

Prologue I

Sardis, Persian Empire

546 B.C.

The steep acropolis of Sardis loomed against the night sky, while far below at the city's edge, flames consumed the reed-thatched buildings. General Mazares, dispatched by King Cyrus II of Persia the moment he'd learned of the revolt, had ridden through the night, leading a unit of armed heavy cavalry. According to the imperial messenger, the Ionian mercenaries were set to spark the revolt at dawn.

Apparently, they'd gotten an early start.

'Fools,' Artaban, his lieutenant, called out over the sound of hooves as the horses neared the gates. A wooden building exploded near the gold-refining works. 'Do they not realize that Cyrus will crush them?'

'There is nothing left to crush,' Mazares shouted. 'I'm surprised that there's anything left to burn.'

It was the second time they'd marched upon Sardis. The first was when King Cyrus's army had broken the siege of the wealthy Lydian capital, captured its king, Croesus, then plundered his vast treasury. If not for this revolt, Mazares would be accompanying the bulk of Croesus's treasure back to Ecbatana.

'The quicker we quell this rebellion, the sooner we get

home.’ He eyed the flames swirling from several structures just outside the gates.

As they neared the inferno, Mazares realized the purpose of the fires. He and his horsemen were almost blinded. Waiting for them, the insurgents, with their backs to the blaze, had the advantage. Within moments, Cyrus’s cavalry was attacked by a shadow army of soldiers armed with spears, axes, and swords.

Dividing his men into two flanks, Mazares led the left, Artaban the right. The deafening clash of metal rang through the night as his horsemen, blinded by the flames, battled the unseen enemy. Mazares thrust at an armed silhouette. His blade struck something solid. The rebel’s shield. Shouting, Mazares ordered his left flank to close in, while Artaban did the same with the right, sweeping in behind the rebels, who suddenly found themselves sandwiched between both flanks. Spurring his horse to rear, Mazares blocked the thrust of a spear, and drove his blade into his opponent’s chest, piercing through the man’s inadequate armor.

Pulling his sword free, he wheeled his mount to the right, then swung at the next man, felling him as well.

Within minutes, it was over. The insurrectionists fled. The flames of the wooden structures, no longer being fed, began to die as a smoky dawn in the eastern sky burned along with the embers of the failed revolt.

Mazares surveyed the scattering of bodies – none of them his men. The speed with which they put down the insurrection troubled him as he met up with his second in command. ‘Tell me, Artaban. Does it not seem suspiciously convenient that the fire was confined to the outer wall?’

And that the skirmishers dissipated almost the moment we rode in?’

‘And why wouldn’t they?’ Artaban nodded back at their troops, who were awaiting further orders. ‘If you were a group of outnumbered mercenaries and you beheld Cyrus’s immortal cavalry charging?’

Immortal they were not. But the ease with which they’d won this so-called battle would certainly add to their legend.

It did not, however, lessen Mazares’s concern.

It was something more than the desertion of the city gates. His unease grew as he led a contingent of horsemen into the city.

‘A trap?’ asked Artaban.

‘I fear something else entirely.’ He raised his hand. His men halted in the agora, looking down the empty streets on all sides. Before his departure from Sardis, King Cyrus had appointed Tabalus to govern the newly conquered city in his stead. ‘Tabalus’s guards could easily have crushed the insurrection, as small as it was. So why have we not seen any of his guards on the streets?’

‘Perhaps the governor is part of it?’

‘Let us hope not. Magos, take charge. If there is any evidence that the rebels are regrouping, end it. Artaban, bring back one of those rebels. Alive.’

‘And where will you be?’ Artaban asked.

‘I intend to find out whether the king’s trust in Tabalus has been misplaced.’

As his officers took off in opposite directions, Mazares and a handful of his horsemen rode to the acropolis, only to discover the palace guards sprawled on their backs in front of the great carved cedar doors, both standing wide open.

‘Dead,’ Mazares said. ‘Find Tabalus.’ He strode past the guards, down the long hall into the throne room. A few minutes later, two officers returned, escorting the frightened governor between them.

Dressed in nightclothes, Tabalus, attempting to regain his magisterial dignity, scrambled onto the throne. ‘Well met, General Mazares. I prayed that you would arrive in time,’ he said.

‘Who is behind all this?’

‘I cannot say. My spies were thwarted at every turn, one even impaled. I managed to get a messenger out moments before the rebels besieged the acropolis.’

One of Mazares’s men nodded. ‘The governor speaks the truth. We found him bound to his bed, and his chamber door barred from the outside. The rest of the palace staff was shut up in the Scroll Room.’

‘None of this makes sense.’ Mazares paced across the polished marble floor, trying to fit the pieces together, certain there must be something they were all overlooking. An answer of sorts finally came when Artaban returned, dragging one of the rebels into the palace. He threw him to the ground at the base of the dais. ‘Tell your governor what took place here tonight.’

The man, groveling on hands and knees, lifted his head, swallowing past a lump in his throat as he looked at the disheveled governor. ‘We were paid – generously – to burn what was left of the buildings near the city gates.’

Mazares noted the soot on the man’s face and clothing. ‘Who paid you?’

‘I know them not.’

Artaban drew his knife and held it to the rebel's neck.

'I swear,' he said, his eyes beseeching. 'The one thing I can tell you – they were not from Sardis. They were not even Lydian.'

'How do you know?' Mazares asked.

'One had a boar's head tattooed on his upper arm.'

'A boar's head?' Mazares asked. 'Are you certain?'

The man nodded.

Samian pirates. The marauding Samian ships were notorious, not only for their red ocher hulls and scarlet sails, but also for their boar's head prows. 'What would Samians be doing in Lydia?'

If anything, Tabalus appeared even more shaken. 'I fear I may know something about that. But it is best said in private.'

Mazares nodded. The guards removed the rebel, leaving Mazares and Artaban alone with the governor.

'Two nights ago,' the governor said, 'one of my spies informed me that he saw Pactyes meeting with a few Samians.'

Pactyes, a Lydian, was the newly appointed Overseer of the Imperial Mint and Gold Refineries, a position bestowed upon him by King Cyrus. Although Mazares had counseled the king against such an appointment, Cyrus insisted that a Lydian figurehead was necessary to prevent the newly conquered Lydians from revolting once the Persian army left. 'You're certain of what you saw?'

'I am. I even conducted a surprise inspection at the mint yesterday morning, but I found nothing amiss.'

Mazares and Artaban exchanged glances. One of the rebel fires was near the mint.

‘Get dressed! Order your grooms to ready your horse,’ Mazares said.

‘For what purpose?’ Tabalus asked, descending the throne.

‘To confront Pactyes.’

‘He will only deny everything, as he did with me.’

‘Then we shall determine what is truth and what is not,’ Mazares said, a feeling of dread coursing through his veins. ‘To the Royal Mint.’

Less than ten minutes later, Mazares and his men, along with Tabalus, rode down from the acropolis and out of the razed city to confront Pactyes.

In all his years commanding King Cyrus’s cavalry, Mazares had never seen anything to match the wealth found in King Croesus’s treasury, and he was amazed once again by the vast quantities of gold as he and his men entered to inspect the mint.

Just as Tabalus had said, all seemed in order – except for the fact that Pactyes was not at his post.

‘Why set the fires and raise a sham revolt?’ Artaban asked.

Mazares turned back to the brass-bound coffers of coins in the treasury, opening the lid of one. The gold Lion’s Heads of Croesids gleamed despite the half-light.

He picked up a coin, feeling the weight of it in his hand – alarmed when he realized it could not be solid gold. He rubbed the coin on a nearby touchstone, the gold plating scraping off, revealing a center of lead. He tossed the coin, then plunged both hands deep into the chest, through the golden surface, and came up with handfuls of lead tokens.

He ordered his men to open every chest in the Royal Mint. Each had the same layer of gold Lydian Croesids on

top, the coins all lead-filled. And beneath, nothing but lead. Lead coins stamped with Samian boar's heads.

Pactyes had fooled them all.

He turned to Artaban. 'Ready the cavalry. We ride for the coast. If fortune smiles upon us, we'll get there before Pactyes flees with the gold.'

'At once.'

Mazares dumped a handful of lead-filled gold coins in Tabalus's hand. 'Find me enough gold for smelting,' he ordered as he strode out. 'When I find Pactyes, I intend to force open his mouth and pour molten gold down his throat.'

Prologue II

Korseai

546 B.C.

The long shadows of the rising sun cast a trembling fear in the two boys as they pushed their small boat into the Aegean Sea. If all went well they'd be back in two days' time.

Xanthos, fifteen, with a final glance back to make sure they hadn't been seen, held the boat steady for his ten-year-old brother, Agathos. 'Hurry.'

Xanthos took up the oars. Only when the small craft was far enough from shore did he think of his mother and her heartbreak when she found them missing. It had only been a few months since their father had disappeared at sea. He murmured a prayer to Zephyr and raised the sail. It snapped, then billowed, the west wind blowing them out into the deep waters as the dawn-washed sky turned blue.

The sun had almost finished its course by the time the boys caught sight of the forbidden island. It was a monumental pyramid rising out of the sea, with three long sharp rocky pinnacles reaching to the heavens. Silhouetted against the setting sun, they resembled gigantic spires.

Both boys stared in awe. They'd reached it. Poseidon's Trident.

'Do you think it's true?' asked Agathos. 'Will Poseidon really hear us?'

‘I hope so.’ Xanthos lowered the sail, took the oars, and rowed toward a breach in the rocks, which concealed a small inlet.

‘But where’s his ear? I don’t see any cave. How do we talk to him?’

The cave, they’d been told, was somewhere on the north side of Poseidon’s Trident, and reached only by boat. It was a good thing, too, since setting foot on the sacred island was forbidden. ‘We’ll have to look in the morning. It’s too dark now.’

When they reached the shallows, Xanthos dragged at the stone-filled net attached to a rope and pitched it over the side to anchor the small vessel near the shore. They ate their supper of olives and cheese, drank from a flagon of water, then settled down for the night, allowing the gentle water to sway them to sleep.

Xanthos awoke to a sudden tilt of their boat and a vise-like grip on his shoulder. A fierce, bronzed face stared directly into his eyes. Before he had time to realize what was happening, two men were hauling him and his brother out of the little boat and into the shallow water. Agathos dug in his heels, his screams piercing as he cried, ‘No! No! No!’

‘By all the gods,’ came a voice from somewhere on the beach, ‘silence that shrieking harpy.’

One of the men raised his hand to strike the small child. Xanthos darted forward, tried to stop him, and was struck instead. ‘He’s afraid,’ Xanthos said, ignoring the pain in his jaw. ‘It’s forbidden to set foot on the island.’

‘Is it?’ The burly man picked up Agathos and tossed him onto the gravel in front of the tallest and fiercest of the group.

He looked down at the boy, his dark eyes narrowing. ‘You’re very small for such a loud harpy.’

Agathos stilled, his eyes widening as the bare-chested man took a step forward, the morning sun hitting the tattoo of an angry boar’s head on his shoulder and the deep scar on his forehead. Someone had branded him with the letter *D*, signifying that he was, at least at one time, a slave. ‘What’re you staring at?’ the tattooed man said. His heavily accented Greek frightened the boys even more knowing he must be from the island of Samos.

Agathos looked down, edging his way toward Xanthos, who recognized the lot for what they were. Pirates. Their father – before he was lost at sea – had warned Xanthos about the men who sailed the Aegean in a red ship, plundering and enslaving all they came across. ‘Please. If you let us go, we won’t tell a soul we saw you here.’

‘To be sure,’ one of the men said, grabbing Xanthos by the scruff of his neck. ‘Pactyes will want to see the fish we’ve caught before we put them on a spit and roast them.’

With a roar of laughter, the pirates frog-marched the boys across the beach to a serpentine path that wound its way up to the top of the island and the pinnacles of rock, to Poseidon’s Trident.

They reached the peak and stumbled out onto a plateau. The boys looked down to the east side of the island where the Samian corsairs’ ship lay at anchor, its scarlet sails furled. The evil eye on its boar’s head prow stared out as a warning to others. Xanthos, seeing the rows of oars lining both sides of the red ship, all manned by slaves, reached for his brother’s trembling hand. Even he was not big or strong enough to survive that fate.

He turned his gaze from the red ship to the center of the plateau, where several men – some of them clearly Lydian foreigners – were looking down into a dark cavity at the base of the centermost pinnacle rock of Poseidon’s Trident. One, wearing a purple tunic of shimmering silk that barely concealed his protruding chest and belly, seemed to be directing two Samians using a wooden hoist and pulley to lower an amphora into a cavern. He looked squarely at them. ‘What have we here, Drakon?’

The man with the boar’s head tattoo said, ‘Lampros tells me they were sleeping in a boat in the small cove.’

The exquisitely dressed foreigner approached, looking them over, then focused on Xanthos. ‘What are you doing on this island?’

Xanthos, who’d never seen anyone wearing silken trousers, wondered if the man was sent there by the gods to punish them for trespassing on sacred land.

‘Speak up!’ the tattooed man ordered. ‘The honorable Pactyes asked what you are doing here.’

‘Fishing.’ Even as Xanthos said it, he knew how absurd it sounded. They’d been sleeping long past sunup. True fishermen would’ve been on their way home by then. ‘But we were blown off course last night,’ he added, hoping that would account for their presence.

The foreigner turned his gaze on Agathos. ‘And what say you?’

Agathos, near tears, looked at Xanthos, then back. ‘I – I just wanted to whisper in Poseidon’s ear. To send our father home.’

‘Whisper in Poseidon’s ear?’ Pactyes looked to Drakon for clarification.

He nodded to the cliff's edge. 'A shallow cave in the rocks at sea level. Some of the islanders believe if they whisper into it, Poseidon will hear their prayers.'

Pactyes scrutinized him for several long seconds, then turned back to the boys. 'Perhaps Poseidon would be appeased by a sacrifice?' He nodded to one of the Lydians. 'Kill them.'

Xanthos tried to throw himself over Agathos to protect him, but one of Pactyes's men caught him and grabbed the back of his tunic, then drew a long knife, pressing the blade against the boy's neck.

Drakon's hand shot out, catching the Lydian by his wrist. 'The island is sacred.'

'Pactyes is the only one I answer to.' He raised his knife.

Heart pounding, Xanthos held his breath, waiting for the death blow. Drakon knocked Xanthos to the ground, drew his *xiphos* from the scabbard under his left shoulder, and brought it crashing down on the pirate's neck.

The man in the shimmering robes halted in his tracks, his piggish eyes taking in first the dead man, then Drakon. 'You dare defy my order?'

'To prevent the wrath of Poseidon?' Drakon said. 'Yes.'

'And yet you killed Alyattes on sacred ground. What difference will two more bodies make? Three if we count yours.'

'I will not let you desecrate sacred ground.' Drakon held his short sword at the ready, then sidestepped so that he stood between the boys and Pactyes.

'Who would be so simple to believe the island is sacred?'

'You might. Considering that the Persian Cyrus has placed a bounty on your head. You may well need all the help that Poseidon can give.'

‘Korax,’ Pactyes said. ‘Kill him as well.’

The mercenaries looked at each other, then split into two factions, those with Drakon, those with Korax. Xanthos, realizing that they’d been momentarily forgotten, looked for a way out. The path to the boat was blocked by the pirates. The only other way down was over the cliff, far too steep for either of them to live. Then he spied the mouth of the cave, giving him hope that they might hide there. Signaling to his brother, he pointed.

As he and Agathos edged toward it, Korax lunged. Drakon blocked him, the boar on his shoulder bristling with the movement of his muscles. The two men circled each other, each feinting, testing each other’s mettle. Korax attacked again, his sword clashing with Drakon’s. Drakon moved in, but Korax shifted, deflected the blow, then swung his sword against Drakon’s upper arm. The silver blade sliced open the tattooed boar’s head. The Lydians cheered. Drakon glanced at the blood dripping down his arm, then charged, as did the men behind him. Swords clashed, the metal ringing.

Xanthos peered in the cavern, grateful to see that it wasn’t the almost vertical drop that he’d feared. It angled down. The shouts and screams of those fighting echoed into the cave as Xanthos helped Agathos over the edge. They started to climb down, when the earth shook so hard, Xanthos fell back against his brother.

The fighting stopped as the men looked around, fear and confusion on their faces. ‘Poseidon!’ one of them yelled.

As if in answer, a low rumble emanated from deep within the cave, frightening the boys as the earth came

alive beneath them. The walls convulsed and Agathos lost his brother's hand, sliding downward in a hail of gravel. 'Xanthos!'

Xanthos reached for his younger brother as the earth thundered around them. But when the sunlight beaming into the cave quickly disappeared, he looked up to see one of the towering spires of Poseidon's Trident toppling forward. He scrambled down to his brother, holding tight as the giant rock crashed against the cave's mouth, the echo deafening, the dark near absolute but for a sliver of light high over their heads. As the boys slid to the bottom of the cave, landing on the pirates' bounty of amphorae, rock and dust rained down. They could barely breathe as the air turned to dust.

They clung to each other, their heartbeats pounding in their chests. Slowly silence, then above them, someone shouted, 'A ship! A black ship!'

'The Persians.' Drakon roared and gave a deep belly laugh. 'Perhaps you should have heeded my warning about angering Poseidon. Take him.'

'Let go of me,' Pactyes called out. 'What are you doing?'

'Since the gold is lost, we'll collect the bounty.'

'It's not lost. It's all in the amphorae down there. You saw them!'

'And Poseidon took them with his very own trident. You'll not find a man among us that would dare go against such a powerful god, even if we had a way to lift that stone. To the ship, men.'

Pactyes's pleas faded, the pirates dragging him away. Soon, again, the only sound was that of Xanthos and Agathos breathing.

‘Hear me, Poseidon,’ Agathos whispered. ‘Please get us home.’

‘Quiet,’ Xanthos said. He moved to his hands and knees, then lowered his head to the floor, listening. ‘Do you hear that?’

‘Hear what?’

‘Water. I think it’s the sea.’

I

Georgetown, Washington, D.C.

The present day

I hope this is worth a twenty-two-hundred-dollar bottle of wine.'

'For Pete's sake, Sam. Not only did he agree to see us, he invited us to dinner. And he *did* send a car.'

'Gourmand or no gourmand,' Sam muttered.

'You're mumbling, Sam.'

Sam Fargo glanced over at the bottle of 2000 Mouton Rothschild, Pauillac that Remi, his auburn-haired wife, cradled in her arm. The two sat in the back of a sleek black 1936 Packard Twelve 1407 Coupé.

'You know what Rube said,' Remi continued. 'If we wanted the man's help, we needed to bring a nice bottle. And we do want his help.'

Sam eyed the driver, then lowered his voice. 'Pretty sure Rube's definition of nice and yours are two different things.'

The Packard suddenly veered toward the freeway off-ramp at the last second. Sam looked up, realizing they were still miles from their destination. 'Something wrong?'

The driver was focused on the rearview mirror, not watching Sam but the road behind them. 'Sorry about that. A car's been following us ever since we left your hotel. It may be nothing, but old habits die hard.'

‘Old habits?’ asked Remi.

‘Let’s just say that Mr Perlmutter has an unusual set of friends, which has given me a bit of practice over the years when driving them around.’

St Julien Perlmutter, the soon-to-be recipient of Sam’s beloved bottle of wine, had been recommended by their mutual friend, Rubin Haywood, a CIA agent. Perlmutter was a world authority on maritime history and had an extensive library known to be coveted by the Smithsonian. He often helped other government agencies with sensitive cases. That would, undoubtedly, explain his driver’s cautious nature.

Since caution was a trait Sam also shared, he craned around, squinting against the glare of headlights coming from the surface street they’d just turned onto. If they were being followed, the man’s maneuver had worked – the freeway off-ramp was empty. Relaxing, Sam leaned back in his seat, not too worried. Not only were they in good hands, he doubted anyone knew that he and Remi were in D.C.

With the coast clear, they returned to the freeway, the remainder of their drive uneventful. Twenty minutes later, they turned onto a brick road flanked with massive oaks, the moonlight shining between the branches, casting long shadows on the drive. The car continued past the manor, then stopped in front of the renovated carriage house, which was equally impressive in size.

Once out of the car, the driver said, ‘Nice to see you again, sir.’

‘Good to see you, too, Frank. How old are the kids now?’

‘Graduated college. Both. Phyllis and me, we’re empty nesters.’

Sam smiled, saluted, then took the bottle from Remi.

‘I swear, Sam, we never go anywhere that you don’t know someone from your days at DARPA.’

‘How did you know?’

‘The salute,’ Remi said, rolling her eyes.

Sam linked her arm through his and the two strolled up the walkway. A weathered brass door knocker in the shape of a ship’s anchor adorned the heavy wood door, which opened wide the moment they set foot on the porch.

To say that *the* St Julien Perlmutter cut an imposing figure would be an understatement. His curly gray hair and beard gave his crimson face a distinguished look, reminiscent of Holbein’s iconic portrait of King Henry VIII, but with a longer beard. Perlmutter wore a paisley robe trimmed at the collar, cuffs, and belt with gold brocade, burgundy silk bottoms with matching gold piping at the side seams and the hem, and burgundy loafer slippers with gold crowns embroidered on the top. He stood a couple of inches taller than Sam – six foot four – and weighed nearly four hundred pounds. He carried that weight like a regal redwood, solid and straight. His blue eyes, filled with intelligence and wit, were as welcoming as his words. ‘Mr and Mrs Fargo. I can’t tell you what a pleasure it is to finally meet the both of you.’

‘Please, call me Sam.’ They shook, Perlmutter’s grip strong and sure. ‘My wife, Remi.’

‘The enchanting Mrs Fargo.’ The older man took her slender fingers in his, kissed the back of her hand, then led her into the house. ‘I’m honored to make your acquaintance.’

Once inside, Sam handed him the bottle. ‘And wine. I hope it will complement dinner.’

Perlmutter read the Rothschild label, his brows rising.

‘An excellent choice. This will pair nicely with the chateaubriand. A classic recipe, one of my favorites.’ Waving them in, he led them through a maze of halls to a sitting room stuffed to the gills with books and papers. The far wall was lined with bookshelves filled with models, relics, and books. At one end was a fireplace with a perfectly banked fire and at the opposite a well-appointed bar. In front of the fire was a sofa and two end chairs, a Queen Anne chair and a gentleman’s club chair, all set around a coffee table large enough for appetizers and three champagne flutes. ‘Please, have a seat while I decant this lovely bottle of wine.’

Sam walked Remi to the Queen Anne chair, then seated himself.

At the bar, Perlmutter lit a candle and set a glass next to it. After removing the cork, he slowly poured a small amount into the glass, sniffed and took some wine into his mouth, savoring the taste. He raised the glass to the light and, looking through the deep ruby liquid, said, ‘What a full breadth of flavor, rich and ripe with beautiful tannins. And a long finish. After it has time to breathe it will be the perfect accompaniment to dinner. A beautiful choice. My deepest gratitude.’

He slowly poured the remainder of the bottle into a decanter, holding it over the candle, making sure no sediment would pass from the bottle. Then he reached below, opened the wine fridge, brought out a 2008 bottle of Pol Roger Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill brut champagne and joined Sam and Remi at the fire. Settling himself in the sofa he said, ‘While we wait for the dinner, please let’s talk about the reason you’re here. Rubin mentioned that this

all began shortly after the two of you met at the Lighthouse Cafe in Hermosa Beach?’ His blue eyes twinkled as he looked over at Sam. ‘Love at first sight, was it?’

‘I’m still trying to deny it. But . . . there’s never been anyone like Remi. She’s had my heart from the beginning.’

‘Sam, you could have fooled me.’ Remi’s green eyes lit up as she smiled.

Sam cleared his throat. ‘You see. It wasn’t easy.’

‘Hardly a fair assessment.’

‘Totally fair assessment.’

‘Do I sense differing views?’ Perlmutter asked.

Remi laughed. ‘Let’s just say it wasn’t smooth sailing.’

‘Well, it wasn’t typhoon fury.’

‘Maybe just a few ten-foot swells.’

‘A few?’ Sam said. ‘Understatement of the year.’

Remi gave Perlmutter a sideways glance. ‘It’s a bit complicated.’

‘As love is,’ he replied. ‘But it sounds like you two still enjoy a few waves now and then.’ This brought a laugh from Sam and Remi.

The champagne poured, Perlmutter continued. ‘So . . . a chance meeting at the Lighthouse somehow led to this Mediterranean caper, and the *one* treasure that the two of you never found?’

‘Exactly,’ Sam said. ‘It was the hoard of gold stolen from King Cyrus after he conquered King Croesus in 546 B.C. It kickstarted our love for adventure.’

‘And for each other?’

Remi placed her hand over Sam’s. ‘I’d say it played a *small* part. And, while we didn’t find the fabled hoard, we did find proof it exists.’

‘But that was what . . . ? Ten or more years ago?’ Perlmutter’s brows furrowed. ‘Why now?’

‘We’d recently been talking about the treasure and what we might have missed in our search,’ Remi began.

‘But, more importantly,’ Sam continued, ‘the man who was obsessed with finding the treasure all those years ago was recently released from prison – far earlier than anyone expected. From what Rube has told us, the man’s spent over a decade in confinement consumed with hate and fixated on two things – those who he feels are directly responsible for landing him in prison, and where this treasure might be. I have a feeling that the first obsession might be Remi.’

‘And you,’ Remi added.

‘The second is that anyone who gets in his way of finding the treasure will not be safe,’ Sam said.

Perlmutter lowered his glass. ‘I know we could get straight to the point – search my memory banks and my library for the possible location of this fabled hoard – but I have to admit, I *do* love a good adventure. And Remi being so deeply involved, I don’t suppose you’d be willing to tell it? From the beginning?’

‘That depends,’ Sam said. ‘How much time do you have?’ Perlmutter smiled. ‘However long it takes.’

Hermosa Beach, California

Sam Fargo gripped the top corner of his bodyboard with his right hand, his left hand on the outside rail, and looked back at the massive wave approaching.

Timing was everything.

He gave a swift kick, his fins propelling him forward. At the crest, momentarily suspended, he teetered, then dropped almost straight down the shimmering wall. Head up, back arched, chest out, he dug the waterside edge of his board into the wave, riding across the smooth, glassy surface as the lip fell, creating a tunnel of blue and gray. In a rush, it was over. The white water crashed, the surge speeding him toward the shore crowded with onlookers who came to watch the expert surfers and bodyboarders riding the giant waves left over from a rare Category 3 hurricane a few days before.

Sam, having been out there all morning, was ready to call it a day. He reached the shallows, pulled off his fins, picked up his board, and waded up to the beach, walking across the wet sand to where his friend Blake Thomas sat. The two were polar opposites, size-wise and coloring. Sam, brown-eyed with light brown hair bleached by the sun, was tall with a lean muscular build. The dark-haired, blue-eyed Blake had a wrestler's build, short and compact. They'd met their

freshman year at Caltech when they were assigned adjoining dorm rooms, and had remained friends ever since.

Sam dropped his board on the sand, took a seat next to Blake, and picked up the lunch bag he'd packed earlier that morning. The offshore wind nearly ripped the paper from his hand as he reached in and pulled out a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. 'Just like Mom used to make.'

Blake, eating a deli sandwich thick with roast beef, eyed the Spartan meal. 'Ever thought if you got a real job, instead of working midnights, stocking shelves, you could afford real food?'

'But I wouldn't have time to work on my project.' He bit into the soft wheat bread, chewed the stiff peanut butter, and washed it down with water from his thermos.

'Come to think of it, you can afford real food. You know, I don't remember you being such a tightwad.'

'I have plans.'

'You and your plans. I remember, if Plan A doesn't work, go to Plan B. You need to chill. Loosen up. Relax. If you backed off, you might actually have a life. Maybe even meet a girl.'

Sam smiled at Blake's ribbing, then nodded at the Coast Guard cutter as it sped north across the water, lights flashing, siren blaring.

Blake glanced out. 'Heard a surfer up in Malibu was killed yesterday.'

Sam had seen the news. A forty-year-old man had fallen from his surfboard. By the time anyone could get to him, he'd drowned. 'Let's hope whoever they're after is okay.'

He watched the boat disappear past the pier, then finished his sandwich. As he got up to toss the bag into the

trash, he saw a surfer paddling to catch what promised to be a monster wave. The swell turned into a wall of water, glistening in the sun as the man expertly hopped up onto his board, hands holding either side. He balanced then rose as the tip of the wave curled over, creating a perfect barrel.

Blake stood next to Sam. 'Where was that wave when we were out there?'

The surfer emerged from the tube, victorious for several seconds – until an avalanche of water collapsed on top of him.

The crowd on the beach gasped almost collectively as he disappeared from sight. His board shot up, straining against the leash connected to his leg, then jerked back into the water. A moment later, the man surfaced, only to disappear as another wave came crashing down. He didn't rise a second time.

'Call for help!' Sam said as he grabbed his bodyboard and fins. At the water's edge he put on his fins and wrapped the Velcro leash to his arm, and paddled out. With each wave that broke, Sam pressed the front of his board down, ducking his head, diving below the white water. A few surfers to the south tried to reach the fallen man, but the waves, breaking in a southeasterly pattern, made it near impossible.

By the time Sam paddled out there, the man was nowhere in sight. Worried he'd lost him for good, Sam noticed someone waving and shouting from the pier. He glanced up, saw a red-haired woman pointing to his right. He looked, saw the orange surfboard, then a blur of black from a wet suit in the froth just a few yards away. He swam over.

At first, there was nothing but the gray-green of the ocean below and the white storm above. Somehow in the

midst of that, he caught a glimpse of the surfer being tossed about, the churning water propelling him downward then upward in a relentless struggle.

Sam darted forward, reached out, scooping his hand beneath the limp man's arm, pulling him toward his bodyboard. There was a gash on the man's temple, and his eyes stared at nothing. Sam put his mouth to the surfer's, forcing air into his lungs. As he rose out of the water to take a second breath, the bright orange surfboard shot toward them like a spinning torpedo. Sam ducked, pulling the man with him, the surfboard skimming over the top of their heads.

He managed to hold tight to the surfer as the next wave crashed down and then the next. After each, he pulled the man's head to him, blew into his lungs, all the while kicking his fins in a desperate attempt to stay surfaced and get closer to shore. His muscles burned, and he wasn't sure how much longer he could hold the man. When he looked up, he saw Blake and another bodyboarder swimming out to help.

Sam gave one last breath to the surfer as Blake pulled the unconscious man up onto his own board. Once they reached the shore, Blake and the other man dragged the surfer onto dry sand, Blake taking over the CPR. Sam, exhausted, dropped his board, then stood there, trying to catch his breath.

A few minutes later, the EMTs arrived and loaded the now semiconscious man onto a gurney.

'Nice job,' Blake said, clapping Sam on the back. 'But one of these days, that Fargo luck's going to wear off, and you'll wish you'd had the sense to wait for help.'

Sam managed a tired smile. 'In the meantime, he's going to live.'

‘You working tonight?’

‘Night off.’

‘We’re heading over to the Lighthouse. Have a few beers and watch the game.’

‘Sure. I’ll see you there.’ Assuming he could walk off the beach.

The strains of a jazz band drifted out as Sam pulled open the door of the Lighthouse Cafe. A popular nightclub, the bar was crowded, the lights dim. He spied Blake standing at the bar with a group watching a muted television, their cheers drowning out the jazz band.

Blake called over to Sam. ‘Better order now while you have a chance.’

Sam, about to tell him that he couldn’t stay, caught sight of the same woman he’d seen up on the pier that afternoon. Tall, slim, her wavy red hair swept back into a ponytail, she was dressed in a tailored blue-and-white linen shirt, navy capris, and white sandals. She stood in the doorway, looking around, her face lighting up with a smile as she waved at three other women sitting at a table across from the bar. Instead of joining them, she walked up to the bar not two feet from Sam.

The bartender asked her what she wanted to drink.

She picked up a wine list. ‘You don’t have any red wines from Spain, do you?’ she said.

‘Sorry. It’s California or bust.’

Her smile faded. ‘It would’ve made the perfect toast.’

‘Remi!’ one of her friends shouted from behind her. ‘We have wine!’

She glanced at the table, saw her friend holding up a

bottle of chardonnay, then returned the menu to the bartender. ‘Thanks anyway.’

He nodded, and moved on to the next customer.

‘Earth to Fargo. You realize the game’s on?’ Blake, seeing the direction of Sam’s gaze, clapped him on the back. ‘Don’t even try. The women at that table are blue-blooded East Coasters. Way out of your league. It’ll take them about ten seconds to size you up, figure out you’re a California boy with a four-wheel Jeep, determine your credit limit, then spit you out. All the Fargo luck in the world won’t help you there. Heck. Their shoes cost more than you make in a week.’

‘And you would know this how?’

‘I used to date the blonde. Olivia Brady. It didn’t last, and *I’d* just closed a multimillion-dollar real estate deal.’

‘Ever think it’s *you*, not the money?’ Sam gave him a cocky grin.

‘Word of advice, Fargo. You might want to avoid mentioning where you work – and it will come up. Trust me on this.’

‘Noted,’ Sam said. He moved to the end of the bar, picking up the wine menu, scanning the list of California reds, seeing the host of usuals from Napa, all with price tags to match and out of his new lifestyle. He skipped past them and saw a reasonably priced California Spanish wine from the northern San Joaquin Valley. He got the bartender’s attention. ‘I’ll take a bottle of the Bokisch Tempranillo and four glasses. Can you send it to the table where the redheaded woman is sitting?’

Sam watched as the waitress brought over the wine and glasses, setting them on the table.

‘I think there’s some mistake,’ the blonde woman said. ‘We didn’t order any wine.’ She pointed to the bottle of chardonnay.

‘From the gentleman at the bar.’

All four women looked in Sam’s direction. One gave a cool smile, then shook her head. ‘Thank him for us, but we can’t accept.’

Sam, seeing the waitress reach for the bottle, walked over, saying, ‘I’m actually on my way out, but I heard you were celebrating. Four of you, four glasses, and a bottle of Spanish Tempranillo. Enjoy.’

He started to turn away when the redhead caught his gaze, her green eyes alight with a mixture of curiosity and wariness. ‘You were at the beach today.’

The other women looked at him with renewed interest, the blonde saying, ‘You’re the one who saved that surfer. The hero.’

‘Hero, no. Right place, right time? Yes.’

The brunette looked at her watch. ‘Speaking of time, we’re late.’ She drained her wineglass, then pushed her chair back. The other two rose with her. She looked at her friend, who hadn’t moved. ‘Are you coming, Remi?’

Remi tapped the stem of her nearly full wineglass. ‘I’ll meet you there as soon as I finish this.’

The three hurried out, leaving them alone.

‘Dinner reservations,’ she explained, then nodded at one of the empty chairs. ‘You’re welcome to join me.’

‘I don’t want to keep you from your friends.’

‘I can miss the appetizers.’ She lifted the bottle. ‘I’ve never heard of this winery.’

‘The bartender assures me it’s very good.’

‘And how do I know it’s not spiked and you’re not some stalker?’

‘I’ll take the first sip.’ He poured a small amount into two glasses, sliding one across to her, then held his aloft. ‘To whatever it is you’re celebrating.’

They touched rims. She waited for him to drink first, then followed suit. ‘That *is* good . . . Black cherry, dark chocolate . . . and a hint of cranberry.’ She picked up the bottle. ‘Tempranillo grown in California. I see a wine tasting trip in my future.’

‘What about your friends? Are you sure you don’t want to . . .?’

‘They’ve probably already forgotten about me. And leave such lovely wine?’

He set his glass on the table and held out his hand. ‘Sam Fargo.’

She took it in hers, shaking with a firm grip. ‘Remi Longstreet.’

‘Nice to meet you, Remi.’ He refilled their glasses. ‘So, what’s worth celebrating with a Spanish varietal?’

‘You have to promise not to tell.’

‘Cross my heart.’

Her smile lit up her entire face. ‘I’ve been looking into rumors that a Spanish galleon sank off Abalone Cove. This morning, I actually found a reference to the ship in the Rare Books and Special Collections Reading Room at Long Beach State. It’s all of two sentences, but considering it took me almost six months just to find that much, I’m ecstatic.’

‘That definitely deserves a toast,’ Sam said, lifting his glass once more. ‘So, what’s next? Exploratory diving to find it?’

‘Eventually. But that’s only part of it. I’m leaving for Greece in two weeks. Fourni, to be exact.’

‘You should have your pick of shipwrecks. What are there, about fifty surrounding the islands?’

‘You’re familiar with the area?’

‘Read about it, but never been. Underwater archeology’s always fascinated me. The lure of being the first person to find something that’s been buried for centuries . . .’ He smiled. ‘Is that your job? Archeologist?’

‘I wish. I’m a translator for an international shipping company. Sadly, it’s not the glamorous globe-trotting job I was hoping for. I sit in a cubicle in Long Beach most of the day, wearing a headset.’

‘Which language?’

‘Whichever one they need. I’m fluent in several, passable in a few more. How about you?’

Recalling Blake’s warning, he kept it vague. ‘Past job, design engineer. Current job, retail.’

‘Doing what, exactly?’

So much for glossing over the truth. ‘Would you believe grocery store shelf stocker?’

‘That’s quite the change in careers.’

The truth was a bit complicated. Sam, a Caltech engineering graduate, had been recruited by DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, to design technology for the Department of Defense. After seven fruitful years, he’d put in his notice, and moved back to California to pursue what had been up until recently a life-long dream. ‘It is, but I wanted the freedom to work on a project. An argon laser scanner.’

Her brows went up, then furrowed slightly. ‘Which does . . . what?’

‘If it ever gets past the paper stage, it’ll identify mixed metals and alloys at a distance. Gold, silver, platinum, you name it.’

‘For real?’

‘Not yet, but that’s what I’m hoping. My friend,’ he said, nodding at the bar, where Blake was still camped out in front of the TV, ‘set up a meeting with a group of investors in a few weeks. If all goes as planned, they’ll be funding the project, and I can actually take it from paper to reality. For now, the grocery job keeps a roof over my head and gives me time to work on the project.’

‘And yet,’ she said, tapping her glass with her perfectly manicured nails, ‘you’re buying bottles of wine for complete strangers? Not exactly budget friendly.’

‘So I eat a lot of peanut butter sandwiches for the next week? High in protein and *very* affordable.’

She laughed. The next several hours passed in a blur as they talked about anything and everything, most of it nautical. Before Sam knew it, the bartender was crying out, ‘Last call!’