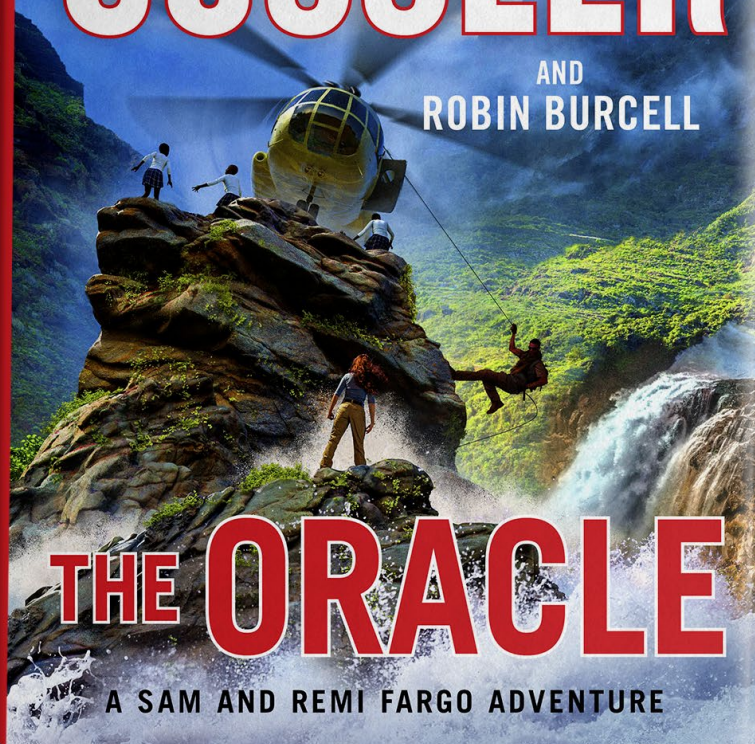


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# CLIVE CUSSLER

AND  
ROBIN BURCELL



## THE ORACLE

A SAM AND REMI FARGO ADVENTURE

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# THE ORACLE

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*A Sam and Remi Fargo  
Adventure*

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CLIVE  
CUSSLER

and Robin Burcell

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS | NEW YORK

**PUTNAM**  
— EST. 1838 —

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

### KINGDOM OF THE VANDALS, NORTH AFRICA, 533 A.D.

**Gelimer**—the last King of the Vandals, the Usurper

**Tzazon**—Gelimer's brother

**Euric**—Gelimer's next in command

**Belisarius**—general of the Byzantine Army

### GELIMER'S ANCESTORS

**Hilderic**—penultimate King of the Vandals, murdered by Gelimer

**Genseric**—King of the Vandals who conquered North Africa and laid siege to Hippo Regia

### THE PRESENT DAY

#### IN LA JOLLA

**Sam Fargo**

**Remi (Longstreet) Fargo**

**Selma Wondrash**—the Fargos' head researcher

**Professor Lazlo Kemp**—a Fargos researcher and cryptologist

**Rubin Haywood**—CIA case agent

**Zoltán**—the Fargos' German shepherd

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

### IN BULLA REGIA, TUNISIA

**Dr. Renee LaBelle**—archeologist

**Hank**—site manager, Bulla Regia

**Amal**—graduate student

**José**—Spanish graduate student

**Osmond**—Egyptian graduate student

**Yesmine**—Amal's mother

**Warren**—former site manager

### TUNISIAN GANG

**Tarek**

**Hamida**

**Ben Ayed**

**Monsieur Karim**—Tunisian antiquities dealer

**Leila**—Karim's assistant

### IN NIGERIA

#### GASHAKA GUMTI, FARGOS' SCHOOL FOR GIRLS

**Pete Jeffcoat**—Selma's research assistant, Corden's boyfriend

**Wendy Corden**—Selma's research assistant, Jeffcoat's girlfriend

**Yaro**—school caretaker, Monifa's husband.

**Monifa**—school caretaker, Yaro's wife.

**Okoro Eze**—tea farmer, Zara's father

**Zara**—student, Okoro's daughter

**Jol**—student

**Tambara**—student

**Maryam**—student

**Jonathon Atiku**—Nasha's uncle.



## CAST OF CHARACTERS

### IN JALINGO, NIGERIA

#### STREET THIEVES

Nasha Atiku

Chuk

Len

#### KALU BROTHERS

Bako Kalu

Kambili Kalu

Makao Oni (aka Scarface)—Area Boys gang leader

#### AREA BOYS

Jimi

Pili

Dayo

Den

Deric

Urhie

Joe

# THE ORACLE

Whatsoever a man soweth,  
that shall he also reap.

– GALATIANS 6:7 –

# PROLOGUE

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## PART I

*Ashes fly back into the face of him who throws them.*

— AFRICAN PROVERB —

DECEMBER 12, 533 A.D.

Bulla Regia,

Kingdom of the Vandals, North Africa

The winter moon lit the paving stones as Gelimer, King of the Vandals, and his brother, Tzazon, galloped their horses through the old triumphal arch, past the theater, past the forum, past the still-elegant sleeping town houses. When they reached the center of the city, they veered left toward the old pagan tomb-lined highway leading out of Bulla Regia toward the hills. Once beyond the silent houses of the dead, they turned onto a long avenue filled with twisted shadows from the ancient olive trees. Their horses grew skittish as the silhouetted outlines of the neglected Temple of Saturn—the great god of the harvest—loomed up before them. A tangle of vines seemed to hold its crumbling, silver-tinged walls together, the entrance to the oracle's temple hidden in the hill behind the ruins.

The two men reined to a stop, tying their horses to one of the trees.



"This way," Gelimer said, leading Tzazon toward the temple, then up the stairs to the portico. They were met by a Moorish child, who seemed to appear out of nowhere.

She guided them over the porch of the temple, then beyond the ruins, deep into a cave in the hillside. Oil lamps hung from the ceiling at intervals, the shadows dancing across inscriptions carved into the walls. When they reached the heart of the cave, the girl stopped before an unlit chamber, Gelimer on one side of her, Tzazon on the other. Tzazon looked around. "Where is this oracle?"

The child raised her henna-traced hand in a gesture of silence. "Behold," she said, "the Sign of Saturn."

As their eyes adjusted to the dim light, they saw a tripod with glowing coals. Above this, a magic square seemed to materialize.

S	A	T	O	R
A	R	E	P	O
T	E	N	E	T
O	P	E	R	A
R	O	T	A	S

It glimmered for an instant, then vanished as the coals burst into flame. The flickering light revealed a girl not much older than the child who'd led them there. Sitting on a tall stool, she wore a turban, and was dressed in robes that shimmered like emeralds tinged with blood in the glow from the embers in the tripod. When she opened her dark eyes, she seemed to be looking straight at and through Gelimer at one in the same time.

The Priestess inhaled the fumes from the tripod. In a voice that seemed as thin as the wind whispering through the olive trees, she uttered her prophecy. "Saturn holds the wheels. The balance between Rhea, wealth and abundance, and Lua, destruction and

## THE ORACLE

dissolution . . . Hear, O King of the Vandals, the wheels have slipped. Lua reigns.”

A chill penetrated Gelimer’s heart. “Tell me, Sibyl, the meaning of your words.”

“It is as it was foretold. As Gamma pursued Beta, now Beta pursues Gamma.”

“Utter nonsense,” Tzazon said. “A children’s rhyme.”

The Priestess inhaled. “Two lost already, at the tenth milestone.”

The tenth milestone was where, in the attempt to rout the invading Byzantine Army outside of Carthage, their brother and nephew had met their deaths. Tzazon, unimpressed, spat. “She could have heard that from marketplace gossip. Or from one of Belisarius’s spies. Tell me of *my* death, Sibyl, so that I can prevent it.”

The Priestess turned his direction, her eyes as black as unlit coal. “Beware the third charge.”

“The witch is mad,” Tzazon muttered. “What does this even mean?”

The sibyl’s unseeing gaze turned back to Gelimer. “Know, O King, the Saturnalia is upon us. To break the curse, the sacred scroll must be returned by one who is of royal blood. Death will come to one who is not.”

“How?” Gelimer demanded. “How do I find this scroll?”

“The penultimate king sees it from the Underworld. The Usurper is blinded. He will lose that which he holds dear, until all that is left is shadow, and naught remains but vanity.” Then, as if the power of her oracles had drained the energy from her slim form, the Priestess slumped in her chair and seemed to disappear.

Gelimer and Tzazon were alone with the child in the darkness.

“She’s a Moor,” Tzazon said to Gelimer after the child led them out. The two men walked from the temple ruins toward their horses. “She worships the old gods. How can you deceive yourself by listening to anything she tells you?”

“Deceive myself? You will be the next to die unless I find this scroll and return it.”

“What is this curse you speak of?”

“It was cast as revenge from the very Priestess who helped Genseric win his conquest,” Gelimer said. “Genseric stole the scroll, hid it, ordered the Priestess’s death, then promised to destroy the scroll should anyone take up arms against the Vandals.”

Tzazon stopped in his tracks. “You expect me to believe that something that occurred well over a hundred years ago has any effect on the here and now? You forget, brother, that these so-called oracles are masters of the vague turn of phrase. You hear what you want to hear.”

“This oracle foretold Hilderic’s death if he failed to find the scroll before the festival of Saturnalia, then return it to Hippo Regius.”

“The only reason he is dead is because the Emperor Justinian would have tried to return him to the throne. It has nothing to do with prophecy and everything to do with protecting your kingdom.”

“And what of the penultimate king’s deathbed confession? How could she possibly have known that Hilderic’s last words were about the map?”

“Servants talk.”

“There was no one there except Ammatas, who thrust the knife into his belly at my orders. And he told no one but me. If I can find this scroll, and break the curse before we go to battle, I may yet save your life.”

Tzazon freed the reins of his horse, then mounted. “Very well. Show me this map.”

The two men rode back into Bulla Regia to the royal house that Gelimer had occupied after he’d deposed his cousin Hilderic from the throne. It was the same home that belonged to Genseric, after he had stolen the scroll.

## THE ORACLE

And now, a century later, it was up to Gelimer to see to its return.

When they reached the royal house, a dozing groom who guarded the doorway rose to attention, taking their horses as they dismounted. The two men strode up the steps, through the great entrance, passing into the atrium, where Gelimer seized a burning torch from its sconce. The torchlight caused the mosaics on the floor to glitter like jewels beneath their feet as the brothers crossed the central hall to a marble staircase. That led down to a long mazelike corridor in the story underground, which protected the Vandal rulers from the summer heat.

At last, the brothers reached what had been Genseric's inner sanctum, then, years later, Hilderic's. The flickering light revealed a desk and chair of ivory and ebony. On the floor beneath it, a detailed mosaic from the old pagan mythology—Echo, behind one of two olive trees flanking the temple, pining for Narcissus, who lay at the foot of the stairs, the handsome youth gazing downward, his finger almost touching the blue and white pattern of the pool in front of the temple.

"I have searched this room, this house, a thousand times," Gelimer said. "There is no map."

"Perhaps it was Hilderic's final revenge. Sending you searching for something that doesn't exist. What exactly did he tell Ammatas?"

"That unless I faced my vanity, I would fail to see that which is right in front of me."

Tzazon grabbed the torch from him, pointing toward the floor. "Narcissus admiring his reflection. There's the answer to your riddle."

Gelimer stared at the shadows cast upon the mosaic by the dancing flame. Echo was looking at Narcissus, who seemed not to know she was there. Behind him was a building, which looked very much like the Temple of Saturn. "His reflection," Gelimer said as he



CLIVE CUSSLER

repeated the sibyl's words in his head. *All that is left is shadow, and naught remains but vanity.* He looked up at his brother. "Vanity. That's the map. Narcissus is pointing directly at it."

"A map of what?" Tzazon said, scrutinizing the pattern in the blue and white mosaic beneath Narcissus.

# PROLOGUE

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## PART II

*War has no eyes.*

— SWAHILI PROVERB —

DECEMBER 15, 533 A.D.

Tricamarum (50 kilometers west of Carthage),

Kingdom of the Vandals, North Africa

Gelimer held up his hand, signaling his army to a halt, as he and his brother Tzazon rode on alone to the top of the hill to survey the Roman encampment in the distance. A sense of fatality overwhelmed Gelimer as he studied the enemy, fifteen thousand strong. The sun glinted off the metal scale armor of the Roman cavalry and infantry as they sat around their fires, preparing their meals. “This is fruitless,” he told Tzazon.

“Forget about the words of that witch-woman.”

The sibyl’s prophecy was all Gelimer thought about. Though he had sent men to search what was left of the now dry reflecting pool in front of the Temple of Saturn, they came up empty-handed. One man died after falling from his horse, the others refused to go back, fearing the curse. Gelimer had even tried to meet with the sibyl again, but they found her cave behind the temple abandoned. “I cannot lose you, too, Tzazon—”

His brother glanced at him in exasperation. "How can you trust in pagan prophecies?"

"I beg you, do not fight this battle. Go back to the stockade and guard our women and children. You'll give them courage."

"And look like a coward to my cavalry? Besides, it's my death that's foretold. Let me be the one to decide." He drew his sword, held it on high, and wheeled his horse to face his troops, crying, "Onward!"

With a mighty roar in response, the cavalry drew their swords and followed Tzazon into battle before Gelimer had a chance to countermand the order. Crossing the stream, they charged at Belisarius's center. On the right flank, Gelimer's troops held back.

Euric, his next in command, rode up beside him. "My Lord," he said. "Your men await your orders."

Gelimer rode over to the waiting troops, then held up his sword, repeating Tzazon's battle cry. "Onward."

Euric raised his blade, shouting, "Hail, Gelimer!" They rode forth, bringing up the right flank as Tzazon took the center. Arrows flew toward them from the Romans, but the Vandals lifted their shields, rendering most of them useless. A few found their mark, the casualties dropping, but their ranks quickly filled, the Vandals repeating their battle cry as they drove into the ranks of Roman horsemen.

Swords clashed, the ring of steel deafening to Gelimer's ears. A Roman horseman charged, his spear poised toward Gelimer's chest. Gelimer parried with his shield, urged his horse around and brought his sword down, knocking the spear from his grasp. The Roman tried to draw his own blade, but Gelimer came in for the kill, driving the sharp tip beneath his armpit, knocking him from his mount. The king quickly turned, taking on a second horseman.

More Roman arrows pierced the Vandal ranks. Gelimer whirled his horse around, saw the archers riding behind the cavalry, and was

## THE ORACLE

about to call for his flank to work their way toward them, when suddenly Belisarius ordered the Roman Army to retreat.

The Vandals cheered, and Tzazon looked triumphant as he galloped toward Gelimer. "Cowards," he said. "You see? We have nothing to fear."

"Do not be so quick to judge," Gelimer replied, surveying the battlefield.

"They have twice the number of dead." Tzazon rode off toward his men, signaling them for their next attack.

Gelimer, unable to shake his sense of foreboding, watched Tzazon and his cavalry chase after the fleeing enemy as they tried to regroup not once but twice. The third time, the Roman horsemen ignored both the right and the left flanks, instead picking away at the center where Tzazon was fighting.

*Beware the third charge . . .*

"To my brother!" Gelimer cried to his men. "Protect him at all costs."

His cavalry galloped forward, scattering Romans in every direction. The Vandal warriors were superior horsemen and unparalleled with the sword, driving the enemy back as Tzazon battled a giant of a man.

The two fought bitterly, their swords clashing. The giant thrust his blade at Tzazon but missed. He tried to right himself, but Tzazon drove his sword into his enemy's shoulder, knocking him from his mount. As the man hit the ground, his sword fell from his grip. For the first time, Gelimer felt as though his Vandal Army had the upper hand.

Even Tzazon must have felt it. As he surveyed the battlefield, searching for the next Roman to kill, he caught sight of Gelimer. When their eyes met, Tzazon lifted his sword, crying out, "Hail to the King!"

Behind him, the giant stirred, grabbing his sword.



“Tzazon,” Gelimer shouted.

Tzazon reined his horse around. Too late. The giant’s sword arced toward him, striking his side between the plates of his armor. Tzazon faltered, his look one of surprise, as the giant thrust again, then pulled the blade from Tzazon’s ribs. Tzazon’s sword slipped from his grasp. He clutched his wound, staring at the blood. His horse, sensing the change in his master, suddenly reared, throwing him from the saddle.

“Tzazon,” Gelimer cried as his brother struggled to his feet. A new strength surged through Gelimer’s veins. He slashed at every Roman that came between them, the men falling in his wake. The giant leered when he saw Gelimer charging. He hefted the mighty blade and brought it crashing down on Tzazon’s neck.

Gelimer’s heart clenched. His pulse roared in his ears. He charged faster, driving his sword into the giant’s chest, watching as he stumbled backward, dead before he hit the ground.

Gelimer slid from his horse, staring at his brother’s fallen body. The battle raged on around him. The sounds dimmed, the world darkened.

“My Lord,” Euric called. “We need orders.”

Gelimer heard nothing.

“My King,” Euric grabbed him by his shoulder. “Your men await your orders.”

“All that is left is shadow . . .” He dropped to his knees. The battlefield was littered with the Vandal dead. His men. Tzazon’s men. “Naught remains but vanity . . .” He struggled to breathe. “Tzazon . . .”

“He’s dead,” Euric said. “And you will suffer the same fate if we don’t get out of here.” Euric pulled him to his feet.

Gelimer remembered nothing afterward. Somehow, he found himself on horseback, following Euric, while the remnants of the Vandal Army fled in every direction.

# CHAPTER ONE

---

*A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.*

— CHINESE PROVERB —

## THE PRESENT DAY

La Jolla, California

Sam Fargo checked the figures for the second time. No doubt about it. There were several discrepancies in the accounting of the money that the Fargo Foundation had sent to fund an archeological dig in Tunisia. “It doesn’t look good.”

His wife, Remi, leaned toward the computer screen, her green eyes troubled as she scrutinized the numbers. She tucked a lock of auburn hair behind her ear, then suddenly rose, pacing the floor behind him. “How could this have happened? Renee LaBelle is one of my oldest friends. I can’t just pick up the phone and start asking all these questions. It’ll sound like I’m accusing her.”

Sam swiveled his desk chair around to face her. Remi and Dr. Renee LaBelle had been roommates at Boston College and friends ever since. “As long as you two have known each other? I doubt she’ll take offense. But if we don’t reconcile our figures with hers, we’re all going to have issues at tax time.”

Remi stopped, looking at the monitor. “At least she backs up everything with ledgers. I remember her saying they had problems when they switched over to that new accounting program. That was

right around the same time. Maybe there was a glitch. Something must have gotten entered wrong.”

A very big glitch. And several somethings, Sam thought. A year ago, when Remi had suggested that the Fargo Foundation fund Renee LaBelle’s archeological dig at Bulla Regia, he’d been against it from the very beginning. Though he and Remi had started the charitable organization to take on worthy projects of this type, he knew from experience that good friendships didn’t always survive the discovery of bad money management. He’d mentioned this at the time, but Remi had her heart set on helping her friend, and had assured him that Renee LaBelle’s past archeological projects had been very successful.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case now. “We won’t know anything until we sit down with her and go over the figures,” he said. “Tell Renee our accountant is the one asking the questions. Like a tax thing. Which it is.” Sam glanced at the clock. Just after ten in the morning. “What are they, eight hours ahead?” He picked up Remi’s smartphone from the desk, handing it to her.

She pulled up a chair next to Sam. “Phone call or video? Video,” she said before he could answer. “That’s a little more personal. Don’t sit too close. If she sees you, she’ll think we’re ganging up on her.”

Sam leaned away from her as she made the call. Her friend’s face filled the screen, her expression one of mild surprise. “Remi. Hold on. Let me step outside where it’s a little quieter. I’m at dinner with the crew.”

“Finish eating. It can wait. I just wanted to ask you a few questions about the books. For taxes.”

“No. No. I’ve been meaning to call—”

“Who is it, LaBelle?” came a male voice in the background.

“Remi Fargo,” she said. “Questions about the books.”

A man’s face appeared in the screen next to Renee’s. “I’ve been telling LaBelle she needs to call you to set up a meeting.”

## THE ORACLE

Her friend nodded. "He has," she said, then seemed to realize that Remi had no idea who the man next to her was. "Sorry. This is Hank, our new site manager. Hank, Remi Fargo. She and her husband head up the Fargo Foundation. I'm sure Sam can't be too far away."

"Right next to me," Remi said, turning the screen to show Sam. He nodded at them.

Hank smiled. "So, what do you say? Set up a video call in a day or two? We know you must have questions."

Had it been a minor issue, Sam would have agreed. There was too much money unaccounted for, in his opinion, to handle it with a video call. "Turns out," Sam said, "we have to be in Nigeria next Monday. No reason we couldn't fly in a day or two earlier and stop off in Tunisia on our way. Might be easier if we all sit down together."

Renee LaBelle shook her head. "A slight logistics problem. We're in Kenya. Archeological conference. How long will you be in Nigeria? Maybe you could come by after?"

"Hard to say," Sam replied. "A week, maybe more." He and Remi were driving out to the southern edge of Gashaka Gumti National Park, where two of their assistants, Wendy Corden and Pete Jeffcoat, had been living these past few months, overseeing the construction of a self-sustaining school for girls. Though nearly finished, they'd fallen behind schedule, and their goal was to have everything done before the rainy season started. "We're checking in on one of the Foundation's projects."

Renee's face lit up. "Is that the school out in the bush? Do you actually have students yet?"

"We do," Remi said.

"Here's a thought," Renee said. "We could leave the conference a day early, meet you in Jalingo instead of flying all the way back to Tunis. Go over the books, pop out to the school . . ." She gave an apologetic smile. "Look at me, inviting myself. Last thing you need is us traipsing around while you're busy working."

Exactly what Sam was thinking. Hoping to avoid turning this into some sort of social visit, he nodded. "We'll definitely be busy."

Apparently, Hank was of the same mind, saying, "That's a bit much to be asking when they're trying to get work done. Don't forget, we'll have the crew with us." He nodded behind him.

Renee turned her phone so that the camera picked up a group of people seated around a table. "You've met Warren, of course." Her gray-haired site manager gave the slightest of nods, then went back to drinking his beer. "And one of my graduate students. Amal, say hi to the Fargos." A young woman in her early twenties, her long dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, lifted her hand, waved.

"Actually," Remi said, "that's even better. Isn't it, Sam?"

Clearly, he'd lost complete control of this conversation—assuming he'd ever had control of it to begin with. "How?"

"Having not one but two women come talk to the girls. A professor and one of her students. It's a brilliant plan."

Sam had no clue how his wife had landed on that idea. "Did you forget about the dorm we're supposed to be building?"

He wasn't surprised to find that Dr. LaBelle's mind worked in similar fashion to his wife's. She gave a slight nod in her colleagues' direction, saying, "We could always bring Hank. He's excellent at construction work."

"What about Warren?" Hank asked.

"Me?" Warren seemed surprised that he'd been singled him out. "Too old for any heavy lifting. And someone's got to hold down the fort."

"Wait," Renee said. "It'll never work. The books are back in Tunisia."

"No problem," Remi replied. "We'll pick you up in Tunisia and we'll all fly out together."

"Wonderful idea. Don't you agree, Hank?"

## THE ORACLE

“What? Yes. But we’re on a tight schedule ourselves. I’m not sure how we’ll—”

“Fortunately,” Renee replied, “I’m the boss.” She looked directly at the camera, smiling. “Get back to me with the details. We look forward to it.”

Remi ended the call, looking very pleased as she set her phone on the desk. “That went well.”

“Did I miss the part where we were supposed to be talking about the missing money?”

“We’ll look at the books in Tunisia before flying out to the school. I’m sure there’s a logical explanation.”

He hoped she was right, because saying “I told you so” to your wife was never a good idea.

## CHAPTER TWO

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*Return to old watering holes for more than water;  
friends and dreams are there to meet you.*

— AFRICAN PROVERB —

Bulla Regia, Tunisia

A light breeze swept in as Sam and Remi leaned against their rented Audi RS at the edge of the archeological park. Sam looked at his watch, a few minutes past eleven. “You’re sure Dr. LaBelle said ten-thirty?”

“Positive.” Remi took out her phone and tried calling. “Voice mail. Do you think we should drive around and look for her? I’m sure this is where she said to meet.”

Sam put his arm around her shoulders. “We can wait. How often does a guy get to stand close to a beautiful girl beneath a gorgeous blue sky?”

“Good point, Fargo,” she said, leaning into him.

About ten minutes later, a midsize blue SUV pulled up.

Renee hopped out, waving to them. “Sorry. Warren normally takes over the supervision of our graduate students midmorning, but he never showed and I totally lost track of time.” She quickly closed the distance, hugging Remi. “Rem-rem. So good to see you. I swear, you haven’t aged a bit since the two of you got married.”

“Nay-nay,” Remi said and smiled. “How long has it been since we’ve heard those names?”



## THE ORACLE

“Graduation,” they said at the same time, then started laughing.

Both women had emerged with a master’s in anthropology and history, though Remi’s focus had been on ancient trade routes and Renee’s in archeology. And, other than the two being slim, they looked nothing alike. Remi, with green eyes and red hair, stood a half head taller than the petite blond-haired, blue-eyed Renee. Their first names, however, had caused quite a bit of confusion for their unfortunate professors—and most of their friends—quite simply because they were always together and the two names were so similar. When someone dubbed them Rem-rem and Nay-nay to avoid any confusion, the nicknames stuck up until Renee left Boston College to pursue her Ph.D. in archeology.

Remi linked her arm through Renee’s. “It’s been far too long,” she said, still feeling a bit sensitive over the real reason they were meeting. “No problems taking the time off? To come out to the school?”

“The timing’s perfect. No one’s going to miss us for a few days.” Renee smiled at Sam. “You’re sure you don’t mind us tagging along, Sam?”

“Looking forward to it.”

Renee laughed at the look he gave Remi. “Just not to the same degree, perhaps?”

Sam winked at her. “Happy wife, happy life.”

“You married a smart man, Remi.” She laughed again, then nodded toward the rolling hills and blue sky in the distance. “That’s where we’re headed. Before we drive out there, I thought you might want to see some of the older digs first. You have time, I hope?”

“Nothing planned,” Sam said.

“Perfect. They’ve made a lot of progress restoring the mosaics since our college days.” She grabbed her shoulder bag from her car, locked the car, and led them toward the entrance.

Because an earthquake destroyed much of the city, little remained

of the villas except for the occasional column, the crumbling walls, and the theater, where the bishop Augustine had once harangued the citizens of Bulla Regia for living in a sinkhole of iniquity. The ruins of what had been two-story Roman luxury villas were unprepossessing. The ground level had been occupied in the winter so residents were able to take advantage of the warmth from the sun. In the summer, they took refuge from the intense heat in the underground chambers, many of which survived the massive quake.

Renee led them along the ancient paving stones, talking about the history of the site, then paused along the way to point out the striking detail of some of the mosaic work of the paths they were walking on. Renee led them along the ancient stones, talking about the history of the site, when Remi stopped, pointing to a group of people in the distance. "Could that be Warren and Amal?"

Sam glanced up as the woman and three men disappeared behind some ruins.

Renee shaded her eyes, looking that direction as well. "That certainly looked like Amal. She gives tours to earn extra money for school. I can't think why Warren would be there, though. Especially when he knew you were coming, and I needed him at the excavation site this morning." She gave one last look that direction, then led them toward a low rectangular parapet. "Careful," she said as they peered down some twenty feet below into a peristyle courtyard supported by six granite columns. Above the columns were large hexagonal windows, which let light into the subterranean corridors. "This is one of my favorites," she said as they descended the stairs into the heart of the villa. She stood off to one side, allowing them to see the splendor of the richly colored floor mosaics.

Remi crouched down for a better look at the intricately detailed sea creatures and twin cherubs astride dolphins, one carrying a casket of jewels, the other a mirror, gifts for a haloed Venus borne in triumph by two centaurs. "Amazing."

## THE ORACLE

“That’s what I think every time I come into work.” Renee sighed as she looked around as she started up the steps. “Who’d have thought all those years ago that we’d be living our dream?”

“We did,” Remi said.

Sam laughed, no doubt thinking about all the scrapes they’d gotten into and escaped from over the years. “Not quite how you’d planned, though. Eh, Mrs. Fargo?”

She looked over at him, laughing as she took his hand. “Not even close.”

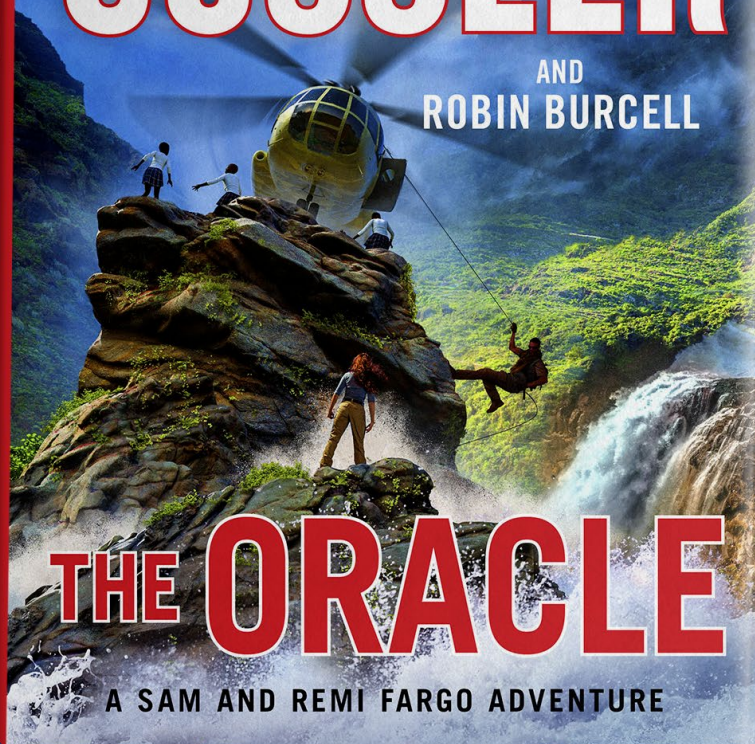
Renee was waiting for them at the top of the stairs. “What you two consider fun the rest of us consider extreme.” She suddenly turned, her eyes going wide, as someone grabbed her shoulder bag, then pushed her down the stairs.



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