

PROLOGUE

January 25, 1829-The Indian Ocean

The precious dream fled like the last mist of morning before the rising sun. Another wave broke against the side of the *Dourado*, the resounding crash booming like thunder in the tiny cabin. Monsieur le Chevalier Louis Domenic de Rienzi clutched the side of his bed to steady himself against the pitching and rolling. He had been dreaming of a triumphant return to France, where he would display the fruits of his years of hard work. He tugged the damp, musty blanket over his head, but it made a pitiful barrier against the shouts that penetrated from above. He squeezed his eyes closed and tried to force himself back to sleep, but to no avail. Muttering a curse, he pushed the sodden covers down to his chest and stared up at the aged wooden ceiling.

A man of his standing should have finer accommodations, he told himself. Of course, this was the best the captain had to offer. When he got back to France, when they saw what he had recovered, then he would be an important man. He would have only the finest lodging. He smiled. For a moment, the aged wooden cabin was transformed into a luxurious berth on the finest ship.

Another wave sent the ship tilting like a drunkard,

and his imagined stateroom dissolved in a dizzying roll. Rienzi held on until the ship righted before rising to don his boots and coat. The shouts on deck grew strident, tinged with an urgency that had not been there before. The storm must be more serious than he had believed.

He spared a moment to glance in the tiny mirror nailed to the wall opposite the bed. He was no longer a young man, but age was blessing him with a touch of the dignity he lacked in his youth. He had left home a young man, but was returning as a seasoned adventurer with a fabulous story to tell.

His cabin door opened onto a narrow hallway. A petite woman in a dressing gown peered out of the door opposite his own. Her nightcap was askew, giving a comical bent to her pinched features. Their eyes met and she gave a little shriek before slamming the door. Rienzi chuckled and made for narrow stairwell leading up to the deck.

Tangy salt air filled his nostrils as he stepped out into the chill night. Fat raindrops struck his face, washing away the last vestiges of sleep. A crewman bustled past, jostling Rienzi in his haste. The sailor muttered something that might have been an apology, but Rienzi's Portuguese was very limited.

Angry black clouds proclaimed the ferocity of the storm that assailed the ship. The brig surged through waves that broke across the deck like hungry fingers clutching its prey. He drew his coat tighter around him to fight off the chill wind that sliced through him and thanked the Blessed Mother that it was summertime here on the bottom half of the world. What might this storm be like at home in the heart of a French winter?

With a fencer's grace, he stepped out onto the

deck, keeping himself balanced on the tilting platform. Deckhands scurried about, obviously trying to put on a brave face in front of the knot of passengers who clung together near the mainmast. Strange that people felt safer on deck, where an errant wave might sweep them away, than down below where it was warm and dry.

He soon found the captain, Francisco Covilha, who was fighting with the wheel and simultaneously barking orders.

“Captain,” he shouted, “may I be of assistance?” Rienzi had some knowledge of sailing, though certainly not as much as the veteran sailor. Yet, it seemed proper to at least make the offer.

The Portuguese sailor shook his head, and called back in heavily accented French. “I am sorry, Monsieur. I must keep us from the rocks.” Maintaining his grip on the wheel, he nodded forward and to port.

Rienzi spun and saw with alarm a jagged line of rocks protruding from the sea, the faint glow of dawn illuminating their jagged features. Despite the crew’s best efforts, the *Dourado* hurtled toward certain peril, borne on the crest of deadly wind and waves.

There was no helping the captain and crew, nor did he hold out much hope that the ship would avert her impending doom. But there *was*, in fact, something Rienzi could do. Reeling with each ebb and swell, he made his way to where the frightened passengers huddled in fearful disarray. Taking him for someone in authority, they all began calling out questions.

Most of them spoke English, but a few were French. Rienzi could speak the uncultured tongue of the oafs from the north side of the channel, but he would not do so unless it was absolutely necessary. He

did have his reputation to consider.

“Do not speak,” he shouted over their confused questions. “There is little time.” Though his words were in French, everyone seemed to grasp his meaning and fell quiet. He stole another glance at the looming rocks. They looked like the teeth of some primordial beast, ready to crush their fragile vessel. There was no time to get the others below, and should the crash be a serious one, belowdeck would not be the safest alternative.

He found a length of rope lashed to a nearby rail. It was one used by crewmen to secure themselves to the ship in just such a situation. He sat the passengers down and showed them how to double the rope around each of their arms so they all could tie on to the same rope. One of the Englishwomen complained about the cold and the rain, but he ignored her. When everyone was secure, he wound the end of the rope around his wrist and dropped to the deck, waiting like a condemned prisoner for the guillotine.

My treasures! The sudden thought pierced the veil of apprehension and embedded in his heart. A cold sliver of fear soured his stomach and sent a tremor of fear through him. Priceless, irreplaceable artifacts representing a lifetime’s work were stored below. How many years had he spent collecting them? Above all others, one item in particular could not be lost.

With that thought in mind, he rose up from the deck to look out at the ocean. The rocks still loomed perilously close ahead, the waves crashing over them sending up gouts of foam that put him to mind of a rabid beast. They now seemed farther to port. Was the captain gaining some control of the craft? They flew faster toward the far end of the line of rocks, the cold

rain now stinging his face. He held his breath. Were they going to make it?

Unwinding the safety rope from his forearm, he belly crawled to the side, and clutched the rail, watching as the dangerous objects flashed by, the gap between the *Dourado* and these sentinels of doom ever narrowing. The last rock flew past with scarcely a foot to spare.

And then the world exploded.

A loud, ripping sound filled his ears, and everything somersaulted. He tumbled toward the bow, pain lancing through his cold, numb flesh as he half-rolled, half-bounced across the hard, slick deck. He crashed into the foremast with a breathless grunt and a sharp crack to the base of his skull. Dizzy, he struggled to stand. His feet and hands did not want to work, though, and his head seemed full of sand. Surrendering with an agonized groan, he closed his eyes.

“I have no choice, Monsieur Rienzi. I must give the order to abandon ship.” A barrel of a man, Francisco Covilha stood a hand shorter than Rienzi, yet managed to appear as if he were looking down his nose at the explorer. The moonlight accentuated his crooked nose and lined face.

“Captain, you cannot be serious,” Rienzi pleaded. “You have kept us afloat since morning. Surely we can hold out until help arrives.” He rubbed his head, which still throbbed from the blow that had rendered him unconscious. He had tried drowning the pain with wine, but had managed only to dull his senses to the point of being an annoying distraction.

“No help is coming.” Covilha shook his head.

“We lost the rudder when we hit those rocks just beneath the surface. Most likely, we have drifted out of the shipping lanes. We cannot expect anyone to come to our aid, and this craft will not be above water much longer. The pumps have not kept pace with the inflow of water. Perhaps you have noticed, no?”

Rienzi stared at the shorter man for a moment. He had, in fact, watched the rising waterline with an equally rising sense of despair. He could not afford to lose this cargo. It was too precious. The *world* could not afford for him to lose this cargo. How could he make the man understand?

“Captain, if you do not know where we are,” he argued, “then how can you possibly hope to get the passengers and crew safely to port?” Perhaps it was selfish of him to try to keep the sinking ship in the water, but he had no choice. It was imperative that he convince Covilha not to abandon the ship and cargo. There remained the remote possibility that someone might come to their rescue. Any amount of time he purchased, no matter how small, increased that chance.

“I do not know *precisely* where we are,” Covilha said, holding up a scarred finger, “but we have drifted south and southeast all day. I have a general idea of our location, and I know that I can get us to Singapore. That is, if we get off this ship before we all drown.” The Captain’s face was a mask of determination, and in that moment Rienzi understood that he would never dissuade the man.

“Captain,” called a voice from behind Rienzi. One of the crewmen, a short, swarthy man with a crooked scar running from his left ear to his upper lip, brushed past, a frightened look further marring his disfigured face. “The water is coming much faster than before.

"We may have only minutes!" He flashed a sympathetic glance at Rienzi. "I am sorry, Monsieur."

The moment of guilt he felt at having thought only of the sailor's ugliness dissolved with Covilha's subsequent words.

"Give the order to abandon ship," the captain instructed. Without further word, he turned away from Rienzi and began shouting hastened instructions.

Muttering a curse under his breath, Rienzi hurried to the foredeck and descended to the level where the crew bunked. He had made certain he knew exactly where his treasures were stored, the one in particular, and he quickly found the trapdoor that led down into the hold. The sounds of frightened passengers drifted down from above, as people who had believed the worst was over now found themselves abandoning ship. *Fitting this should happen at midnight*, he thought.

Yanking open the trapdoor, he mounted the ladder and began his descent. Only a few rungs down, he heard the sloshing of water inside. It must be filling rapidly. An icy sense of doom rising inside him, he strained his eyes to peer into the inky blackness, but it was too dark for him to see anything. He needed to find a lantern, though it would likely do little good. Why had he not stored it in his berth? He knew the answer; it was too large for him to hide it in the tiny room, and it would have proved too great a temptation for either captain or crew. It had seemed safer to leave it crated with the other artifacts. It was certainly safe from prying hands now. Or soon would be. He gave a mirthless laugh at the irony.

He clambered up the ladder and back onto the deck. The *Dourado* was listing to port, and he was hard-pressed to maintain his balance as he hurried back to

his quarters. Inside, he gathered his small lantern, along with his journal, which he kept safe in an oilcloth bag. Hastily lighting the wick, he returned to the deck.

The ship now listed mightily, and he was forced to place his free hand on the deck and scurry along like a wounded crab. As he made his way toward the foredeck, a noise caught his attention. He raised his lantern and the light fell on two young women, their faces frozen in terror, clutching the mast.

“Get to the boats,” he shouted. “Quickly!” The shorter woman, a blonde whose milky complexion was almost ghostly in the blended moon and lamp light, shook her head. The other did not respond at all. Fear held them rooted to the spot.

“Monsieur!” The Captain’s voice boomed. “The second boat is leaving! You must come now!”

“Wait for us, Captain! There are yet passengers aboard!” Rienzi cried. If the man would not wait for Rienzi, perhaps he would wait for them.

“Hurry, I pray you!” Covilha’s voice covered a remarkable distance. “The ship is sinking fast!”

“Mon dieu,” Rienzi muttered as he scrambled over to where the frightened women sat. “Come with me,” he ordered. “I will get you to the boats.” The one who had sat in mute silence a moment before, a thin brunette with brown eyes, nodded. She released her grip on the mast with obvious reluctance, and crawled to his side.

“Come, Sophie,” she called to the blonde. “We must go quickly. There is no time.” Still Sophie shook her head and refused to move.

This time not bothering to muffle his curse, Rienzi moved to the woman’s side, his boots sliding on the damp decking. Gripping the oilcloth bag in his

teeth, he used his free hand to pry Sophie's fingers loose from the mast. He grasped her around the waist, and heaved her onto his shoulder. He felt the other woman's arms encircle him, steadying him as they stumbled together across the sloping deck.

The captain was waiting at the rail. Together, they helped the women into the smaller boat. A short distance away, the longboat awaited. Each craft overflowed with anxious looking sailors and travelers.

"That is everyone?" Covilha asked.

Rienzi nodded and tossed his oilcloth bag down into the boat. "Cast off. I will join you shortly." He turned and left the captain gaping open-mouthed at the top of the rope ladder. He stumbled and skidded his way back down through the crewdeck to the opening that led into the hold. He dangled his lantern through the open trapdoor and felt his heart fall into his stomach. Everything was under water. All would be lost. *It would be lost. He should have taken it from the hold when the ship first struck the rocks. Burn it all, he had not believed that the ship would truly sink!*

A pitiful whimper snapped him out of his dark thoughts, particularly when he realized that it did not come from his own throat. He looked down to see a small dog furiously paddling through the icy salt water that sloshed through the flooded hold. How had it gotten there? The water level was so high that he was easily able to reach out and catch the pitiful creature by the scruff of the neck, and lift it to safety.

The *Dourado* lurched, and now he could actually feel the craft sinking. If he did not get clear before it went down, the suction could pull him under. He tossed away the lantern, ignoring the tinkle of shattering glass. Clutching the frightened dog to his

chest, he stumbled to the ladder and clambered up onto the deck. Not even looking for the lifeboats, he dashed to the rail and leapt over. The *Dourado* was sitting so low that he scarcely had time to brace himself for the shock of the cold water.

When he felt his feet touch, he kicked furiously, trying not to go too far under. He raised the yelping, clawing dog above his head, and managed to keep the tiny creature above water. He broke the surface with a gasp and shook his head to get the stinging salt water out of his eyes. He was relieved to see the smaller boat close by, and heading in his direction. Ignoring his body's instinct to curl into the fetal position, he fought to stay afloat as his rescuers rowed to him. His legs felt like lead and his sodden clothes and heavy boots weighted him down. He kicked with desperate fury, but he was sinking. His shoulders sank beneath the surface of the water, then his chin, then his entire head. He was going to die.

Strong hands took hold of his shoulders and hauled him up. Covilha and the scarred sailor dragged him into the boat. He dropped to the bottom and slumped, exhausted, against someone's legs.

"All of that for a *dog*," a voice behind him whispered.

Rienzi was too tired and disconsolate to reply. Instead, he clutched the wet ball of fur to his chest, and watched with tear-filled eyes as the greatest discovery in the history of mankind sank into the depths of the sea.

CHAPTER 1

A dead ship makes better company than a live person, Dane thought as he propelled himself with two solid kicks through the gaping hole in the side of the sunken vessel. He drifted, careful not to upset the fine layer of silt that covered the boat's interior. It would be the underwater version of a whiteout if he did, and it would spoil his exploration. A school of bright blue sergeant majors, so called for their dark, vertical stripes that made them resemble a sergeant's insignia, swam past seemingly oblivious to this intruder into their watery domain. Dane greeted them with a mock salute and they scattered out into the sea. Another small flip of his swim fins and he slid deeper into the bowels of the wreck.

It was a tuna seiner, and not a very old one. The outside was white with broad bands of green striping down the side. He did not expect to find anything of interest inside, but he desperately needed a diversion after a long and fruitless day of searching for the remains of the sunken Spanish galleon.

He switched on the dive light strapped to his forehead and looked around. More than likely, this had been a drug runner's boat. It was stripped down to bare bones on the inside, all of the trappings of the fishing trade absent. A fire extinguisher was still strapped to the wall, one of the few remaining accoutrements in this sunken tin can. He floated over

to it, and gently brushed away the silt over the inspection label to reveal the year 2002. He looked around a few moments more, his eyes taking in the crumbling upholstery on the seats and the bits of marine life that were beginning to homestead on the interior. There was nothing here to hold his interest. He took a quick glance at his dive watch and calculated that he had about ten minutes of air remaining. It was time to head back up.

He turned and swam out of the wreck. As he left the boat, a shadow passed above him and something large and dark appeared at the edge of his vision. He looked up to see the thick, gray form of a bull shark circling above him. Dane paused, watching the fierce creature swim back and forth. Aggressive and unpredictable, a bull shark was not to be trifled with. The best option was to wait until it went on its way.

The large creature swam a tight circle five meters above him. Dane held tight, not wishing to draw its attention. Faint shafts of sunlight filtered down through the crystalline waters, shining on its tough hide. The beast's angry eye seemed to fix on Dane, though he knew it was only his imagination.

Minutes passed, with no sign of the shark leaving. He could have sworn the thing was standing guard over him. Its jagged white teeth seemed to grin back at him, daring him to chance it. Again he checked his watch. Six minutes of air left. He couldn't wait much longer. He would have to chance it, but at least it was a shallow dive. The water was no more than thirty meters deep here, if that, but it was safest to make a slow ascent, making a couple of stops to avoid decompression problems. His heart beating a bit faster, he suppressed the urge to strike out hard for the

surface, and began a slow, controlled rise.

He had read stories of men who had dived on bull sharks, and had even met a few of the guys. Most of them were crazed adrenaline junkies. It was, however, at least theoretically possible to share space without provoking the beast. Problem was, it depended quite a bit on what kind of day the shark was having.

Holding his arms close to his sides, he stretched out, propelling himself with controlled kicks. He slowly drifted upward toward his waiting boat, remaining as still as possible and trying to resemble nothing more than a piece of floating debris. *Don't rise faster than your bubbles*, he reminded himself.

The shark continued to patrol the area, showing no signs of agitation, or so Dane hoped. He now had a good view of the marine predator. It was at least ten feet long, probably a female. Viewed through aquarium glass or from within a dive cage she would be a real beauty. Sharks were fascinating creatures; all muscle, teeth and stomach, his Dad used to say. So far she gave no sign that she had noticed him. He flipped his fins, and he was now gliding upward at a steep angle. Just then, the shark veered to her left, heading directly at him.

Dane tensed. The dive knife strapped to his thigh would do him little good against her tough hide. Struggling against his instincts, he forced himself to remain still, feigning death, floating free. The wide, ugly snout and rows of glistening razor teeth filled his field of vision as the shark barreled toward him.

His natural survival response battered at his will, screaming for him to take out his knife and start hacking. Just as he was about to give in, the shark angled past him, brushing his shoulder with her rough

hide as she swam past. As quickly as she had come, she was gone again.

Dane closed his eyes for a moment and said a brief prayer of thanks to the gods of the sea. Without looking around to locate the shark, he hastily pinched his nose closed and blew, forcing his ears to pop, before resuming his gradual ascent. He looked down at his wrist. Five minutes. Glancing up, he was surprised to see two boats floating above him. His attention had been so focused on the shark that he had not heard the second craft's arrival. He continued on with suspicious thoughts rising in his mind. The newly arrived craft floated directly above him. Warily, he surfaced just behind the stern.

The bright Caribbean sun danced on the cerulean water, and he squinted against the glare. The boat was an old Coast Guard cutter. Someone had repainted it an ugly shade of green with the Cuban flag emblazoned sloppily on the back. Four men stood with their backs to him, three of them holding rifles at the ready. One of them was talking to the crew of Dane's boat, the *Sea Foam*. The newcomers were armed with old AK-47's and garbed in a motley mix of military uniform bits, as green and ugly as their vessel.

Aboard the *Sea Foam*, Dane's partner, Uriah Bonebrake, known to friends simply as "Bones", stood facing the unwelcome intruders. A false smile painted his face, and his body was deceptively relaxed. The Carolina-born Cherokee, and Dane's friend since their days together as Navy SEALs, carried a nine-millimeter Glock on his right hip, out of sight beneath his loose-fitting Hawaiian print shirt. Bones was outgunned, but Dane could tell that his friend was looking for an opening. Matt Barnaby and Corey Dean,

the other two members of Dane's crew, stood behind Bones. Matt's lean, tan face was drawn in concern, while Corey looked frightened.

"You are in Cuban waters, Señor," the man without a rifle said. "We must inspect your boat for drugs." One of his comrades snickered, and he shut him up with a wave of his hand.

"These here ain't Cuban waters, Chief," Bones said, his deep voice relaxed, almost friendly. "Like I told you, we're marine archaeologists. This is a research vessel. If you're looking for drugs, there's this dude who hangs out on the corner near the Wal Mart by my house who can probably hook you up."

Bones knew as well as Dane that these clowns might be Cubans, but there was no way they were government agents. They were self-styled pirates, thugs who preyed mostly on private pleasure craft. He needed to help his crew, but how?

"You, my tall friend, are not so amusing as you seem to think. I suggest you cooperate. Do not force us to harm you." The fellow's voice was as oily as his skin.

"No need for any of that now," Bones said in a friendly tone. "We've got a cooler in the cabin. Maybe you fellas would like a Diet Mountain Dew or something?"

Bones was stalling for time, waiting for Dane to do something to help them out. Hoping he would not be heard over the sound of the cutter's idling engine, Dane quickly submerged and dove back down to the tuna boat. He had an idea.

He re-entered the submerged vessel, scraping his shoulder on a jagged piece of metal. The salt water burned, but he had no time to think about it. He

checked his watch again. Less than three minutes now. He had to hurry.

A quick swim through the dimly lit vessel, and he soon found what he was looking for. He hefted it and turned to find himself blind. In his haste, he had disturbed the silt on the bottom of the craft, and the interior of the submerged craft was now filled with a thick, opaque cloud of sediment.

More angry than concerned, he took a moment to orient himself. It was a small boat, and he should not have any problem getting out, but precious seconds were ticking away. He blew out a few bubbles just to make sure he knew which direction was up, and reached up to put a hand on the ceiling. He swam his way to the opposite side of the boat, the side in which the hole was rent, and hugged the wall as he worked his way back.

The way out appeared like a sliver of sky through gray clouds. Exiting the sunken craft, he made ready to return to the *Sea Foam* and his crew. Something moved in his peripheral vision. *The shark again!* This time he had no choice but to make a bolt for the surface and hope that the primordial creature would continue to ignore him. He set his jaw and swam to the surface as fast as he could. The shark ignored him, and he surfaced without drawing notice.

Tensions were at a peak. The leader of the intruders was waving his arms and shouting in Spanish. Dane caught a few of the words; enough to know that they contained threats of bodily harm. Bones' eyes flitted in Dane's direction for the briefest of instants. It was enough to let him know that Bones had seen him, and was ready. Dane kicked free of his flippers just as the bull shark resurfaced on the other side of the boats

and made straight toward him, its fin slicing through the calm gulf waters. The cut on his shoulder! It had scented him. First things first, though.

This had better work, Dane thought. He hefted the fire extinguisher he had retrieved from the drug runner's boat, and opened it up full blast on the pirates.

Surprised shouts rang out from the men on the cutter, and gunshots erupted as Bones used the diversion to draw his Glock and open fire. The two intruders farthest from Dane went down immediately. The man in the stern opened up wildly with his AK, spraying the *Sea Foam* with a deadly torrent of hot lead.

The shark was ten meters away and closing fast. Flinging the fire extinguisher in its direction, Dane grasped the side of the boat and heaved himself out of the water. He tumbled over the stern and rolled to his feet, freeing his dive knife as he went. Only a few paces away, the confused attacker, still struggling to keep his burning eyes open, spotted Dane and turned, bringing his weapon to bear.

Bullets buzzed past Dane's ear as he closed the gap between himself and the Cuban. He lashed out with his left hand, smacking the barrel of the weapon to the side. Simultaneously he thrust hard with his right. Still gripping his rifle, the Cuban could not protect himself. Dane drove his knife into the man's chest. Giving it a quick jerk to the left, then back to the right, he yanked the weapon free, and shoved the dying, self-styled pirate away.

The last attacker was down on one knee, exchanging gunfire with Bones. He was armed with a .38-caliber revolver, of all things. Holding his breath, Dane dashed toward him. The brigand must have

espied him in the corner of his vision. He turned and leveled his pistol at Dane, and pulled the trigger. The hollow sound of a hammer striking repeatedly an empty cylinder seemed deafening to Dane as he charged in. Cursing in Spanish, the man threw the useless weapon at Dane's head, and then jumped up to meet his attacker.

Dane thrust low and hard at the man's midsection, but his opponent was a skilled fighter. The Cuban spun to the right, grasping Dane's left wrist in both hands and tried a shoulder throw. Dane saw the move coming, and managed to grab hold of the man by the loose fabric of his uniform pants behind his left thigh. He yanked up hard, throwing them both off balance. As they tumbled to the deck, the Cuban struck Dane's wrist, sending his dive knife sliding across the deck. He rolled away, sprang to his feet, and leapt at Dane again.

Years of combat training kicked in. Dane dropped into a long stance, bending at the knees. He wrapped one arm around the man's waist and the other between his legs. Allowing the attackers momentum to carry him, he heaved the man onto his shoulder like a log. Ignoring the pain from his wound, he turned and dropped his opponent over the side of the boat and into the water.

The Cuban broke the surface, shouting angrily, but his cries quickly turned to frightened shrieks as the water around him began to churn and froth. The bull shark ripped into him in an eerie, silent assault. The man shrieked and beat at the shark with his fists, but to no avail. Dane saw Bones, who had held his fire during the fight for fear of hitting the wrong man, raise his pistol and take aim at the shark. Just then, the Cuban

ceased his struggles. Great gouts of blood erupted from his mouth as the ferocious predator carried him under, leaving a crimson pool spreading between the two boats. It was surely his imagination, but Dane thought he could smell the coppery scent of carnage.

The strength left his legs and he leaned heavily against the rail

“Thanks for coming to my rescue,” he called across the intervening waters to his friends.

“Hey man, just because he didn’t see the shark doesn’t mean we all missed it,” Bones yelled back. “The guy was a moron, anyway.” The big, ponytailed native leaned his muscled, six-foot frame over the rail, cupped his hands, and shouted down at the water, “How many shots in a revolver, pal?”

“That’s cold,” Dane said, feeling a touch guilty at his enjoyment of the dark humor Bones had adopted as a means of coping with the realities of combat they had experienced in the service.

“Yeah, but I’m right.” Bones’ mirthless grin reminded Dane too strongly of the action they had seen in the SEALs.

“I put a call in to the Coast Guard when we first saw these guys coming,” Matt said, leaning against the rail of the *Sea Foam*. He ran his long, tan, fingers through his spiky brown hair, and scanned the horizon. The condition of his hair was always of paramount importance to him. “They should be here any minute.” Matt was a former army grunt, but the skinny mate and engineer had proven himself an able seaman.

“You know what that means,” Corey, the fair-skinned, redheaded computer specialist interjected. He sat on the deck behind Bones with his elbows propped on his knees and his chin cupped in his hands, looking

despondent.

“I know,” Dane groaned, “back to the docks.” They could not afford a delay. Business had been slow, and he had been counting on the Spanish galleon to change their fortunes. He had done his homework, researched it thoroughly, and was certain he had a line on it. But nothing remained secret for long in this business. His competitors would hear about the shootout and wonder what he was looking for out here.

“It should only be for a day,” Bones said hopefully. “It’s pretty obvious what these guys are. Or should I say *were*?” He twisted his mouth in a wry smile.”

“It had better not be for long,” Dane said. “We’ve got to get back to work.” He did not add, *or we’re going to go under*. Everyone knew that fact already. “If somebody finds that wreck before us...” His words trailed away as a Coast Guard cutter appeared on the horizon.

CHAPTER 2

Dane and Bones were surveying the damage to the *Sea Foam* when the sound of approaching footsteps drew their attention. Though they had returned to port, they remained on their guard after the attack. Even Corey, who abhorred violence of any sort, had armed himself with Matt's spare .9 millimeter and was keeping an eye out for danger.

A young woman, perhaps in her mid-twenties, stood at the end of the dock. She was tall, with long, deeply tanned legs, which her khaki shorts displayed to good effect. A tight, white, sleeveless shirt clung to her trim, athletic body in all the right places. The intense Key West sun glistened on her long, white-blonde hair, which she wore pulled back, displaying a strong, yet attractive face that appeared untouched by the humidity. Her chin was a bit too small and her nose just a touch too big for her face, but that only added character to her appearance. She regarded Dane with an intense, green-eyed stare that took his breath for an instant. She was a beauty.

"Good afternoon," she said, smiling broadly. "Permission to come aboard?" She asked the question as if it was a mere formality, which Dane supposed it was. Beautiful women on the *Sea Foam* were few and far-between.

"Granted," Bones replied quickly, shouldering

Dane aside. He offered his hand to help the young woman onto the deck. She did not need his assistance, though, vaulting the rail and landing on the balls of her feet with catlike agility. Bones stepped back and grinned in approval. “Not bad. What are you, anyway, one of those Romanian gymnast women or something?”

“Hardly.” She brushed some invisible dirt from her shorts. “Well then. I assume you would be Bonebrake and Maddock,” she said, nodding to each of them in turn.

“As if we had a choice,” Dane replied, and immediately wondered if that sounded as dumb to her as it did to him. Bones was the clever one. “And you would be?”

“I am Kaylin Maxwell.” She looked at him as if he ought to know her.

Dane was certain that he’d remember that pair of legs, if not the name. “I’m sorry Miss Maxwell, have we met before?”

“Sure we have,” Bones interrupted, his smile shining brighter than white against his deeply tanned features. “You know, at that thing, at the place...” His voice trailed off under Kaylin’s bemused stare.

Kaylin folded her arms and looked down at the bullet holes riddling the side of the boat. “Termites?” she deadpanned.

“Cubans,” Dane said. “It’s a long story.”

“But it’s a *great* story,” Bones interrupted. “We were heroes. How about I buy you a drink and tell you all about it?”

“I’ll take a beer if you have one handy,” she said. “But I know enough of your reputation to not let you buy me anything.”

Dane waited for the woman to explain herself, but no explanation was forthcoming. “You never told us where we know you from.”

“You don’t know *me*,” the blonde replied, “but you both knew my father quite well.”

Dane paused for a moment, and then took a step back. “Hold on! You’re Maxie’s daughter?” Commander Hartford Maxwell had led his and Bones’ unit during their service in the SEALs. Dane had held the rank of Lieutenant Commander under Maxie. “I haven’t heard from him in years. How is he?”

Kaylin looked away, her bright eyes cloudy and her face crestfallen.

Dane’s heart sank. He already knew what she was going to say.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you,” she said, her voice husky with emotion, “that my father is dead.” She paused, taking a deep breath. “He died a week ago. That’s why I’m here.”

“Oh,” Dane said, caught off guard by the surprise announcement. He did not know what to say, so he grimaced and looked down for a moment. He had seen his share of death, but he knew all too well that loved ones were different. Matt and Corey had joined them, and they offered their condolences to Kaylin, who nodded her thanks.

“You’re in the will, Maddock,” Bones joked, clapping him on the shoulder. “Lord knows Maxie wouldn’t have left me anything.” The commander had appreciated Bones as a soldier. Problem was, Bones held his liquor about as well as any other Indian: not well at all. Maxie was constantly busting his subordinate for some shenanigan or another. Every time it had been when Bonebrake was drinking. After

retiring from the service, Maddock's friend had curtailed his drinking to the occasional social drink, but his offbeat personality remained intact.

"I'm sorry, but I fear there's no inheritance," Kaylin said, smiling sadly.

"Yeah, I guess that wasn't very sympathetic of me," Bones said, looking a bit abashed. "I gotta' tell you, I'm not very good with the whole serious thing."

"No problem," Kaylin said. "As I said before, I've already heard a little bit about you, so I was prepared." She offered a sad smile to show there were no hard feelings, but then her face grew serious. She frowned and looked around uncomfortably. "Is there somewhere the three of us can talk?"

"Oh, sorry. Of course." Matt and Corey excused themselves, and Dane and Bones ushered her into the main cabin of the *Sea Foam*. They sat down around a small table that was covered in charts and various books and papers. Dane hurried to clean up the clutter while Bones took three Samuel Adams from the small refrigerator and passed them out. Kaylin took a long, slow drink and sat in quiet contemplation for a moment before launching into her explanation.

"My father was murdered," she began. "The police say he interrupted a burglary in progress."

Dane took a drink of his beer. It was dark and rich, just the way he liked it, and so cold that it stung his throat on the way down. He was listening to what Kaylin had *not* said, and that was what he responded to.

"But you think differently."

"I *know* it wasn't a burglary," she replied, meeting his gaze with a level stare. "Not long before he died, my father gave me a package and told me to keep it safe. He said it was something he was working on, and

that people were after it. He planned to get it back from me when he felt that things had ‘cooled off’, whatever that meant.”

“I don’t get it,” Bones interrupted, his beer forgotten as he concentrated on the issue at hand. “Maxie was good. If he knew somebody was after him, he should have been on his guard. How did they get to him?”

“That’s another reason that I know it wasn’t a burglary,” Kaylin replied. “As you said, Dad was good. Whoever got him must have been better.” She paused and cleared her throat, her eyes beginning to mist. She accepted the napkin Dane offered with a nod of thanks and dabbed at her eyes.

“What was the condition of the house when the police got there?” He felt strange continuing the discussion when she was obviously upset, but he sensed that it would be better to give her something to talk about, rather than sitting in gloomy silence.

“It *looked* like a burglary,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. This was obviously difficult for her to talk about. “Drawers had been rummaged through or dumped on the floor. His DVD player was missing, and what little bit of jewelry he owned. Things like that.”

“Let me play the devil’s advocate here,” said Bones, raising a long finger. “How can you be certain that it wasn’t a burglary? You know, Occam’s Razor and all that.”

“For one, it was too clean,” Kaylin said. If she minded the question, she did not show it. “They left no fingerprints. Zero. No signs of forced entry, no alarm from the security system, and I know for a fact that Dad never went anywhere without locking up and

arming the system.”

“He never missed a detail,” Dane agreed. Maxie was the most professional officer he had ever known. “I can’t imagine Maxie forgetting anything.”

“Also, the hard drive on his computer was erased, save a few mundane files. All of his research was wiped clean. That isn’t the sort of thing a burglar would do. The biggest reason, though, is what they didn’t mess with.” She paused. “Dad’s study looked untouched: his desk, his filing cabinet, his books.”

“Why would burglars mess with his books?” Bones asked. “Is there a big black market for old James Micheners?”

“People will sometimes hide money in their books,” Dane explained. “Or they’ll get those fake books that are hollow on the inside and put their valuables in there.”

Bones raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Dude, I would make a lousy burglar,” he said. “The desk, I get. They’d be looking for checks, credit card numbers, money, stuff like that.”

“You said the study *looked* untouched.” Dane had caught the inflection in Kaylin’s voice. “What makes you believe someone had been in there?”

“The work Dad was doing,” Kaylin looked up at the ceiling, seeming uncertain how to answer, “was sort of a research project. He told me that along with his real work, he kept a fake journal. Some of it was accurate, but with key information altered or missing. He kept it in the safe in his study. If someone got hold of it, they’d think it was real, because he’d gone to the trouble of locking it up.”

“The sneaky son of a...” Bones whispered. “Oh. Sorry. No disrespect or anything.” He stared out the

window with a faint smile and a distant look in his eyes. “I don’t know if you remember him the way we do. It’s all good, though.”

“That’s all right, he *was* sneaky.” Kaylin laughed and reached out to pat Bones’ shoulder. “He figured that if whoever was after him ever got hold of it, it would protect us, and also keep them from finding what he was looking for.” She shook her head in admiration.

“I assume the false journal was missing,” Dane said, finding himself drawn into the puzzle despite his surprise at the news of Maxie’s death.

Kaylin nodded. “The safe was locked. All his other papers appeared to be undisturbed, but the journal was gone.”

Dane folded his hands behind his head and looked up at the ceiling. He just could not believe Maxie was gone. The man had always seemed indestructible. Dane’s parents had died in an auto accident while he was in the service, and Maxie had stepped in to fill the void left by their loss, serving as a guide and role model. The two stayed in touch for a short while after Dane left the military, but life had gotten in the way. Now, he regretted not having put more effort into the friendship.

“I truly am sorry to surprise the two of you with all this,” Kaylin said. “Someone comes out of the blue and drops a bomb on you. It isn’t the best way to deliver news. In any case, Mr. Maddock...”

“Please, call me Dane.” It jarred him to realize that, after their conversation, they still were not technically on a first-name basis.

“All right, Dane.” The way she said it reminded him of how Melissa used to try a new flavor of lipstick:

pursed lips and sort of a withholding judgment expression on her face. “I know this is all comes as a surprise, and not a pleasant one at that, but I need your help.” She reached across the table and laid her hand on his arm.

“Hold on. Why me?” Dane was momentarily taken aback. What could he do to help with a murder investigation? He fixed the woman with a questioning gaze, but let her hand remain where it was. “I mean, you didn’t come all this way just to deliver bad news. Why are you here?”

“Dad told me how to find the two of you.” Her eyes darted to Bones and back to Dane. “He said that if anything happened to him, I should come to you.” She let that statement hang in the ensuing moment of stunned silence.

“Wait a minute,” Bones finally said. “Maxie wanted you to come to *me*?” His look of exaggerated shock would have been comical had Dane not been so completely caught off-guard by Kaylin’s revelation.

“He knew the two of you were working together. He told me that *you*,” she gestured at Bones with her beer bottle, “were a character, but as trustworthy as they come. He’s definitely right about the first part. As to the second part, that remains to be seen.”

“But we’re marine archaeologists, not policemen,” Dane protested. What had Maxie been thinking? “We dive on wrecks and look for treasure. How can we help you?”

“Marine archaeologists are precisely what I need,” Kaylin said. She bit her lip and looked from Dane to Bones and back. It seemed as if she was uncertain whether to say any more. Finally she continued. “I need you two to help me find a shipwreck.”

CHAPTER 3

In my lifetime, I have had many joys and few regrets. The greatest of those things I regret, however, is the loss of my beloved treasures that January night. I was the first to rediscover the wonders and riches of those historic cities. I should have been the one to bring their secrets to light. But without that most precious of artifacts, no one would listen to me. I was scoffed at by my peers, ridiculed in scholarly circles, condemned from on high. I had no choice but to hold the truth close to my breast.

It is strange to think that I boarded the Dourado with the belief that I would return home a hero. The truths I had to share would have shaken the foundations of mankind. But alas, the fates have denied me the renown that I so richly deserve. Because I do not wish to hold myself up to the mockery of future generations, I will not record my findings in this journal. I will say only that truly, there is none like it.

Dane closed the translated copy of Rienzi's journal. He ran his fingers across the smooth cover. Maxie had bound his translation in a simple, three-ring binder, and had printed "Journal" in his precise hand.

"So Maxie was looking for whatever this guy Rienzi lost. Do we have any idea what it was?"

Kaylin stood with her back to him, not answering, staring over the balcony and down at the Ashley River's slow moving waters where the river flowed into Charleston Harbor. Content to wait until she was ready

to talk, Dane left his seat at the bar that separated the kitchen from the living area of her small apartment, and joined her outside. Propping his forearms on the rail, he took in the peaceful view. A few sailing vessels plied the calm, gray harbor waters, their white sails glistening against the blue sky. He had always had an affinity for the water. If he could not be on the water, he wanted to at least be near it. He wondered if perhaps he had found a kindred spirit in Kaylin.

He and Bones had arrived late the night before, three days after their initial meeting. Despite their reservations, it had not taken much coaxing from Kaylin to convince them to sign on for her project. Their latest expedition was a complete bust, and even though the Coast Guard investigation had cleared them of all wrongdoing, it would be a while before the *Sea Foam* was ready to ply the seas again. The compensation Kaylin was offering was more than enough to repair the damage to their craft. More, in fact, than he thought an art teacher should be able to afford. When he had pressed her on the point, she explained that her father had provided well for her. That, Dane did believe. Maxie was the kind of man who took care of his own. He and Bones admired the man greatly. But more than that, they wanted to see his last wish carried out.

“I’m sorry,” Kaylin finally said. “It’s difficult to talk about Dad’s work.” She turned to look at Dane, her green eyes downcast. “Rienzi never names this treasure that was so precious to him. I’ve only had a few days to look over everything, but it seems that Dad was thorough in combing through everything the man ever wrote. He says all sorts of grandiose things about how important his discoveries were, but never reveals

what, exactly he found.”

“I picked up on the grandiose part,” Dane said. “He sounds like a character. Makes you wonder if it’s all just bluster, or if he really did accomplish anything of note.”

“He lived quite a life,” Kaylin said. “He took part in the battle of Waterloo. He also fought for Simon Bolivar in Colombia, then came back to Europe where he was wounded at Marathon. He traveled most of the known world and became a self-styled discoverer. Not exactly a colonial times Indiana Jones, but something close.” She grinned, and some of the strain melted away. She looked younger, more energetic. “He claimed to have been the first person to rediscover the ruins of Syre and Assab in Abyssinia. He also claimed that he was the first to excavate them, as well as Petra in Arabia.”

“Wasn’t Petra a crappy Christian band back in the eighties?” Bones called from the kitchen. He dropped a bag on the table and joined them on the balcony.

“It’s also a famous city in the Middle East,” Kaylin said. “It’s literally carved into the sides of cliffs.”

“You know, like in the third Indiana Jones movie,” Dane said, recalling Kaylin’s analogy. He nudged his friend with an elbow to the ribs.

“Oh yeah!” Bones said, as if this were all a startling revelation. “You guys are so smart.”

The blonde rolled her eyes and continued. “Anyway, Rienzi was returning to France on the *Dourado* with all the treasures he had accumulated during his world travels. He lost everything when the ship sank.”

“Bummer,” Bones said. “Reminds me of the time

I hooked up with this really cute sorority girl. We made it about halfway back to my dorm and then she hurled all over...” He took one look at Kaylin’s disapproving stare and cut the story short. “Nevermind. Rewind to where I said ‘bummer’ and just leave it there.”

“Good idea.” Kaylin folded her arms across his chest and frowned, but there was a twinkle in her eye that had been absent moments before. “Rienzi certainly thought it was a ‘bummer’ as you put it. He went back to France and made a bit of a name for himself writing. He never did get over losing his life’s work, though.”

“What happened to him?” Dane asked.

Kaylin hesitated. “He killed himself eighteen years later.”

“Ouch. Sounds like the guy had a flair for the dramatic,” Bones observed, shaking his head. “So, what do we know about the last voyage of the *Dourado*?”

“It’s a strange story,” she said. “Besides Rienzi’s belongings, the captain claimed to have been carrying more than half-a million dollars on board when the ship went down. That was a great deal of money back then. When the survivors reached Singapore with word of the sinking, the British sent out a detachment of troops in three ships to guard the wreck from the local pirates while divers tried to salvage the ship.”

“I can’t imagine trying to dive using nineteenth century technology,” Dane observed. He shuddered at the thought of braving the depths with only the aid of primitive dive equipment. Modern diving was hazardous enough.

“They didn’t have to. The ships returned very quickly. They were unable to find the *Dourado*, and

assumed that it had gone down in deep water. Less than a week later, though, the wreckage was found off the coast of the island of Bintan. Salvage efforts only turned up a few items: a silver statue, a box with some papers, and a couple of personal items. They found no sign of the money, nor of Rienzi's treasure. After three months, Rienzi gave up on ever recovering his property, and returned to France."

The doorbell rang, bringing their conversation to an abrupt halt. Kaylin answered the door, and returned a moment later with a tall, lean, ginger-haired man of middle years in a black suit and priest's collar. His thin-lipped smile was the only sign of emotion in an otherwise bland face. His eyes, narrowed in either curiosity or suspicion, flitted from Dane to Bones, then back to Dane.

"Father Wright," Kaylin said, "I would like to introduce two friends of my father. This is Dane Maddock." She gestured to Dane with a wave of her hand. "And this is Uriah Bonebrake. They were in the Navy together with Dad."

The priest shook Dane's hand first, then turned to Bones. "Uriah," he said, clasping Bone's hand. "A strong, biblical name."

"Let's hope I don't share his fate," Bones said with a mischievous smile. "Getting killed over a woman hits way too close to home." Dane's surprise must have registered on his face, because his Bones frowned at him. "Think I don't know my Bible? I was raised on the reservation. Pentecostal preachers everywhere you look."

"I suppose we can forgive you for that," Father Wright said. He actually cracked a smile, but only a small one. "Kaylin," he continued, turning to their

hostess, “I won’t stay but a moment. I just came by to check in on you.”

“Thank you, Father. I’m doing fine, all things considered.”

“Glad to hear it.” Father Wright paused, rubbing a pale, slender hand absently across his chest. He seemed nervous or uncertain. “I hope you’ll forgive me, but I have a bit of an unusual question. Your father had in his collection a very old French bible. I must not have hidden my admiration for it very well, because he offered to donate it to the rectory library.”

“Oh,” Kaylin said, a frown creasing her brow. “I haven’t gone through his things yet. I’ll keep an eye out for it, though, and let you know if I come across it.”

“Perhaps it is in his library?” the Priest asked. Dane thought it a trifle rude for the man to persist, but he held his tongue. “I could drop by his house sometime when you are going to be there.”

“Actually, that’s the one place I *have* inventoried,” Kaylin said. “After the burglary and the police investigation it seemed like it needed doing. As I said, I *will* look for it.” Her voice had taken on a tone of impatience, and she stood with hands on hips.

“Thank you,” Father Wright replied, touching her shoulder gently. “I just wanted to mention it. Please let me know if there is anything I can do for you.”

“I will, Father. Thank you for dropping by.” Kaylin showed the priest out and returned to the living room where Dane and Bones had wandered in from the balcony. She had a puzzled look on her face.

“That was an odd conversation,” Dane said, dropping down onto Kaylin’s black leather sofa.

“It was very odd,” she said, taking a seat next to him. “Father Wright is a good man. It just feels so

inappropriate for him to be asking for something of Dad's so soon after..." Her voice trailed away. "You know what I mean."

"You'd think a priest would have better bedside manner," Bones observed. He fished beer and a package of beef jerky out of the bag he had laid on the kitchen table. "Anybody else?" He held up his drink and snack.

"It's a little early for that much gas," Dane said. "Thanks anyway, though."

"Breakfast of champions," Bones said. He joined them in the living room, dropping down into a papasan beneath one of Kaylin's seascapes. The rattan chair creaked under his weight, and he overflowed it like a gorilla in an inner tube. Dane chuckled at the mental image. Bones raised an eyebrow but did not ask what was funny.

"Cool artwork, Kaylin," Bones said, looking around at the paintings that adorned the living room walls. "You painted them all, huh? Anyway, I want to talk about this wreck we're supposed to find," he said. "If it was salvaged back when it first went down, and they didn't find much, it either means that Rienzi was full of it, or this alleged incredible discovery was lost somewhere between the point where the ship sank, and the point where the wreck was finally discovered. At best, we'll have to scour the ocean bed looking for some item which, by the way, we don't know what it is. I'd say it's impossible."

"It can't be impossible," Dane argued. "Maxie wouldn't have wasted his time if it couldn't be done." Dane had the utmost confidence in their former commander. He had no doubt that Maxie had been on to something. "There's something he knew that we

don't. When we figure it out, we'll know how to proceed."

"Do you have anything other than the papers you showed us?" Bones asked Kaylin.

The girl shook her head. "We're missing something. I've been through Dad's journal and Rienzi's and I can't find anything." She folded her arms and set her jaw. Her eyes were fixed on some invisible spot in the distance as she thought. "It has to be there. It just has to."

Dane thought he knew someone who could help them. He excused himself for a minute and stepped outside to make the call. When he returned to the living room, Bones and Kaylin looked at him with curious expressions.

"I've got a friend on the case," he explained cryptically. He would leave them in suspense until he heard something back.

"So that's how you're going to play it?" Bones asked, grinning suspiciously.

"Yep," Dane said. He did not want to get their hopes up until he found out what kind of results his contact could get. That, and he enjoyed keeping them in suspense. At any rate, there was more that they could do in the meantime.

"Kaylin," he said, turning to the blonde, "What do you say we check out your dad's library?"

CHAPTER 4

The books in Maxwell's library were arranged in meticulous fashion by subject, author and date of publication. The precise rows were totally in keeping with the commander's personality. Everything in the room, from the painting of the shipwreck on the wall above the computer, to the single, framed family portrait, reminded Dane of his mentor and friend. A pang of sadness welled up inside, but was immediately overwhelmed by a wave of bitterness. He wanted to find whoever it was who had done Maxie in. He wanted them bad. He clenched his fist, imagining the murderer's throat.

"I wonder what bible Father Wright was talking about?" Kaylin asked. She stood next to him, looking over the books. "I know what Dad had in his library, and I never saw an old bible."

"I didn't know Catholics even read the bible," Bones said, "at least not in English."

"He didn't read it, genius. It was in French," Dane shot back. "You don't see it anywhere? Maybe whoever broke in took it." He didn't know why someone would steal a bible. He scanned the shelves but saw no obvious empty spaces where a book might be missing.

He set about the task of examining the library, pulling books off the shelves at random and thumbing

through, looking for notations, papers, anything that might give a clue as to what they were looking for. Kaylin searched through the file cabinets, while Bones sat popping Maxie's CD-ROMs into his laptop one at a time, scanning their contents.

His cell phone vibrated against his chest. Dane withdrew it from his jacket pocket and flipped it open. It was the call he had been waiting for.

"Hey Jimmy, what you got for me?" Jimmy Letson was a writer for the Washington Post. He had access, legally, to a myriad of internet databases. He was also a hacker who had access, illegally, to resources Dane didn't even want to know about. The two had been friends in the service, remaining in contact even after Jimmy had rung out of SEAL training, and left the service when his tour ended.

"What's that? No, 'Wow Jimmy, that was fast!' or 'Hey Jimmy, thanks for dropping everything to check on this for me,' or 'Gee Jimmy, thanks for risking your job...'"

"I get the point," Dane said, laughing. "Fine, I declare you the Pope of Cyberspace. Now what did you find out?"

"Funny you should mention the Pontiff. This guy Rienzi, he came back from his world travels sounding off to anyone who would listen about all the great treasures he had lost."

"We knew that much already. Did he ever say what, exactly, he had lost?"

"He must have, because within several months, he had managed to tick off all of the scholars in his field, or at least the ones we have any writings from. Unfortunately for you, they all talk about his 'ridiculous' claims, but they never say what specifically those claims were. A year after his return, he pretty much shuts up, and goes back to being a run-of-the-mill writer."

"Do you think the ridicule got to him?" Dane

asked.

“I think it was bigger than that. Jimmy paused. He loved drama. NAILS turned up a letter from the bishop in Paris to a cardinal back at the Vatican, written nine months after Rienzi’s return to France.”

NAILS was an acronym for “National Archive and Informational Linkage System”, an amazing connection of informational resources used by the CIA. Jimmy had somehow found a way to clandestinely link up to the system. Dane had told his friend on more than one occasion that he did not want to be around when Jimmy was finally busted. Jimmy just laughed and boasted that he was much too smart to be caught by those bozos. His cockiness made even Bones appear humble.

“I’m waiting for you to tell me why I should care,” Dane said, feigning disinterest.

“The Cardinal wanted Rienzi excommunicated. That interest you?”

Dane reflected on this new bit of information. Could they be connected in some way? The timing was certainly right.

“Thanks, Jim, that’s great. Anything else?”

“Probably nothing you don’t already know. I’ll shoot a summary over to you. Anything else you need?”

“Actually, would you see what you can find out about the *Dourado*?”

“I suppose you’re in a big hurry on this one too,” Jimmy groaned.

“No, last night will be soon enough.” Dane ignored Jimmy’s profane reply. “Thanks again. I’ll stand you to a bottle of Wild Turkey next time I’m in DC.” Maxie had taught him long ago how helpful it could be to know a man’s weakness.

"You've got a deal," Jimmy replied, and broke the connection.

Dane hung up the phone and shared this new information with Bones and Kaylin.

"So Rienzi comes back from his trip and starts ruffling feathers," Bones said. He stood with his chin cupped in his hand. His brown eyes stared vacantly out the window. "Whatever claims he's making, they're enough to get somebody in the church all riled up. They threaten him with excommunication, and he clams up."

"With the kind of clout the church carried, it wouldn't be out of the question for the Vatican to find a way to get rid of any written record of Rienzi's claims, whatever they were," Kaylin added. "What could he have found that would upset the church that much?"

A flicker of movement at the corner of his eye caught Dane's attention. "Did you see something out there?" he asked Bones, pointing toward the window.

His friend shook his head. "Sorry, man. Lost in space." He tapped his temple with a deeply tanned finger.

"Thought I saw something." Dane drew his pistol, a German-made Walther P-99, and moved to the windowsill, carefully peering out over the narrow backyard that ran down to the shore of the Cooper River. It was a calm, sunny afternoon. Nothing seemed amiss in the quiet neighborhood. Bones appeared at his side, Glock drawn.

A knock at the front door broke the silence, causing the two of them to jump. Kaylin looked at him questioningly. Dane nodded, and walked with her to the door. She opened it to reveal an elderly black

woman in a neatly pressed dress.

“Bernie!” Kaylin cried, crushing the woman in a tight embrace. The old woman smiled and hugged her back.

“Gently, child,” she said in a tender voice, “I’m not as young as I used to be.” She smiled a warm smile and patted Kaylin.

Kaylin pulled back and held the woman at arm’s length. “It’s so good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too. Can I come in?” The woman gave Kaylin a motherly pat on the shoulder and stepped through the doorway. After Kaylin introduced Dane and Bones, the four of them made their way to the kitchen, where they sat down around a stout oaken table in front of a wide bay window.

“Bernice took care of me when I was little, after Mom died,” Kaylin explained. “I call her Bernie.”

“I’m so sorry about your father,” Bernice said. “I’ve been in Mississippi visiting family for a few weeks. I went to your apartment as soon as I heard, but you weren’t there.”

“I’m glad you found me,” Kaylin said. Her smile underlined the sincerity in her words.

“So am I. There’s something I have to give you.” The woman fished into her bag and produced a large, manila envelope with something thick and rectangular inside. Dane could see that it was one of the packing envelopes used for mailing delicate items. “Your father gave me this a few months ago. He made me promise to keep it a secret. He said that I should give it to you if anything should ever happen to him.” She shook her head. “I never thought it would be so soon, if ever. Your father always seemed indestructible.”

Dane turned his head toward the window, giving

the two a modicum of privacy to share this painful moment. Outside, a solitary boat drifted lazily down the Cooper River.

Kaylin nodded to Bernie, her eyes misty, and carefully undid the clasp on the envelope. Reaching in, she carefully withdrew a battered, old bible, the leather cover worn with age.

Dane leaned forward, his heart beating faster. This had to be it.

After a moment's pause, Kaylin opened the old book, and gingerly flipped through the pages. The writing was French! In various places, someone had written notes in the margins in a bold, ornate hand. The ink had faded with time, and was, in parts, nearly invisible. Beside her, Bones whistled, and leaned closer. She turned back to the inside cover. There, on the front page, in the same flowing script, was the name: *Louis Domenic de Rienzi*.

"Rienzi's personal Bible," Bones marveled, his tone near reverential. "This is what the priest was after."

As Dane sat staring at the ancient volume, something drew his attention. The boat had stopped drifting. A solitary man stood on the deck, and appeared to be pointing in their direction. Immediately, Dane realized what was happening, and he sprang to his feet.

"Down!" he shouted, grasping the edge of the table and upending it toward the bay window. The others fell to the floor as bullets shattered the glass and ripped into the heavy tabletop. An instant later, the sound of rifle fire drifted across the water, echoing hollowly through the house. Dane drew his Walther with the futile knowledge that boat was too far away

for him to have any hope of hitting the shooter.

“Out the front,” he ordered. He did not have a clue who was shooting at them, but he had an idea why. In any case, they had to get Kaylin and the bible out of there right away. He reached up over the table and fired blindly, the report of the Walther loud in the small space.

“Come on Granny!” Bones yelled to Bernie. His pistol in his right hand, he wrapped his left arm around the woman’s waist and pulled her toward the door. Her eyes were wide with fright, but did not argue.

Dane followed behind, snapping off two more hasty shots at the boat in hopes of slowing the sniper’s fire. He turned to see Kaylin rummaging through a drawer. “What are you doing?” he shouted. What could she possibly need from the kitchen that could not wait?

She turned back toward him, a .380 automatic and two reloads in her hand. “Dad kept guns everywhere. Let’s go.” She nodded toward the door.

He was impressed by her lack of panic, but there was no time to remark on it. He rushed to the front door where Bones and Bernie waited. He nudged the door open and looked up and down the deserted street. Behind them, the sniper continued to rain bullets on the house. From the sounds of shattering glass, Dane determined that the shooter was methodically firing into each room, working his way across the back of the structure. They needed to get away immediately.

“Bones, you take Bernie in her car. Kaylin and I will go in mine.”

They hurried to the vehicles, weapons at the ready. Dane threw open the door of his rented green Tahoe and fired it up. He glanced at the rear view

mirror and saw a silver Taurus whip around the corner and come barreling down the street toward them. The passenger side window was down, and the man opposite the driver reached out the window and opened fire. Kaylin, Bible clutched in one hand, returned fire with her .380 before joining Dane in the SUV. Dane floored it, hoping to stay ahead of the attacker's vehicle.

He looked in the rear view mirror in time to see Bones make a u-turn in Bernie's cream-colored Lincoln and tear down the street, headed on a collision course with the Taurus. Bones thrust his pistol out the driver's window, blazing away left-handed with his nine as he charged their assailants.

"He's crazy," Kaylin whispered in awe. She climbed into the back seat, .380 still at the ready, and watched out the back window.

"You have no idea," Dane said. In his rear-view, he saw the windshield of the Taurus shatter. The driver yanked the car hard to the right as Bones flashed by, still shooting. The silver car fishtailed as it drifted into Maxwell's front yard, but the driver recovered quickly and continued the pursuit. Dane groaned. "Are you all right using that thing?" he asked, tilting his head toward Kaylin's pistol.

"Please," she said. "You knew my father." She turned back toward the rear of the vehicle, her .380 trained on the pursuing car.

He took a hard right, nearly bringing the Tahoe up on two wheels. He stepped on the accelerator and weaved through the sparse afternoon traffic heading into downtown Charleston. Behind them, the Taurus whipped around the corner, tires screeching. Dane cursed as he watched the other drivers move out of the

way of the speeding silver vehicle. How were they going to get away?

“Maybe they won’t shoot at us with witnesses around,” Kaylin said. Her hope proved in vain as shots rang out, and spiderwebbed cracks spread around a bullet hole in the bottom corner of the rear window. “Okay, forget I said that.”

“Gotcha,” Dane said as he whipped the wheel back-and-forth, zigzagging as he sped along, but trying not to slip into a pattern that would make them easy targets. He heard the rear driver’s side window roll down, then the report of Kaylin’s pistol as she squeezed off rounds, maintaining a slow, steady fire at their attackers.

“Where are the cops when you need them?” he growled. The light ahead turned red. He pressed the pedal to the floor and veered into the oncoming lane to pass the traffic that had stopped for the light, narrowly avoiding a collision with a cab that was crossing the intersection. The cab screeched to a halt, and he heard the cabbie shout a physically impossible suggestion as they shot past. Once through the light, he yanked the Tahoe back onto his side of the road and continued on.

“They’re through,” Kaylin called to him, snapping off another shot. Unfortunately, the light traffic worked in both drivers’ favor.

A quick glance in the rear view mirror showed the Taurus again narrowing the gap between the two vehicles.

“How can they possibly keep up with us when they’re driving with a broken windshield?” Kaylin grumbled.

Dane did not answer. It was further

confirmation that whomever Maxie had run afoul of, they were good. He turned a hard right onto Market Street, the Taurus now in close pursuit. Kaylin exchanged a few more shots with the passenger in the pursuing car.

“Something has got to give, here,” she said, popping a reload into her pistol. “They’re way too close.”

“That’s an understatement,” Dane replied, glancing in his mirror. The traffic ahead of them was at a standstill. The oncoming lanes were almost gridlocked, and tourists packed the narrow sidewalks. The last thing they needed was an old west-style shootout, but it might come down to that. He looked around for a side street, anything that would afford an escape. Ahead of him, the stalled traffic loomed ever closer. And then, to his left, he saw what he was looking for. It could work, but they would have to be fast.

He tapped the brake, and then yanked the wheel hard to the left, nearly rolling the top-heavy vehicle. Horns blared as he cut across the street directly in front of oncoming traffic. Hitting the brakes hard, he maneuvered the Tahoe into a controlled skid, then released the pedal and whipped the vehicle into an empty parking space.

“Out,” he barked. He hopped out of the car and looked across the street, where the sheer volume of vehicles had managed to hold up the Taurus. The driver was trying to force his way across through the heavy oncoming traffic. Through the driver’s window, Dane was finally able to get a look at their pursuers.

The two could have been twins. Each had short, dark hair, and wore wrap-around sunglasses and dark

colored polo-style shirts. *Dressed to blend in with the crowd*, Dane thought. *That's what I intend to do*. He took Kaylin's hand, and led her away from the car. They hurried across the parking lot and into the Charleston Slave Market.