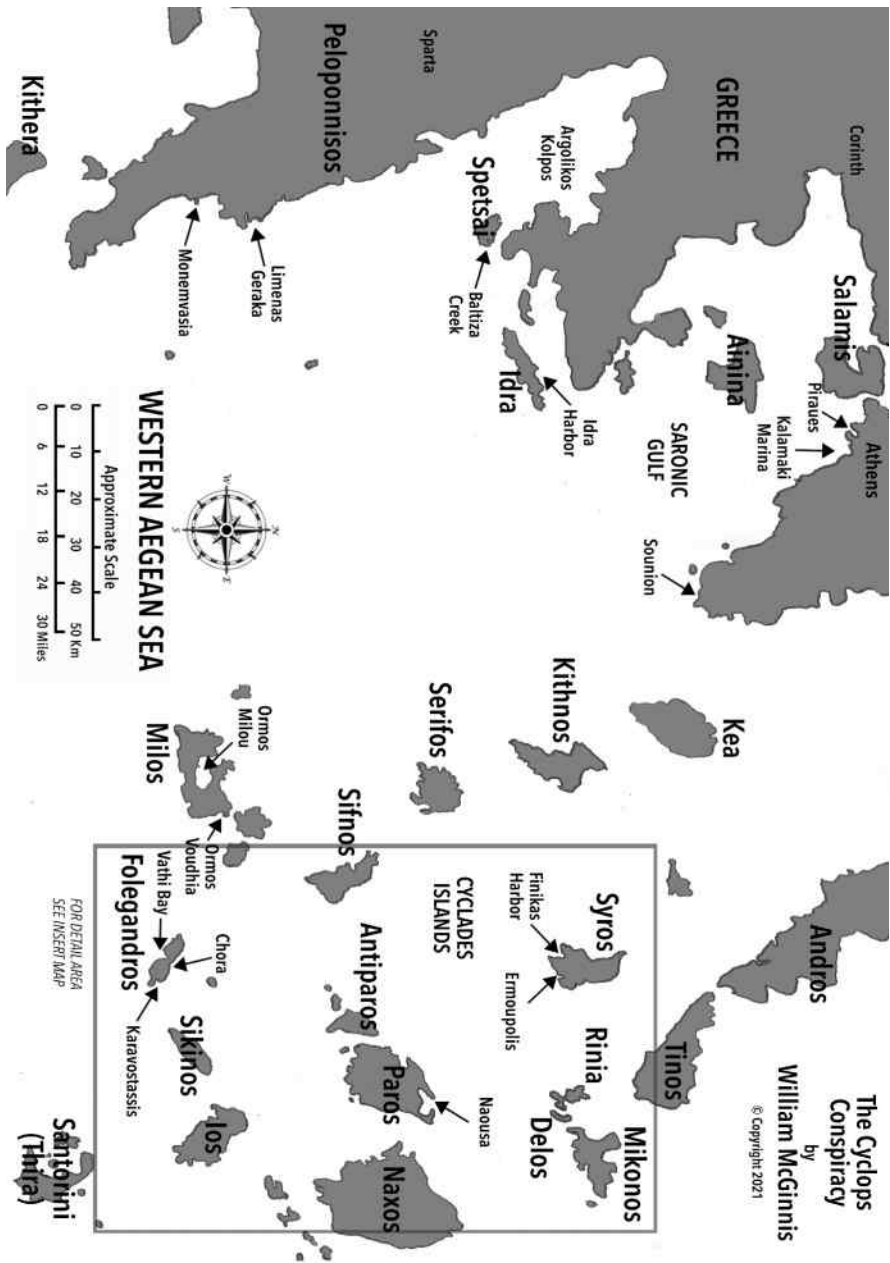
To Western Civilization.

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The Cyclops
Conspiracy
by
William McGinnis
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FOR DETAIL AREA
SEE INSERT MAP
Santorini
(Thira)

CHAPTER 1

THE STRAIT OF GIBRALTAR

“Thirteen suitcase nukes?” Adam Weldon looked skeptical.

“I’m afraid so,” the admiral answered. “On their way to target cities in Europe and America.”

“Not good,” Tripnee said.

The three of them sat in the center cockpit of the nine-million-dollar, 70-foot sloop, *Dream Voyager*, as it glided on autopilot in light winds under full sail eastward through the Strait of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean Sea. The cliffs of Morocco’s Atlas Mountains slid by to starboard, while the Rock of Gibraltar towered to port.

Admiral Ty Jeppesen’s motor launch followed in their wake a respectful two hundred yards back, while the United States aircraft carrier USS *Nimitz* followed two miles behind that.

“Why such extraordinary lengths to tell us this in person?” Tripnee asked.

“Because America, Europe, the world, needs your help.” The tall, somewhat world-weary admiral, an old Navy SEAL buddy of Adam’s, exuded authority and urgency.

Eyes narrowed, Tripnee said, “But we need a break from all that.”

“I realize that. The thing is, you’re the perfect people, in the perfect position, to quite literally prevent World War III.”

Adam asked, “How?”

Tripnee crossed her arms, frowning.

“Back in the ’eighties,” Jeppesen said, “as the Cold War wound down, eighty-four portable nuclear bombs the size of attaché cases went missing in the Soviet Union. Just one could devastate a city the size of Paris or New York. If thirteen—or any number—were set off in Europe or America by Iran-backed terrorists, the inevitable response would be to obliterate Iran and who knows what else. Russia, Iran’s ally, would counterattack, and we’d be thrust straight into World War III.”

“But why me and Adam?” Tripnee demanded, scowling.

“Thirteen of these bombs will soon be smuggled through the Greek islands aboard sailboats—”

“Why sailboats?” Tripnee interrupted. “Why not private jets?”

“Private planes would’ve worked years ago,” Jeppesen answered, “but now, both big airports and shipping hubs, and also smaller airports, have scanners and sensors, and often, bomb-sniffing dogs.”

“And sailboats and yachting marinas are still below the radar,” Adam said.

“Exactly.” Jeppesen nodded.

“You haven’t answered my question. Why me and Adam?” Tripnee asked again.

“The two of you sailing *Dream Voyager* look the part. You’re glamorous. You’ll blend into the Greek islands boating scene.”

“Lots of your people can sail. Get them.”

“You both speak Arabic.”

“Not convincing.”

“The real reason?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“Okay. The real reason: You’re the best.”

“Flattery will get you everything. Not.”

“Seriously,” Jeppesen insisted. “You’re both savvy and

resourceful, and deadly when needed. Let’s face it, you’ve had more success taking down conspiracies than anyone else we have.”

“Humph.” Tripnee glowered, immobile.

“What Ty is too diplomatic to say,” Adam said to Tripnee, “is that we’re also unofficial, below the radar, and expendable.”

“Well,” the admiral admitted, “there is that.”

“So, if something happens to us, there’s full deniability,” Tripnee said. “That’s some sales pitch.”

Adam asked, “So what is the situation?”

“We’re looking at a new Islamic terrorist threat group, calls itself the *Jamaat-e al-Aliemlaq*, that operates in the Greek islands.” Jeppesen looked out over the sun-drenched water toward the eastern horizon. “Means ‘Cyclops Group,’ and we think it’s a mix of ISIS, al Qaeda, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. They’re constantly changing, adapting. Iran supplies weapons. To finance their operations, they raid antiquities, arrange for human trafficking, you name it. All manner of dirty, nasty stuff. What’s weird, despite being religious fanatics intent on getting into Paradise by imposing Allah’s law, the *Shari’a*, on all the world, some of them have developed a taste for the good life: sailing, partying, carousing on the idyllic islands of the Aegean. We need to penetrate this group, as soon as possible—no later than yesterday, we’ve got to identify and track the key operatives and their boats, and find and secure those bombs.”

“Spread throughout the Aegean? That’s six *thousand* islands,” Tripnee blurted out.

“We have leads.” The admiral locked eyes with her. “You’ll have to be resourceful. Use your wits.”

Adam scratched his head and rubbed his chin. And eventually nodded.

Tripnee rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“Also, Interpol is sending an agent who will join you and brief you in Athens. An expert in high-tech spycraft, including electronic eavesdropping and drone facial recognition technology. The latest stuff to give you an edge.

“I won’t lie, the slightest slip-up could get you killed. Also, we have constraints. People breathing down our necks. Senators and House people who oppose operations like this. People with no idea of the challenges we face, and no understanding of what’s at stake, are ready to hold hearings and scream bloody murder, and even send the three of us to jail if things go wrong.”

“Same ol’, same ol’,” Adam said. “What about the president?”

“We have his full backing.”

Adam felt his old friend’s stress. The admiral, as a key mover and shaker in the world of US espionage, had always displayed tremendous grace under pressure, but here, within sniper range of the Rock of Gibraltar, Ty Jeppesen’s voice and hands trembled with suppressed intensity as he concluded, “The stakes could not be higher. Will you help us?”

Tripnee, eyes narrow, neck muscles corded, rose up and jabbed a finger in front of Jeppesen’s face. “How the hell can we say no?” She stormed down the companionway.

Jeppesen signaled his motor launch to come alongside. Before departing, Adam’s longtime friend said, “Just so you know: Interpol and the Greek authorities are good, but we’re pretty sure they have leaks, and probably a mole. Best not to look to them for any help.”

“Good to know.”

“Also, you must be getting famous. Interpol specifically requested you.”

CHAPTER 2 ATHENS

Five days and 1,640 nautical miles after the admiral’s bombshell visit, *Dream Voyager* swept northward across the Saronic Gulf toward Athens. An impossible feat for most sailboats, but an easy romp for Adam’s extraordinary craft. The boat, after all, had been specially conceived by acclaimed nautical designer, Bruce Farr, to perform like a Ferrari while providing the luxury of a Rolls Royce.

As Athens came into view, Adam and Tripnee sat together at the helm, marveling at the sight of the Parthenon on the Acropolis towering above the fabled city.

Tripnee said, “The Cradle of Western Civilization.”

Nudging her in the ribs, Adam asked, “What about your ‘Down with the Patriarchy’ campaign? Wasn’t this where the patriarchy got launched?”

“Ancient Greece was patriarchal, all right,” she said, poking him back.

“And?”

“And they also had plenty of amazing, badass women who didn’t take any shit.” She jabbed him again, hard.

“That was a badass poke.”

“But imagine how this sight must have overawed everyone who sailed into Athens in ancient times—and how it gave pause to anyone thinking about attacking the place.”

The Alimos Kalimaki Marina was a madhouse, pulsating with

hustle and bustle. With sails furled, Adam motored deep into the marina's labyrinth of fairways, while Tripnee hung fenders off the stern and along both gunwales. A dazzling collection of gorgeous yachts—all Med-moored, that is, tied up stern-to to the quay—extended as far as the eye could see. Every boat was a beehive of activity, some loading and heading out, others going nowhere, just teeming with people partying.

Finding no open quays, Adam picked a spot where the yachts on either side looked loosely packed. But were they loose enough for him to jostle them aside and force his way in?

He aimed his stern into a narrow opening between two boats, dropped anchor, and powered backward. Tripnee added fenders to both stern corners and readied the mooring lines. The trick was to pry the boats on either side apart without grinding boat-to-boat. Slowly, ever so slowly, with fenders squeezed almost, but not quite flat, the boats to starboard and port shifted aside as he eased *Dream Voyager* farther and farther back until, finally, they were in.

People materialized from neighboring boats to receive their mooring lines, which they passed through rings on the quay, then tossed back to be secured to stern cleats.

Tripnee said, "Good job, Adam, docking the boat. I didn't think it would fit."

Silly, Adam thought, but this simple appreciation meant the world to him.

Tripnee and Adam showered, dressed, closed and locked all hatches, and set the alarms. On shore, first, they checked in with the harbormaster and cleared Greek customs. Next, they visited a nearby supermarket where they filled a taxi with supplies to restock *Dream Voyager*.

After packing everything on board, they again locked up and set the alarms, and again set off, this time deep into Athens.

A thirty-minute Uber ride through teeming, sweltering streets

brought them to the edge of the historic Plaka District which surrounded the Acropolis. Here they made their way on foot through ancient, twisting streets no wider than alleyways to a particular outdoor café. Taking seats at a shaded table, Tripnee ordered an ouzo and Adam a coffee. Here, soon, they were to meet their tech-savvy Interpol contact, S.I. Katopodis.

Adam studied their surroundings, his back to a stone wall, his senses alert. A steady flow of people, mostly tourists, but also local folks of all sorts, flowed past.

Tripnee glanced around, then looked up and let out a low gasp when she saw, far above, the Parthenon shimmering in heat waves rising from the city.

Then, off in a different direction, something in his peripheral vision caught Adam's attention. A tiny drone moved slowly along at rooftop level, about fifty feet above them. He pointed it out to Tripnee. As they watched, it swooped down to hover a dozen feet from them, where it did a little dance, swinging from side-to-side, twirling and doing backflips. Then the hummingbird-sized quadcopter shot up, disappearing skyward.

"Why do I sense our tech-savvy Interpol guy is a hot-shot drone pilot?" Adam mused.

"Why do you assume S.I. Katopodis is a man? Could just as easily be a woman."

"You got me." Adam smiled. "Unconscious bias, perhaps. But, I dunno, what do we know? Super tech-savvy. A veteran Interpol undercover operative. A counter-terrorism expert. Speaks five languages. Skilled in hand-to-hand and small-arms combat. Explosives expert. Their top authority on Greece and the Aegean. And, I gather, an experienced sailor, to boot. Pardon me if I say the odds are Katopodis is a man."

"Typical patriarchal chauvinist bullshit."

Just then a tall, very fit-looking woman with wild, luxuriant,

shoulder-length blond hair and striking blue-green eyes approached their table.

“Adam and Tripnee? Hi, I’m Agent Katopodis.”

CHAPTER 3 SOUNION

“Call me Sophia,” the woman said as they all shook hands. Adam gestured for her to sit down, but she remained standing. “Thank the lord you’re here,” she said with an appealing German accent. “There’s no time to spare. We’ve got to get to Finikas Marina on the island of Syros. I’ll fill you in once we’re underway.”

Tripnee and Adam exchanged glances.

“Well, all right,” Tripnee said. “No beating around the bush.”

“Amen,” Adam said.

An hour later, after helping Sophia and Tripnee move a taxi-load of Sophia’s technical gear aboard *Dream Voyager*, Adam checked out of the marina at the harbor master’s office.

A wraith-thin, uniformed member of the Greek Coast Guard, a sort of naval policeman, said, for the third time, “Strong *meltemi*. Not possible to go to Cyclades. Saronic Gulf yes. Cyclades, no.”

And for the third time, Adam explained, “You don’t understand. I sail. I know what I’m doing.”

The young Greek kept shaking his head.

Should he just walk away, ignore this petty official, and sail to the Cyclades anyway? Probably not the way to go. Doing this might call attention to *Dream Voyager* just when their mission called for a low profile.

Adam dialed a number, explained the situation, and handed his cell phone to the official. The gaunt-faced Greek coast guardsman spoke briefly, but mostly listened. Two or three minutes later, looking chastened, he handed the phone back, and said quietly, "Sail where you want." Apparently, Sophia had some clout.

Soon thereafter, while Tripnee and Sophia pulled in the stern mooring lines, Adam eased the throttle forward, and *Dream Voyager* crept away from the Kalamaki quay. Oh-oh. The harbor exit was to port, but an errant anchor chain from a neighboring boat rubbed hard against their starboard side rotating them to starboard. Worse, the chain passed close under their keel and looked like it would at any moment disable their propeller.

Adam looked back. A middle-eastern-looking guy on the quay pulled out an Uzi machine pistol. "Gun! Get down!"

Tripnee dropped fast. But Sophia froze. Adam reached out and pulled her down below the cockpit rim moments before bullets hissed by inches over their heads, ripping into the stern bulkhead of *Dream Voyager's* cabin. The barrage was intense—but brief. Probably one full clip. Then silence.

Adam risked a quick look. The guy had already disappeared along the quay. But who knew if he might return or if there were others?

With Tripnee and Sophia still hunkered low in the cockpit, Adam stood up and accelerated forward, cranking the wheel full to port.

Come on, baby, turn, turn. And don't lose your prop.

But the neighbor's anchor chain wouldn't budge, and *Dream Voyager* swung inexorably to starboard. Amazingly, though, the prop missed the mooring line.

Checking all around for gunmen, Adam realized he was heading straight into a narrow dead end lined with costly yachts. Despite countless near-death encounters as a SEAL, his heart

was pounding. Hello, pandemonium. Fortunately, it was clear what to do. But was the fairway wide enough? And more importantly, was he about to be pulverized by another Uzi barrage?

Dream Voyager, in reverse, had what sailors call prop walk to starboard. Adam developed speed along the right side of the fairway, turned hard to port, then, just before his bow hit a majestic yacht on the left side of the fairway, he cranked the wheel the other way and accelerated in reverse. This stopped his forward motion, propelled him backward, and continued the boat's counterclockwise spin. Trouble was, another dazzling yacht loomed a few feet off his stern.

So, all the while wondering if it would be the last thing he ever did, he moved forward and back, forward and back, each time rotating a little more counterclockwise. At last, *Dream Voyager* completed a 180° fairway turn. Then, willing his heartbeat to return to normal, he accelerated through Kalimaki's labyrinth of fairways toward the seawall exit and out onto the Saronic Gulf.

"Thank you, Captain," Sophia said with a broad smile. "You handled that beautifully."

Adam grinned and stood a little taller.

"Who the hell was that back there?" Tripnee demanded, looking at Sophia. "Until you came aboard, everything was fine."

"I wish I knew," Sophia answered. "Things here are tense, explosive. I'll fill you in. But right now, I need to go below."

The wind was dead calm, the temperature still around 90°F, and the water a brilliant, cobalt blue. Motoring eastward at 12 knots, Adam anticipated making Sounion Bay, their intended overnight anchorage, before dark. This would put them in position to make Finikas Harbor on Syros early the next day. As Athens fell away behind them, even as they kept a wary eye out

for threats, Adam and Tripnee marveled again at the ever-amazing sight of the receding Parthenon glowing atop the Acropolis high above the city.

To welcome Sophia aboard and give her a feel for the ship, Adam invited her, when she came back on deck, to take the wheel. “Just maintain our current speed and heading. All of us will keep a lookout for other boats.”

As he gave her the helm, he practiced the useful naval ritual of saying, “Hands off,” and was pleased when she knew to reply, “Hands on.”

As Sophia took the wheel, she looked around and sighted over the bow into the distance, seeming to fix their course in her mind.

Meanwhile, Tripnee disappeared below and after a while returned with her prized five-foot-long Barrett M82 sniper rifle. The three of them settled in. Adam got out gel-coat materials and patched the Uzi bullet holes in the cabin bulkhead. Tripnee sat at the cockpit table breaking down, cleaning, and resembling her hefty, lethal, matt-black weapon. And Sophia stood at the wheel doing occasional 360° scans but mostly peering forward at the horizon.

After a while, the Interpol agent said, “So, the situation here in Greece. First some background.”

Adam glanced her way and listened up. Tripnee rolled her eyes and remained focused on her M82.

Sophia said, “Greece, which is orthodox Christian, was ruled by the Ottoman Empire for centuries. The empire was Islamic. Greece fought for and won its independence from the empire in eighteen twenty-one, and ever since, the Greeks have exacted systematic revenge against Muslims because they were so pissed at the Ottoman rule.”

Tripnee’s expression hardened as she hefted her newly reassembled rifle and sighted through its telescopic scope at a

point on the Greek coastline a mile or so away, a distance well within the gun’s range.

“Muslims,” Sophia continued, “have lived in Greece since before the fourteenth century, but are under tremendous threat. They feel Greek policies shame them and destroy their identity.”

“Now wait one minute,” Tripnee interrupted as she turned, rifle in hand, toward Sophia. “Ottoman rule was no picnic. The Ottoman Turks fined non-Muslims and tried to stuff Islam down Greek throats. The Greeks fought long and hard for their independence, and once they gained their freedom they had every right to assert and reclaim their own culture and their own religion: Orthodox Christianity.”

Fire sparked in Sophia’s eyes. “The Greeks limit the building of mosques—forcing Muslims to pray in unmarked, makeshift, degrading places, such as converted underground garages. They bulldoze Muslim graves. They restrict the way Muslims can educate their kids. They fine Muslim leaders, the muftis and imams. They even stripped sixty thousand Muslims of their Greek citizenship—an action criticized by the European Human Rights Commission.”

Tripnee leapt up. With her feet spread wide on the cockpit bench and her gnarly Barrett M82 at port arms, she towered over Sophia. “Greece has to hold the line against millions and millions of restless Muslims next door in Turkey and just across the water in the Middle East and Africa. If Greeks don’t defend their culture—which has contributed so much to the world—it’ll get swallowed.”

Sophia Katopodis maintained outward calm, but her long, lithe body vibrated with tension as she replied: “Greece treats Muslims like second-class citizens. Muslims in Greece can be both Muslim and loyal Greeks at the same time. Most want nothing more than to peacefully practice their religion.”

Adam made a palms-down calming gesture, and said, “How about we agree to disagree?”

It was sweltering hot and Sophia was still fully dressed in a long-sleeved shirt, long pants, and a light, stylish jacket. She seemed to notice for the first time that Tripnee and Adam had changed into laid-back sailor attire: Tripnee wore shorts and halter top and Adam his well-worn shorts and t-shirt. Excusing herself, and returning the helm to Adam, she went below.

After a while, she returned in a two-piece aquamarine *pareo* wrap that made the blue-green of her eyes pop. She twirled on her tiptoes at the top of the companionway. The spin seemed oddly girlish, even vulnerable, for this serious woman.

Tripnee’s eyes narrowed at the sight. But for Adam the effect was mesmerizing. He had to look away.

Sophia said, “The problem is that a small group of Muslims have turned to fanatical jihad and linked up with ISIS, al Qaeda, and Iran. Spread through the Greek islands, these terrorists are constantly evolving and adapting. Doing everything they can to mess with, corrupt, disrupt, and destroy life in Greece and the West. What’s weird is that some of them have developed a taste for a wild, over-the-top, Western lifestyle: yachting, partying, carousing, and snorting drugs. Having their seventy-two virgins right here in this life. To finance themselves—and to wreak havoc—they traffic in antiquities, drugs, humans.”

“You know for a fact they have suitcase nukes?” Adam asked.

“Thirteen,” Sophia said. “In shielded cases that block radiation, making normal Geiger counters useless.”

“Locations?”

“Strung out across the west Aegean,” Sophia said. “A slew of terrorist sailboats getting ready to launch a full-blown, hell-on-earth, jihad holocaust.”

* * *

They dropped anchor in Sounion Bay as, just to their east, the setting sun’s last rays lit the majestic Temple of Poseidon on Cape Sounion. Once the anchor was set, first Adam, then Sophia, then Tripnee hit the water, which was a comfortable 77°F. After swimming several laps around the boat, Adam, with Tripnee close behind, climbed back aboard, and headed down to the galley to prepare dinner.

Up in the warm night air in the cockpit, the two served dinner: a feast of spaghetti, meatballs, a huge Greek salad and a smooth red wine. Sophia, who had been puttering in her forward cabin, appeared in her same *pareo*. Now, however, she also wore glasses and an unusual watch on her left wrist.

“A toast,” Adam said, “to this spectacular setting.”

They lifted their glasses.

As the trio ate, a small drone like the one in Athens circled the cockpit three times, then darted away.

Tripnee said to Sophia, “Okay, we get it, you’re a drone pilot.”

“Not just a drone pilot,” Sophia said. “A drone falconer. Not just one drone at a time, drone swarms.”

Tripnee looked nonplused, while Adam nodded approvingly.

“Watch this,” Sophia said as she moved her hands through the air as though operating an invisible control board. Four drones flew out of the balmy night in single file, circled the cockpit, then deftly landed one-by-one on the ship’s rear deck.

“Very impressive,” Adam said. “How’d you do that?”

“AR, augmented reality. These glasses and this wrist device are a set that allow me to fly an entire drone swarm. While you two do the old-fashioned, actual, physical stuff, my drones, with facial recognition software and more, can identify people and

monitor everything they do, including voice and electronic communications.”

“Sounds like science fiction,” Adam said.

“Oh, it’s real all right,” Sophia said. “Lots of intelligence agencies and corporations and NGOs are using this same stuff.”

Tripnee rolled her eyes, looking unimpressed.

“Think about it,” Adam said to Tripnee. “If these devices work, first, Sophia can help us identify people in this *jamaat* conspiracy. Then her drone eavesdropping could give us a crucial edge, almost like reading minds.”

Tripnee nodded slowly, her lips pressed into a straight line.

“Drone falconer,” Adam said, turning back to Sophia. “Where did you come up with that?”

Tripnee said, “There was a time when royal households had flocks of trained hunting falcons. The person who tended and controlled them was called the falconer.”

Sophia said, “That’s right.”

“How’d you become so adept with drones?” Adam asked.

“By spending too much time with ’em.”

“Too much time?”

“Yeah, and maybe not enough with people.”

CHAPTER 4 CYCLOPS: MY EYE

My eye. My eye. My missing eye. I burn like it was yesterday, like it was five minutes ago. But it was long ago.

Poor Papa. He suffered so much. More than me. He told me so. The bomb had to be built. It had to be. Allah willed it.

The kids in Hamburg, then the Greeks on Syros, recoiled from the dark hole in my face, from me. All except Papa. My dear, wonderful papa, who loved me so much. My papa, my Muhammad, may peace and blessings be upon him as he walks and lives.

My papa, my universe, my everything. And I his. He was my shelter, my refuge, and even back then, so long ago, with me so small, I learned to be the same for him.

His pain, his humiliation. He came to Germany as a penniless migrant. Taught himself German and studied computers. Became a brilliant computer scientist. And, praise Allah, he’s so charismatic, with incredible, wonderful powers over people. And with such light skin.

Still, the humiliation. Small of stature and Muslim. They shunned him, passed him over. Even when he found a position, he was the last to get promoted and the first to be let go. A slow death by a thousand cuts—to the skin, to the heart, to the eyes.

And then the bomb. I was so small and so proud that he let me help him build it. Who could have known that it would