





Chapter One: The Deception

Benny awoke suddenly from fitful dreams. His back hurt, his head ached, and there was no room to stretch. He focused on the tiny screen two feet in front of him and strained his eyes to see the silent figures. The woman next to him was laughing above the hum of the engines. He fumbled for the buttons on the armrest and the screen turned green as the tiny figure of a plane moved awkwardly over the landscape. *Damn*, he thought to himself, *we're only over Germany, so at least two more hours*. He needed a cigarette and a drink. He was getting too old for this.

Shaking himself awake, he attempted to sort out the events of the last few days. Why had Russel sent that email? Perhaps a life spent studying Minoan culture, more specifically the Phaistos disk, could overshadow recent events. After what had happened in Italy he had been shunned by the community. Was everything suddenly forgiven or at least forgotten? Maybe it was just a cruel joke. Get him over to Crete and then yell "Got ya!" Of course there wouldn't be anyone to yell; he would be standing alone in the Heraklion airport waiting for someone, anyone, to meet him. Maybe that was the plan. They knew his weakness, just mention the "disk" and he

would go on for hours. That is what happens when you study one thing for thirty years. He had lost the respect of his colleagues and become the butt of jokes. Maybe this would be the biggest one yet.

But even the thought that this was a hoax could not stop his mind from wondering, *What if it is real?* Another disk was probably not enough to break the code, but it was more than anyone else had to work with. And if he could track down some more texts . . . he could be the first to translate the Phaistos disk, then they would have to respect him again. Maybe it would be like the old days. Maybe. More than likely this was another dead end.

He reached under the seat in front of him and fumbled in a brown canvas bag. “Where are those pictures,” he mumbled to himself. Pulling out a crumpled envelope, he pushed up the flap and slid out some photos. Two were of the new disk that Russel had emailed to him and the other two were of the Phaistos disk, one of each side. He turned on the overhead light and squinted at the prints until his eyes adjusted to the glare. It seemed such a simple thing, a round, flat disk of baked clay. It was eight inches in diameter and a half inch thick with 241 signs divided into sixty-one groups that were in a spiral beginning in the center and ending at the outside. The new disk had the same configuration as the original Phaistos disk but many of the symbols were different. Most fakes he had helped to authenticate varied the number of symbols but copied the same images, which was a much easier task than creating new ones. There were many new images on the recently discovered disk; thus, if it was a fake, someone with knowledge of the original, and Minoan culture, had gone to a great deal of trouble to produce an object that would have little monetary value. Of course, its archaeological worth could be immense if it wasn’t a fake. And there was something about the signs . . . Could he be holding pictures of a second

Phaistos disk?

The enigmatic Phaistos disk had been discovered at the palace of Phaistos in Southern Crete in 1903. As the only example of this particular type of Minoan writing, translating it had always been considered impossible, but for his entire career he had tried. He would have the last laugh if successful. But lately he hadn't had much success.

Russel had been vague in the email, something about needing to authenticate the disk before his university would okay the funds to purchase it. But would any respectable institution buy an artifact such as this? With all the lawsuits floating around to return archaeological objects to Greece and other countries of origin, why was Russel trying to buy this disk? If it was real, it would be better to inform the Greek authorities and let them handle it. And why had Russel specifically stated that he needed to authenticate it? Russel must know he could only prove it was a fake. Even if it was genuine, the disk would have to be sent to London to date the clay. It was the only way to know for sure. The more he thought about the whole thing, the stranger it seemed.

So why didn't I simply refuse, he thought. He knew the answer, even if he wouldn't admit it.

He returned the photos to his bag and settled back in the seat, drifting in and out of uneasy sleep. *In his dreams he was working on an excavation, digging under the shadow of a wall and grateful for the shade on a scorching day. Then he was arguing with someone but the face was foggy. The shadows became longer; from the corner of his eye he saw movement.* He woke up screaming.

"Sir, are you okay?" the flight attendant gasped.

"What? Ah, yes, yes. I'm sorry. A bad dream I guess," he replied sheepishly, seeing the look

of horror on his seatmate's face. "I'm so sorry," he apologized to her, his face becoming red with embarrassment.

"It's quite alright," she replied, edging as far away from him as her seatbelt allowed.

"We'll be landing in about a half hour. Would you like a warm facecloth?" the attendant asked.

"That would be nice, thank you," he replied taking the warm cloth from her tongs and placing it over his face. He hadn't realized how much he was sweating until then.

Jesus, he thought. I can't go back there, no matter what. I just can't. But there should be no reason for me to return to that site. This eased his anxiety somewhat.

Thirty minutes to Athens and another hour before his plane left for Heraklion, if it wasn't late, and then he would be standing on Crete again after more than twenty years. He suddenly realized he was sweating again and reached up to turn on the overhead fan. But it would be okay, if only this new disk was real and he could translate it, he could start over and would be respected again. Yes, this might work out very well for him.

Benny spotted the temple of Apollo on the southern tip of Attica during the descent and stared at the countless buildings that lined the hills on the approach to the airport in Athens. The landing was smooth and uneventful. He followed the masses exiting the plane into the labyrinthine passages of the terminal and arrived at passport control. He hoped the Italians hadn't gotten Interpol involved. If so, he might be turned back. He realized he was sweating again.

The agent took his passport, stared at it for what seemed an eternity, glanced at his face, stamped an inside page, and handed it back without saying a word. Benny hurried through the maze of hallways and emerged by the luggage carousels. He saw his flight number on the third

one and joined the growing crowd awaiting the start of the endless conveyor.

As the belt roared to life, he was again thinking about that cryptic email from Russel that had brought him back to Greece after so many years. He hoped the offer was sincere but believed there was an ulterior motive. Once they had been best friends, but so much had happened over the years to alienate him from Russel and everyone in the profession. And the situation was made worse by the incident in Italy last year. He spotted a dark-red bag with a blue-and-white tag coming toward him, and grasped it.

Heading to the exit through the large glass doors, Benny found himself in the lobby of the airport surrounded by crowds anticipating the arrival of someone special. But he still had one more flight to go. He pushed through the crowd and up the stairs to the domestic check-in counter. Next he went to security where he emptied his pockets, walked through the scanner, retrieved his bag, and headed down what seemed like an endless hall. “Gate 1,” he read on the boarding pass.

The departure lounge was crowded when he finally arrived. Benny immediately spotted a group of what appeared to be university students milling around and chatting with the enthusiasm of youth. Most likely they were on an organized tour of Greece. *Thirty-five minutes*, he thought as he found a seat. But he couldn’t relax as questions ran through his mind. *What if Russel wasn’t there to meet him or what if he was? What would they say after all this time? It must be ten years since they last spoke.* His mind kept wandering to what-ifs and whys. He wished he hadn’t come.

“Flight 316 to Iraklion now boarding at gate one,” blared the speaker system. The crowd began moving toward the attendants by the exit doors. Through the doors, down stairs, then a

short walk across the tarmac, and he was on the plane. Finding his seat, he settled in for the short ride across the sea to Crete, the wine dark sea.

He was seated next to a window and soon a young woman, one of the group of students he had noticed before, slid into the seat beside him with a cheery “hello” and a big smile. He sighed at the thought of conversation and hoped she would talk to her fellow travelers or at least remain silent.

They were airborne in less than twenty minutes. His mind wandered back to that first crossing all those many years ago. He was young, good-looking, enthusiastic, and expecting to discover the next great unknown Minoan palace. He was inspired by Evans’ discovery of an entirely new civilization and had wanted to study the Minoans and especially Knossos. After all, Arthur Evans had been an unknown to archaeology in 1900. Then he had unearthed the palace at Knossos and discovered the Minoans, which he named to honor their ruler King Minos. Unbeknownst to Benny, his future wife was on the same flight. Lily had earned a scholarship to work at the field school for a month. He had to pay for the experience because of his less than impressive grades but considered it a wise investment nonetheless.

There was a large crew at the field school that year. The field director, British archaeologist Frederic Colchester, was a “by the book, everything must be done a certain way and no other” kind of guy. Freddy, he hated his nickname, always seemed to be trying to impress everyone with his knowledge. Then there was Adam something or other, Benny couldn’t recall the last name; Adam was Freddy’s opposite. He was the assistant on the site but managed to spend most of the time sleeping in the shade. This was much to the chagrin of students like Benny, to whom he would assign *his* work. And, of course, there was Lily. Beautiful, intelligent, the top of her

class, and destined for great things in archaeology, at least until he came into her life. It wasn't long before she was pregnant and working to support his push to finish a doctorate. Man, had they bet on the wrong horse!

"You heading to Crete?" the young lady asked, interrupting Benny's train of thought. "I'm with that group," she motioned to no one in particular. "We're in a university travel course and just arrived in Greece. Isn't it wonderful? Ever been here before? We're headed to Crete the land of the Minotaur! What's that island? Is it part of Greece?" she asked while leaning across Benny to peer out the window at a speck of land amongst the dark blue sea.

"I'm not sure," he replied lethargically.

"Where are you from? Ever been to Crete before?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I've worked on archaeological excavations there."

"Great! Which sites? We're going to Knossos tomorrow."

"I worked at Knossos many years ago."

"Great! Maybe you could help me. You see I have to give a presentation tomorrow at Knossos about the Minotaur and Theseus and stuff. We were supposed to read a bunch of books to prepare for the trip but I mean who has the time, right? Now I have to give this presentation and, you know, anything you could help me with would be great. Do you know about the Minotaur?"

Benny laughed to himself. How many times had he listened to students' excuses for not finishing their projects on time? Generally, he would dismiss such a request; the fact was, he welcomed the distraction.

"What would you like to know?"

Her smile widened at his response. “How does the white bull figure into the story?”

Benny shuddered at the mention of the white bull. It must be a coincidence. Regaining his composure he began, “the white bull is what began the story. The god Poseidon gave a beautiful white bull to Minos, the king of Knossos, to sacrifice to him. But the bull was so beautiful, Minos disobeyed Poseidon and saved it by substituting an inferior bull for the sacrifice.

“Well, Poseidon was none too happy with this and placed a curse on Minos. The curse was that Minos’ wife, Pasiphae, developed an unnatural attraction for the white bull. She asked Daidalos, the court engineer, to help fulfill her uncontrollable desire. Daidalos constructed a large wooden cow that was hollow and Pasiphae entered inside. The white bull was drawn to the wooden cow, jumped on it, and well, ah,” he hesitated as she was staring directly at him. “Well they, how should I put this, consummated their relationship—”

“What does consummated mean?” she interrupted Benny.

“Put it this way, Pasiphae became pregnant!”

“Ewww,” she complained as her face contorted in disgust.

“It is only a myth.”

“Yeah, but even so, it’s gross.”

“Anyway, Pasiphae became pregnant and eventually gave birth to the Minotaur, a creature with the head of a bull and body of a man.”

“Ouch! That must have been one painful delivery!”

Benny couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

“The creature was horrible but Minos was a softy so, rather than kill it, he decided they should raise him. Unfortunately, they soon discovered the Minotaur had a taste for human flesh

so Minos had Daidalos build a labyrinth under the palace to hold him. Fortunately, Minos had recently defeated Aegeus, the king of Athens, and as part of the reparations the Athenians had to send seven young men and seven young women every year to feed the Minotaur.”

“This gets worse all the time!”

She doesn't know anything about the Minotaur, Benny thought. I wonder what she would have done if we hadn't sat together? Oh well, might as well help her get an A.

“Theseus was the son of Aegeus,” Benny continued, “and he was destined to be a great hero. He volunteered to go to Knossos on the death ship with the other youth in hopes of saving everyone. When Theseus arrived on Crete, the goddess Aphrodite cast a spell on Ariadne the daughter of Minos and Pasiphae so that—”

“Was she normal or some kind of half-cow freak?” the young lady interrupted Benny’s story.

“She was normal. Where was I? Yes, Aphrodite made Ariadne fall in love with Theseus so she would help him slay the Minotaur.”

“Does he kill him?”

“Yes, but I—”

“That’s awful! Poor thing.”

“But I thought you . . .” he shook his head and continued. “Anyway, she told Theseus where to enter the labyrinth and how to kill the Minotaur. More importantly, she had a ball of thread.”

“What was the thread for? Did he have to sew something?”

“No. Theseus took the end of the thread into the labyrinth while Ariadne unwound the ball at the entrance. In this way, he was able to follow the thread back and find his way out of the labyrinth. He came upon the Minotaur who was sleeping and killed him with a sword then

retraced his steps using the thread.”

“How was he able to sneak up on the Minotaur? Didn’t he hear Theseus coming? Doesn’t make sense.”

“It is a myth. Haven’t you studied any myths yet?”

“I’m a business major. What do I know about myths?”

Benny sighed and continued, “Anyway, Theseus and Ariadne, who he had promised to marry, escaped from Crete with the other Athenian prisoners. They sailed to the island of Delos—”

“Was that the island we saw earlier?”

“No, it is larger and farther east. As I was saying, they sailed to Delos and spent the night. Theseus had second thoughts about marrying Ariadne, so he and the other Athenians departed early the next morning abandoning Ariadne.”

“Oh, why doesn’t *that* surprise me?” she asked sarcastically.

“Yes, well, he paid for it. You see, the ship they sailed to Crete on was a death ship and flew a black flag. Theseus had told his father that if successful he would change the black flag to a white one, but Aphrodite was angry at him for leaving Ariadne and made him forget to change the flag. Aegeus was on the top of a high cliff beside the sea watching for the returning ship when he saw the black flag, believed his son and the others dead, and threw himself into the sea. That is why the sea is called the Aegean, after King Aegeus.”

“That was great! Well, except for the bull and woman part and the Minotaur getting killed. But other than that it was great. My prof is going to be impressed with my presentation.”

“I’m happy for you. I just remembered something. You asked how Theseus could sneak up

on the Minotaur. A few years ago some fragments of a papyrus scroll were discovered in Egypt with what is believed to be part of the story of the Minotaur. There is some dispute over the translation but scholars suggest it relates to an object, a talisman of some sort, that Ariadne gave Theseus to protect him from the Minotaur.”

“What’s a talisman?”

“It’s like an amulet.” Benny noticed the look of continued puzzlement on her face. “A magic charm, something with magical powers.”

“That would make sense. If Theseus magically overpowers the Minotaur then he would have been able to kill him.”

“That’s right. And that’s a bonus for you.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I’ll bet even your professor doesn’t know that part of the story. You’ll really impress him.”

Her face was beaming at the prospect. “Thanks so much for your help. Why are you going to Crete? Are you working there? Maybe we’ll run into one another again.”

“Anything’s possible!”

The flight attendants were checking seatbelts in preparation for landing in Heraklion as Benny settled back in his seat. The young woman was now turned around talking enthusiastically to one of her group. It wouldn’t be long before Benny found out what was going on, but he was dreading the meeting. All the excitement of a groundbreaking discovery was disappearing due to bad memories. After a smooth landing, the plane taxied the short distance to the gate. He was feeling nauseous, not from the flight, but due to the anticipation of who or what awaited him. He was nervous as his feet touched the ground of Crete once more and he walked toward the

terminal. He entered through the door and saw the baggage carousel to his right. His eyes searched the interior for Russel but could not find him anywhere. Maybe Benny wouldn't even recognize him anymore.

Standing by the carousel, he suddenly spotted Russel. *Man, he looks old*, he thought. Russel's hair was almost white; his face was drawn, gaunt, and covered by a gray five o'clock shadow. His shoulders slumped and he looked uneasy. Then Russel saw him. A halfhearted smile spread across his face as he waved. Benny saw his bag coming along and grabbed it, then headed toward Russel, who was already on his way over.

"Benny, it is so good to see you. It has been too long," he chimed as his hand extended forward.

"Russel, I would have recognized you anywhere, you haven't changed a bit," he lied as Russel pumped his hand.

"Well, I wouldn't say that, ol' chum. Few more gray hairs, bit of a paunch. And, of course, I have slowed down considerably. But you're looking well."

He could hear the tone in Russel's voice, even though he attempted to cover it. His big belly and receding hairline made a mockery of Russel's words.

"I've got a car waiting."

"I'm most interested in knowing why you brought me here." *Damn, shouldn't have just blurted it out like that.*

"All in good time, my friend. First we'll get you to the hotel where you can clean up and rest a bit."

"Yeah, that would be good. My body doesn't take well to those long flights anymore." He

was glad the subject had changed; he needed to rest before getting into the details. “How’s Beth doing?”

“Oh, just splendid. She said to be sure and give you her love.”

The first lie, he thought. Beth, Russel’s wife, never liked him and couldn’t even stand to be in the same room with him. It all went back to that first season of field school where he spent more time hitting on the female students than working. She never understood what Lily saw in him.

“And how’s Lily?”

“She’s divorcing me.”

“Oh, so sorry to hear that.”

Another lie, he thought.

“Car’s this way,” Russel motioned as they wormed their way through the crowd. “Booked you into the Olympic on Kornarou Square. Hope that’s okay.”

“Fine. What room are you in?”

“I’ve got to run some errands after I drop you off. I thought we could meet up for dinner. I’ll lay everything out for you then.”

“Yes, that’s fine,” Benny replied. *He didn’t answer the question and he isn’t staying in the same hotel! This thing keeps getting more bizarre.*

“Traffic shouldn’t be too bad. Be at the hotel in twenty minutes.”

“So, Russel, working anywhere specific these days?”

“Ah, not really, no, just some paper research. Nothing in the field like the old days,” he laughed nervously.

He’s covering up something, Benny thought.

They walked a short distance along the road directly in front of the terminal until Russel motioned toward his car. Opening the unlocked passenger door, Benny tossed his suitcase into the back and slipped into the seat.

Always bad at small talk, Benny sat in silence looking out the window. *Whatever is going on he's not going to tell me everything, that's for sure*, he thought.

Russel pulled the small sedan into the traffic headed toward the city. They wound through the narrow streets further congested by parked cars on both sides. Horns blared as oncoming traffic barely slowed for red lights and completely ignored stop signs on the side streets entering the main highway. The suburbs of Heraklion stretched unbroken the four kilometers from the airport to the center of the city.

The car jumped as Russel shifted down to make the sharp curve as they climbed up into the old town through an opening in the ancient Venetian wall. Benny caught a glimpse of the archaeological museum on the right just before they entered Eleftherias Square. Freedom Square. They wound through the narrow streets of Heraklion until finally emerging near the Olympic Hotel.

“Parking is a bear around here and this is as close as I can get you. The entrance is just ahead on the left, past the fountain, and to the right of a small bar,” Russel said as he pulled the car to a stop on the left side of the street.

“This is fine. I can walk from here.”

“Let's meet at 7:00 for dinner. Is that okay?”

“Yes. Where?”

“There's a small place toward the harbor. Nice and quiet. Turn right when you come out of the hotel and go to the Lion's Square. You must remember where that is?”

“Would rather forget sometimes.” He almost smiled.

“Then down the 28th August to Vironos, turn left, then right at the first street. Second place on the right.”

“Seven. I’ll see you then.”

He got out of the car avoiding eye contact with Russel, grabbed his suitcase out of the back seat, and walked toward the hotel.

“Room’s in your name, Benny. And all paid for,” he added.

Benny waved acknowledgement but never looked back. *Well, that went better than I had hoped*, he chuckled to himself.