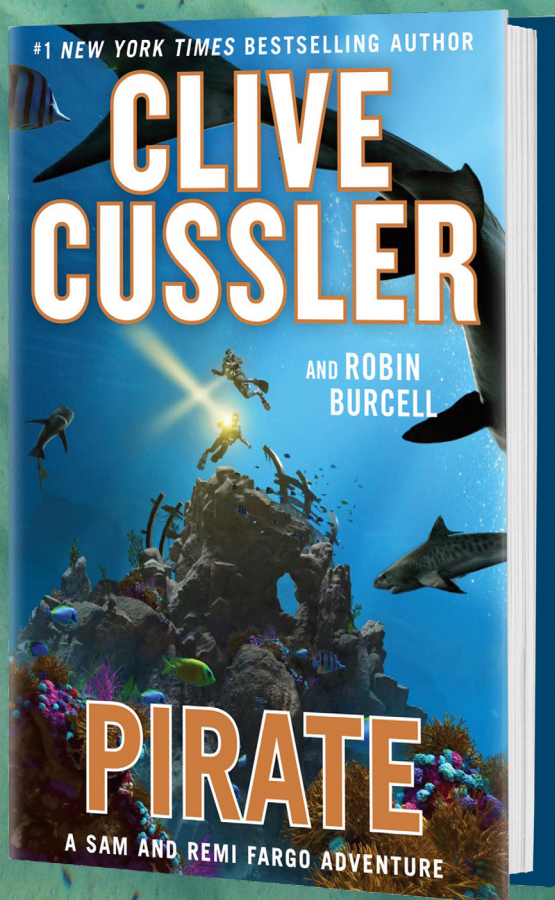


CLIVE CUSSLER

PIRATE



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CLIVE CUSSLER
AND ROBIN BURCELL



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS • NEW YORK

PIRATE

Prologue



Bishop's Lynn, Norfolk, England

October 9, 1216

The first flurries of snow fell from the gray sky, the temperature plummeting as twilight deepened. William the Marshal, Earl of Pembroke, reined his spirited stallion to a stop, the three knights behind him following suit. Around them, the forest turned into a menacing maze of rustling shadows, the path no longer clear.

When William failed to see the horsemen they'd broken away from earlier that evening, he wondered for a moment if they had taken a wrong turn. But no. There was the twisted oak on the left, as he remembered. He and the three knights with him had ridden ahead to scout the path for the others who would be following the next day, guarding the king's treasure. And though William had argued against the move, hoping to wait for more reinforcements, the king's advisers insisted that it was important to secure the treasure's safety—especially now that Prince Louis of France had taken London and was proclaiming himself King

of England. With half of King John's barons siding with Louis against him, he wanted the royal treasure out of the usurper's reach.

Robert de Braose rode up beside him and William looked over. "My men should have been here by now."

"Perhaps the colder weather has delayed them."

William held up his hand, demanding silence. The faintest of sounds caught his attention, and he strained to hear. "Listen . . ."

"I hear nothing."

There it was again. A rustling that differed from the wind in the trees.

Beside him, a whisper of metal as Robert drew his sword from its leather scabbard. Then a cry as several horsemen emerged from the forest, their swords drawn. William's horse reared at the unexpected charge. He fought to stay seated. He heard the air swoosh as Robert's sword arced toward him.

Instinctively, he lifted his shield. Too late. The sharp edge of Robert's blade struck his rib cage. The tight chain mail of his body tunic absorbed most of the blow, though pain shot through him.

Had Robert mistaken him for the enemy?

Impossible, he thought as he drew his sword. He whirled about, then took out the horseman closest to him. The man's body landed near that of William's youngest knight, Arthur de Clare.

Anger surged through him as he turned to Robert. "Have you gone mad?" he asked, almost too stunned to believe he'd been ambushed by one of the king's handpicked men.

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“On the contrary,” Robert said. He urged his mount forward, swung again, but he no longer held the element of surprise. Their blades collided, metal ringing. “I have finally come to my senses.”

“By attacking me, you commit treason against the king. To what end?”

“Not my king, yours. I swear fealty to Louis of France.”

The betrayal struck deep. “You were my friend.”

Robert kicked at his horse’s flanks, sword lunging as he leaned forward, then pulled back at the last second.

William anticipated the feint, waited, then swung his shield, knocking Robert from his horse. The stallion ran off. Behind them, Hugh Fitz Hubert, also unhorsed, took down one rebel knight, then turned to find another riding off, leading the remaining horses away. Two-upon-two, and William the only remaining horseman. He liked these odds much better and he circled around, facing Robert. “I trained you. I know your weaknesses.”

“And I, yours.” The clouds parted, and a shaft of moonlight glinted off Robert’s weapon of choice. A one-edged blade combined the power and weight of an axe with the versatility of a sword. The end curved slightly into a deadly point—one which William had seen penetrate tightly woven chain mail.

The heavier weight of the weapon gave Robert an advantage over the lighter two-edged longsword that William used. But Robert would tire easier, especially now that he’d been knocked from his mount. And no sooner had that thought crossed William’s mind than Robert charged him, swinging his blade like a battle-axe, aiming for the horse’s legs.

William retreated, realizing the greater threat. Take out their horses and, even if they did survive, they could never get back in time to warn the king.

A hard thing to do—giving up the advantage—but William knew it was his only chance. He dismounted, slapping his horse on its flank, sending it off. Fitz Hubert and the rebel knight squared off, swords clashing.

He faced Robert. The two men sidestepped, round and round. William examined Robert's metal tunic, hoping there might be some flaw in the mail. "Why?" he asked between blows. He needed answers. He intended to survive.

Robert eyed him, shifting the weight of his sword in his hand. "There is enough gold in the king's camp to fund an entire army—take back what was lost by *your* inept king's actions."

"His actions are his to make"—metal sparked against metal—"whether or not you find them to your liking."

"My family has lost everything," Robert said, circling William, searching for an opening, waiting for the right moment. "The king has lined his coffers with our gold—with our blood. Imprisoned my half brothers." He struck again and again. "That treasure belongs to us, and where it goes, we go."

William's muscles burned, he was tiring fast. Robert was a formidable enemy. Younger and stronger. The two men faced each other, their breath coming hard and fast. He lost track of Fitz Hubert and the other rebel knight but heard them somewhere in the dark. "You *will* fail," William said.

"Nay. The king is already dying."

Fear coursed through William. And, with it, the strength to lift his sword one last time. His blade arced. Robert parried—as

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William knew he would. William's sword glanced upward, and he used the force to bring it farther, thrusting into the chain mail beneath Robert's arm. With both hands, he drove Robert to the ground.

William stood over Robert, noting the mixture of fear and loathing on his face as he stomped on Robert's sword arm. He pressed the point of his blade against Robert's throat. "What say you now?"

"We have still won."

"With your imminent demise?" It was a moment of glory. A heartbeat away from striking the deathblow to the traitor. Especially when he saw Fitz Hubert emerge from the trees unscathed.

But then Robert, his breathing labored, smiled at William. "Who do you think convinced the king to move his treasure for safekeeping, then set up this ambush? 'Twas I . . . Prince Louis, the true king, who sits now in London, will reap the benefits of your false king's greed . . . The treasure will be ours." He sucked in a lungful of air. "We have spies in every court . . . Every last jewel in his crown, every last bit of his gold, will finance Louis's campaign. England will be his . . . You and your ilk will swear fealty to Louis before this week is through."

"Not if I have aught to say about it."

William drove the sword home, twisting to make sure the final thrust brought death. He left the body where it was, then eyed Fitz Hubert. "Are you hurt?"

"A cracked rib, I fear. "

"You heard?"

"Aye."

They managed to recover only one horse, William's, and they

decided because of Fitz Hubert's injury, William would ride to warn the king. When he reached the encampment in Bishop's Lynn, he saw it on the faces of the others. John de Lacy met him outside the king's tent, refusing him entry. "The king is ill. Dysentery. He wishes to see no one."

"He will see me. Make way or forfeit your life."

"What—"

William pushed past him and entered the tent, his nostrils flaring at the putrid air. The king's physician and two stewards were in attendance. Candles flickered in their stands around the king's pallet, casting a dim glow about the still form. Too still. William feared the king might be dead by now. But as he neared, he saw his chest rise and fall with each shallow breath. "My liege." William took to his knee at the king's bedside, bowing his head. "I have failed you."

The king's eyes opened slightly. A sheen of perspiration covered his brow. "How so?"

"What I have to say is best told in private."

King John said nothing at first, just stared at William. Then, a slight flick of his wrist. "Be gone. All."

William waited until the tent was cleared. And, even then, he was loath to impart the news. "I failed to recognize a traitor in your midst. Perhaps not the only one. Robert de Braose. He told me you were dying. Before he possibly could have heard."

"Dysentery."

"I fear not."

The king closed his eyes, and for a moment William worried that he would not waken. "Who would do this?"

"That, I do not know. But whoever has worked this evil, they

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know of the royal treasure you bring with you. It is meant to finance Prince Louis's claim on the English throne. They know you are moving it. Your illness was to be the distraction needed so that on the morrow they could take it."

"My son . . ." The king reached out, grasped at William's hand, his grip weak, feverish. "What of Henry?"

"He is safe. I will guard him with my life." The king's oldest son, a mere lad of nine, was innocent of the dishonesty and treachery of the last several kings—his father and all his relatives included. If there was to be any hope for England, it would be through a monarch who was untouched by greed and murder. "I fear that the temptation of such a treasure will be too much for the young prince's reign."

"He will need all of my treasure to finance his retribution. To win back our lands."

"My liege. If I may be frank. As long as that treasure exists, there will be those who want nothing more than to possess it. Louis of France is only the first of many. And lest you forget, the rebel barons you have fought against these past several months cannot be trusted. Not while the lure of gold and riches tempts them." He waited a moment to make sure his words were heard and understood. "A poor kingdom is far less desirable. Even more important, a young king barely old enough to rule a poor kingdom is no longer a threat . . ."

"What are you saying?"

"What if that treasure was lost this night while we were trying to move it through the quicksand of the fens? If you lose the treasure, you lose your son's enemies."

The king remained silent, his breathing shallow.

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“You are dying, sire.” Though he didn’t want to believe, he knew the words were true. This was no dysentery. He’d seen it before. A slow poison that ate away at the gut. The king would last perhaps a week or more, his pain excruciating while he waited—nay, prayed for death. “This way, we know young Henry will be safe.”

“And if my son should need the treasure? When he is older?”

“He won’t. As long as it remains lost, he will be safe.”

It was several long seconds before the king answered. “See that it is done.”

One



San Francisco, California
Present day

Sam and Remi Fargo weaved their way around the tourists crowding the sidewalk. Once they were through the green pagoda-style gateway of Chinatown, the throng much thinner, Remi checked the map on her cell phone. “I have a feeling we took a wrong turn somewhere.”

“To that restaurant,” Sam replied, removing his revered panama hat. “A tourist trap, if I ever saw one.”

She glanced at her husband, watching as he ran his fingers through his sun-streaked brown hair. He stood over a head taller than Remi, with broad shoulders and an athletic build. “I didn’t hear you complaining when they brought out the moo shu pork.”

“Where did we go wrong?”

“Ordering the Mongolian beef. Definitely a mistake.”

“On the map, Remi.”

She zoomed in, reading the streets. “Perhaps the shortcut through Chinatown wasn’t so short.”

"Maybe if you'd at least tell me where we're going, I could help?"

"It's the only part of this trip," Remi said, "that's my surprise for you. You haven't even shared what you have planned."

"For a reason." Sam put on his hat, and Remi linked her arm through his while they walked. He'd arranged this trip because their last adventure to the Solomon Islands had not been the hoped-for quiet vacation they'd planned. "I promise you nothing but rest, relaxation, and a week of no one trying to kill us."

"A whole week of downtime," she said, sidling closer to him as a cloud drifted over the sun, taking with it all the warmth of the early-September afternoon. "Have we had anything like that in a while?"

"Not that I can remember."

"There it is," she said, spying the bookstore. The flaking gold-leafed lettering in the window read *Pickering's Used & Rare Books*. "Just to show how very much I appreciate you traipsing all this way with me, I won't make you come in." Remi was being facetious. Sam's late father, a NASA engineer, had collected rare books, and Sam, also an engineer, had inherited that same passion.

He eyed the bookstore, then his wife. "What sort of husband would I be if something happened to you in there?"

"Dangerous things, books."

"Look what they did to your brain."

The pair crossed the street to the bookstore. A Siamese cat, resting on a stack of volumes in the window, looked up in disdain when a bell tinkled as Sam opened the door for Remi. The place

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smelled of musk and old paper, and Remi scanned the shelves, at first seeing nothing but used hardcovers and current paperbacks. She hid her disappointment from Sam, hoping they hadn't made the trip for nothing.

A gray-haired man, wearing gold spectacles, wandered in from the back, wiping his hands on a dusty cloth. He saw them and smiled. "May I help you find something?"

Sam's phone rang. He took it from his pocket, telling Remi, "I'll take it outside."

"Perfect, since this was meant to be a surprise."

He stepped out, and Remi waited until the door closed firmly behind him before turning to the proprietor. "Mr. Pickering?"

He nodded.

"I was told you had a copy of *The History of Pyrates and Privateers*."

His smile faltered for the barest of instances. "Of course. Right over here."

Pickering led her to a shelf where several identical volumes of *Pirates and Privateers* sat. And while they were clearly reproductions, their faux gold-tooled leather binding gave them the appearance of something that might be found in a library centuries before.

He slid a copy from the shelf, used his cloth to wipe the dust from the top of it, then handed it to her. "How did you know we carried this particular volume?"

She decided to keep it vague—not wanting there to be any hurt feelings now that she knew the book was merely a reproduction. "A woman I work with knew of my husband's interest in

lost artifacts and rare books.” She opened the cover, admiring the detail that gave it an antiqued appearance. “It’s a beautiful copy . . . Just not what I was hoping for.”

He pushed his spectacles up onto the bridge of his nose. “It’s popular with interior designers. Less emphasis on lost artifacts and more on decorating a coffee table. I do, on occasion, run across old volumes of historical significance. Perhaps your friend meant the Charles Johnson volumes on *A General History of Pyrates*? That, I do have.”

“As do we. I was hoping for *Pirates and Privateers* to round out our collection. My friend, no doubt, confused the two titles.”

“Who did you say referred you here?”

“Bree Marshall.”

“Oh. Well, that’s—” A whoosh of air and the tinkling of the bell seemed to startle him, and he and Remi turned toward the door at the same time. Remi, expecting Sam, saw a much shorter, broad-shouldered man silhouetted against the light from the shop’s window.

The bookseller eyed the man, then smiled at Remi. “Let me get the dust off of it and wrap it for you.” And before she could object, tell him she really had no interest in buying a reproduction, he swept the book from her hands. “I’ll be right back.”

Her friend Bree had clearly misunderstood which book her uncle had in his shop. No matter. It was a beautiful copy and would look nice in Sam’s office. He’d certainly appreciate the sentiment, she decided as she turned to browse the shelves while waiting, spying a copy of Galeazzi’s eighteenth-century music treatise. It appeared to be a first addition, and she couldn’t imagine why it was sitting in a simple locked glass case at the front counter.

“Do you work here?” the man asked.

She turned, caught a glimpse of dark hair, brown eyes, and a square-set jaw, as he moved from the backlighting of the window. “I’m sorry. No. He’s in the back. Wrapping a gift for me.”

He nodded, then walked past the aisle out of sight. When Mr. Pickering emerged from the back room, he walked around the counter to the register. The man stood off to one side, his hands shoved into the pockets of his black leather coat. His presence bothered Remi, though for no reason she could determine except perhaps the way he seemed to be watching their every move—and that he never took his hands from his pockets. She didn’t like it when she couldn’t see someone’s hands.

Mr. Pickering slid her brown paper parcel onto the counter, his gnarled fingers shaking slightly. Nerves or age? she wondered.

“Thank you,” she said. “How much do I owe you?”

“Oh. Right. Forty-nine ninety-five. Plus tax. No charge for the gift wrapping.”

Not quite the wrapping she would have chosen. Aloud, she said, “On the good-news front, it’s definitely less than I’d anticipated.”

“Printed in China,” he said, offering her a nervous smile.

She paid him, then tucked the parcel beneath her arm. The Siamese, on its windowed perch by the door, peered over at her, its tail twitching. Remi reached down and petted it, the cat purring, as she stole a glance at the stranger, who hadn’t moved.

He pulled a gun from his coat pocket and pointed it at them. “Lady, you should’ve left when you had a chance. Keep your hands where I can see them.”

Two



Sam finished his phone call with the hotel manager, who confirmed that the champagne on ice and gift for Remi had been delivered to their suite as ordered. Sam checked his watch, then glanced over at the bookstore, wondering what was taking Remi so long. Knowing her, she was probably having a lively discussion on some obscure topic with the bookseller and that customer who'd walked in shortly after. She'd been excited about the prospect of searching for this mystery book—something she was certain he'd want to add to his collection. But, really, how long could it take to find the thing and pay for it?

Time to urge Remi to shop a little faster or that champagne was bound to be room temperature by the time they made it back. He peered into the window, seeing no one, not even the cat who'd been perched on the books by the door. What he did see was Remi's purse sitting atop a wrapped parcel on the counter.

Not like her to leave her purse, he thought, and opened the door, the bells jingling as he stepped in. "Remi?"

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The shop appeared empty.

“Remi?”

He eyed her unattended purse, then walked through the store, looking down each aisle, finally finding her standing in the doorway of what appeared to be an office or storage area at the back of the shop. “There you are.”

“You’re supposed to wait outside. Remember?”

“Everything okay?”

“I found that cookbook I’ve been searching for. The owner’s wrapping it up for me. Now, leave or you’ll ruin your surprise.”

He stared for a second or two, unable to read anything on her face, her green eyes about as expressive as a poker player’s. “I’ll wait outside,” he said. “Don’t be long.”

She smiled sweetly at him, never moving from the doorway. “I won’t.”

He retraced his steps. The door bells jangled overhead as he opened, then shut, the door, remaining inside the store.

While Remi wasn’t exactly a stranger in the kitchen, she often joked that *cook* was a noun, not a verb.

Come to think of it, he couldn’t recall her *ever* buying a cookbook, much less searching for one. Definitely not while they were married.

She was in trouble.

Nice time to be without a gun.

Typically, he carried a Smith & Wesson .357 magnum, but they were in San Francisco for fun and so he’d left it on their plane.

Now what? Call 911 and hope the police arrived in time?

Not about to risk his wife’s life, he silenced the ringer on his

phone, set his hat on the counter, then quietly began opening drawers, searching for something a little more substantial than his small pocketknife to use as a weapon. He found a folding knife with a four-inch blade. He pulled it open, felt it lock. Decent weight, nicely balanced, point intact, probably used to open boxes, judging by the gumminess on the blade's edge. Now to get back to that room without being discovered.

He slid his hand into his wife's purse, found a small makeup bag, and took out a compact mirror. Flipping it open, he wiped the powder residue from the mirror with his pants, then edged his way down the aisle, making sure a row of bookshelves was between him and the door to that storeroom.

"You!" a deep voice shouted.

Sam froze.

"Forget the combination again and you die."

"Forgive me." Pickering, the bookseller, Sam figured, as he continued down the aisle. "I'm nervous."

"Please," Remi said. "There's no need to wave that gun around."

"Shut up! You, old man. Get that safe open."

"I—I'm trying."

Sam forced himself to breathe evenly. His wife was in that room, and all he wanted to do was rush in there, save her. But his haste could mean her death. A folding knife against a gunman. It was moments like this he was glad for the weapons-and-security training he'd received during his years at DARPA.

When he reached the end of the aisle, he stopped, used the mirror to peer around the corner.

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Light spilled from the doorway of the storeroom onto the gray linoleum floor. Sam kept to the edge, careful not to cast a shadow. Holding the mirror out, he angled it to get a visual into the room.

Relief at the sight of his auburn-haired wife, now seated by a cluttered desk, was short-lived as he angled the compact farther and saw the short, swarthy fellow holding a semiauto to the shopkeeper's back. The two men stood in front of a large floor safe, the shopkeeper turning the dial. If Sam approached from this position, it put Remi between him and the gunman.

He didn't like the odds. At the moment, he had no other choice. C'mon, Remi. Turn. See me . . .

He rocked the tiny mirror back and forth so that the light caught her face. Unfortunately, she looked away, leaning toward the desk, as an audible click indicated the safe had unlocked. Pickering pulled open the door, revealing a smooth wooden box large enough to hold two bottles of wine.

The gunman stepped closer to it. "What's in the box?"

"An old book. Just an antique."

"Put it on the desk."

He complied, placing the box on the desk near Remi.

Sam grasped the handle-heavy knife by its blade, stepped into the doorway, aimed, and threw.

The timing couldn't have been worse.

At that very moment, Remi jumped from her chair and swung the brass desk lamp against the gunman's hand. Sam's knife struck the man's shoulder. A shot cracked the air as he twisted, his gun flying from his hand.

Sam rushed in. The gunman pushed Pickering onto Remi,

then grabbed the box. He slammed it into Sam's head as he ran past and out the door.

Sam wasn't sure if it was the jangling of bells as the front door opened or the blow to his head causing the ringing.

"Sam . . . ?"

It was a second before he realized his wife was speaking to him. "Everyone okay?" he asked.

"Are *you* okay?" she replied.

"Fine . . ." He reached up, touched his head, his fingers covered in blood. "Looks like I came in second."

Remi set the gun on the desk, then pushed him into the chair she'd been sitting in moments before. Placing both hands on his cheeks, her skin warm, soft, she leaned down, searched his eyes, as if to ensure that he really was okay. "You're always first in my book. Ambulance?"

"Not necessary."

She nodded, took a closer look at his head, then turned toward the bookseller, who was using the desk to pull himself to his feet. "Mr. Pickering. Let me help you."

"I'm fine," the old man said. "Where's Mr. Wickham?"

"Mr. Wickham?" Remi asked.

"My cat. Wickham . . . ? Here, kitty, kitty . . ." A moment later, the Siamese wandered into the storeroom, and Pickering scooped it up.

"Well, then," Remi said, "everyone accounted for. Time to call the police."

Pickering eyed the phone as she put the receiver to her ear. "Is that necessary?" he asked.

"Very," she replied, pressing 911 on the keypad.

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The police arrived about five minutes later, sirens blaring, even though she told them the robber had left.

One of the officers drew Sam aside to take his statement. When he'd finished, the officer asked Sam to show him where the gunman had been standing when his weapon discharged. Sam positioned himself next to the desk, then demonstrated the man's movement as Remi bashed his hand with the lamp. The officer stood where Sam stood, looking around. "And where were you when you threw the knife?"

"In the doorway."

"Stand there, please."

Sam did so.

The officer walked over, placed his finger on the doorframe. "Here's where the bullet hit."

Sam looked over, realized it was just a few inches from his head. "My lucky day."

"Mr. Fargo. While I commend your actions, in the future might I suggest you call the police?"

"If this happens again, I'll make sure to do that."

More often than not, he knew Remi would take the proactive approach.

It was one of the many things he loved about her, he thought, glancing toward the front of the store. She had already given her statement and was waiting patiently by the door.

A plainclothes investigator, Sergeant Fauth from the Robbery Detail, arrived and was questioning Mr. Pickering, who seemed distracted—understandable, considering his age and the circumstances. He opened the still-unlocked safe as the investigator asked, "Was anything else taken?"

“No. Just the box with the book in it. There’s really nothing else of value in there. A few old coins. Spanish gold, but nothing that—well, nothing. The coins are still there.”

“What sort of book was this?”

Pickering shrugged. “Just a reproduction of an old book on pirates. The book itself is of little value. I have several on the floor. I can show you.” He walked out, retrieved one from the bookshelf, and set it on the desk.

“The box it was kept in, then? Did that have any value?”

“Not much. No.”

“Why was it locked up, then?”

“I suppose in hopes that if someone thinks something is valuable, he’ll ignore what really is?”

“Mr. Pickering,” Sergeant Fauth said, looking at his notebook, then at the bookseller. “Any reason at all you can think of that this man targeted your store?”

He wiped a sheen of perspiration from his brow, his hand shaking slightly. The robbery had clearly taken its toll on him. “It may have something to do with a rumor that started about an original of this book being here. Why or who, I don’t know. But really, page for page, the book that was stolen is the same book as this copy. A reproduction only.” He patted the volume of *The History of Pyrates and Privateers* that he’d taken from the shelf.

The sergeant thanked him, then tucked his notebook into the breast pocket of his suit coat. CSIs arrived to dust for prints and photos. Once that process had started, the investigator handed his business card to both men. “If anything comes up—questions, something you remember—you have my number.” He

started to walk out, then turned toward Pickering. “Anyone you want me to call? Family member? Friend? Maybe come by, help you out?”

“No one. I’ll be fine now.”

He left, nodding at Remi on his way out the door.

Sam glanced over at the CSI, then at Mr. Pickering, concerned about his being here by himself. “Are you sure we can’t do anything for you?”

“No. Thank you, Mr. Fargo. I think after they’re done here, I may just go upstairs and take a long nap.”

Remi walked up to Pickering, giving him a hug. “I’m very sorry for what happened.”

He took a deep breath and smiled at her. “I can’t thank you enough. Your bold action may have saved our lives.”

Sam picked up Remi’s purse and handed it to her, wanting to speed their departure. “Ready?” he said, holding the door.

“Definitely.”

“Wait,” Mr. Pickering called out. “Your package. It would be a shame to have gone through all that and leave it behind.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking the parcel from him, then handing it to Sam as soon as they were outside.

“I take it this isn’t a cookbook?” Sam asked.

“It’s not even the book I came for. It’s more a didn’t-want-to-go-home-empty-handed book. I think it’ll look nice on the table in your office.”

“We’ll certainly appreciate the backstory.”

They crossed the street, walking uphill toward the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. They’d been in tough scrapes before—and they would be again. And even though he had every confidence in his wife’s

ability to take care of herself, he was never going to stop worrying about her.

It was this last thought that caught him each and every time. He reached over, took her hand in his, and she leaned her head into his shoulder. "You okay?" Sam asked after a bit.

"Me? Fine. I'm not the one bleeding."

"Superficial cut. It's already stopped."

She looked over at him. "We'll see when we're back at the hotel."

"Did you notice those gold coins in Pickering's safe?"

"Odd, isn't it? That the robber ignored the gold for a book in a box that he hadn't even seen?"

"A book that's supposed to be nothing but a reproduction."

"Definitely odd," she said as they turned onto Stockton Street by their hotel. "It was almost as if Mr. Pickering was downplaying the stolen book's value. Which doesn't make sense. I'd hate to have been shot over a reprint. Which brings me to my next point. What happened to that promised week of no one trying to kill us?"

"You didn't think I meant today, did you? Tomorrow. The week starts tomorrow."

"Well, then. Glad *that's* cleared up."

Inside the lobby, they stopped at the concierge desk, where Remi asked the woman working there to mail the book to their home with the other item she'd purchased earlier that morning—a large ceramic rooster from an antique shop—a gift for their researcher, Selma Wondrash, who said she'd always wanted a rooster for her kitchen.

"Insurance?" the woman asked. "Or special packing instructions?"

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“No,” Remi said. “It’s just a book. It’ll be fine.”

“Same address as the rooster?”

“The same.”

“I’ll take care of it for you, Mrs. Fargo.”

“Thank you.”

At the door of their suite, Sam swiped the key card in the lock, then took a quick look inside before allowing Remi to enter. “Good to go,” he said, holding the door for her.

She stepped into the room, and on a table in front of the sofa found a plate of sliced green apples, cheese, and a bottle of Billecart-Salmon Brut Rosé champagne on ice. He was pleased to see that someone from Guest Services had noticed they were later than expected and so refilled the ice bucket. The champagne was chilled to perfection, and the gift he’d arranged to have waiting there was next to the two fluted glasses. He handed the small, distinctively blue Tiffany box to Remi.

“And I didn’t get you a thing.”

“You got me a book.”

“A copy, as it turns out.”

He uncorked the champagne. “You’ll make up for it later.”

“Maybe,” she said, untying the ribbon and lifting the lid to find a gold chain with a vintage-looking diamond-studded oval key charm. “The key to your heart?”

“No key needed there.”

“Let’s hope it’s not to my new front door.” She slipped the necklace over her head. “Imagine the cost to replace it every time we had to rekey.”

“With all the security features we’ve recently added, diamond-studded keys would be the least of our expenses.” In fact,

they'd spent a small fortune turning their house into a veritable fortress after it had nearly been destroyed during a massive home invasion. Peace of mind, he thought, handing her a glass. Then, raising his own, he said, "New promise. Starting tomorrow, nothing but rest, relaxation, and a week of no one trying to kill us. Ah, yes . . . and my undivided attention."

"I'm holding you to your promise on that last part, Fargo."

"No one trying to kill us? Or my undivided attention?"

"Both would be nice," she said, touching her glass to his.

"Indeed."



Remi was still asleep when Sam awoke the next morning. He quietly rose from the bed and ordered their breakfast from room service. By the time it arrived, Remi emerged from the bedroom, her lithe form wrapped in a cream silk robe, her long auburn hair still damp from the shower. She kissed him, then took a seat at the table.

He poured her coffee and slid it across the table toward her, then resumed reading his paper. "Sleep well?"

"I did," she said, spooning fresh fruit into a small bowl of Greek yogurt. "Where are we off to today?"

"And spoil the surprise? Not saying." Sam turned the page of the *Chronicle*, scanning the articles, when his gaze caught on the headline *Robbery Victim Dies from Apparent Heart Attack*.

"This changes things . . ."

"What?"

He lowered the paper and looked at her. "The bookseller, Gerald Pickering. He's dead."

Three



Charles Avery sat back in his seat, drinking coffee as he turned the page of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. In his late fifties, his dark hair salted with gray at the temples, he was—in his opinion—fit for a man of his age. Even so, he'd needed a second cup of coffee to get it together this morning, having flown in late last night on his jet from the East Coast to his San Francisco offices.

When he read about the death of the bookseller Gerald Pickering, he smiled. The news wasn't all that surprising. Not after yesterday's events.

Of course, all of that meant nothing if his men failed to recover the book and confirm it was the one he'd specifically been searching for.

Good riddance, Pickering, he thought as the head of his security team, Colin Fisk, walked into the room carrying a large, polished wooden box. Finally. "You found it," Avery said.

"The bookstore, yes. The book, no."

Avery took a deep breath, containing his anger. "What do you mean no?"

Fisk placed the box onto the table, lifting the lid, revealing a leather-bound volume. "Fake. We went back after the police left. Pickering said he sold it to another collector before my man got there."

"Did your man explain to him who I was?"

"Yes."

"And what I'd do to him if he didn't hand it over?"

"Yes."

"Did you at least find out who he sold it to?"

"I'm afraid he expired before we were able to obtain that info."

Avery lowered his coffee cup to the mahogany table, then forced himself to take yet another deep breath as he pinned his stare on Fisk, wondering if it had been a mistake to hire this team Fisk had suggested. They were supposed to be the best—and, in some respects, they were. They followed orders without question, and they'd certainly found Pickering easily enough, even after Avery's own men had failed to do so. Was it possible that Pickering had guessed Avery's intentions? Somehow known that the knowledge of the original book's existence in his shop meant his days were numbered?

For twenty years, Avery had been searching . . .

How was it that he'd gotten so close only to miss?

He lifted the book from the box, opening it to the first page.

Clearly, it was taken from a first edition, maybe even the one stolen from his family more than two centuries before. How else

could someone so accurately reproduce the maps and wording? What this mere copy didn't have, and what he was sure he'd find in the volume Pickering had been hiding, was the key to deciphering the code on the maps printed within. What good is a map without a way to read the ciphered notations?

"You're sure you searched the place thoroughly?" Avery asked.

"Positive. We do have one possible lead, though. The names of the two who were listed as a victim and witness in the original police report. I did some checking on them. Apparently they're treasure hunters."

"Treasure hunters? Who's financing their operation? Go after the money and stop them in their tracks."

"They finance themselves," Fisk said. "And from what I've heard, others who have tried to go after them have failed. The Fargos aren't your average husband-and-wife hobbyists out searching for a quick buck. They're self-made multimillionaires who donate their proceeds to charity."

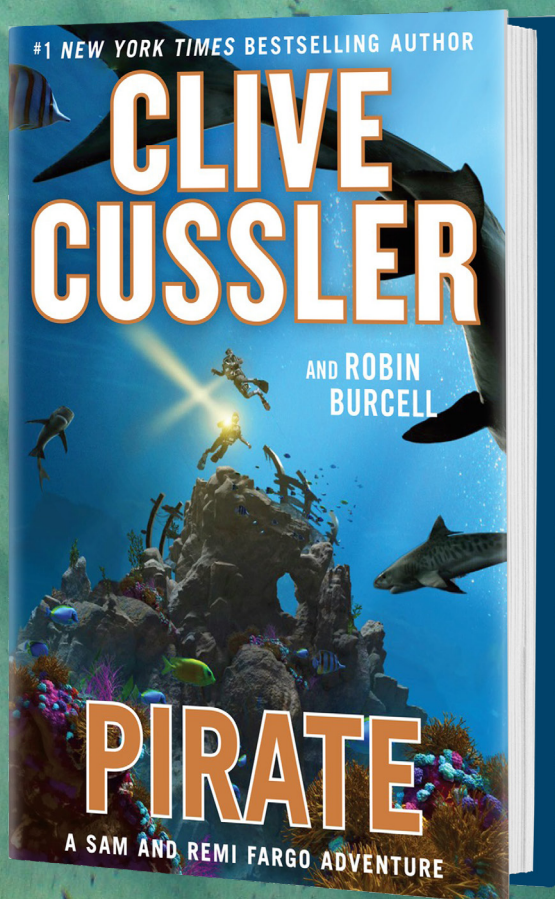
"Regular Robin Hoods? They should be easy to deal with."

"Highly trained Robin Hoods."

Avery reached for his coffee. "They haven't come up against me yet, have they?"

"No, sir. But forewarned is forearmed."

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