

Prologue

London, England, 1864

The man known as Jotun strode purposefully through the predawn fog, the collar of his peacoat up and a scarf wrapped loosely around his throat and mouth. His breath misted in the air before him.

He stopped walking suddenly and listened. Had he heard footfalls? He turned his head to the left, then the right. Somewhere ahead he heard a muffled click. A boot on cobblestone. Moving lightly for such a big man, Jotun stepped back into the shadows between the pillars of an arched gate. In the pocket of his coat, he tightened his fist around the shaft of his lead-and-leather cosh. The side streets and back alleys of Tilbury were never a friendly place, and even less so between sunset and sunrise.

“Damn this city,” Jotun grumbled. “Dark, dank, cold. God help me.”

He missed his wife, he missed his country. But this was where he was needed, or so the powers that be said. He trusted their judgment, of course, but there were times when he would gladly trade his current duty for a proper battlefield. At least there he would know his enemy and know what to do with him: Kill or be killed. Very simple. Then again, despite the distance, his wife much preferred his current posting to his earlier ones. “Better to be distant and alive than close and dead,” she’d told him when he’d gotten his orders.

Jotun waited another few minutes but heard no further movement. He checked his watch: three-thirty. The streets would begin to stir in another hour. If his quarry was going to make a run for it, it would have to be before then.

He stepped back onto the street and continued north until he found Malta Road, then turned south for the docks. In the distance he could hear the lonely clanging of a buoy, and he could smell the stench of the Thames River. Ahead, through the fog, he glimpsed a lone figure standing on the southeast corner of Dock Road, smoking a cigarette. On cat’s feet, Jotun crossed the street and strode ahead until he could see more of the corner. The man was indeed alone. Jotun stepped back into the alley entrance, then whistled softly, once. The man turned. Jotun lit a match with his thumbnail, let it flare briefly, then crushed it out between his thumb and index finger. The man walked over to Jotun.

“Mornin’, sir.”

“That’s debatable, Fancy.”

“Indeed it is, sir.” Fancy looked down the block, then up.

“Nervous?” asked Jotun.

“What, me? What would I have to be nervous about? Tiny fella like me walking these alleys in the dark of night. What could be wrong with that?”

“So let’s hear it.”

“She’s there, sir. Berthed as she’s been the last four days. Lines are singled up, though. I chatted up a mate of mine that does odd jobs down on the docks. Rumour has it she’s moving upriver.”

“To where?”

“Millwall Docks.”

“Millwall Docks aren’t finished yet, Fancy. Why are you lying to me?”

“No, sir, that’s what I heard. Millwall. Later this morning.”

“I’ve got a man at Millwall already, Fancy. He says they’re closed down for another week at least.”

“Sorry, sir.”

Jotun heard the distinctive scuff of leather on brick behind him in the alley and immediately realized Fancy was sorry for a different reason entirely. Jotun took some solace in the knowledge that this little weasel of a man probably hadn’t betrayed him out of spite but rather out of greed.

“Run along now, Fancy . . . Far away. Out of London. If I see you again, I’ll open your belly and feed you your own guts.”

“You won’t be seeing me again, sir.”

“For your sake, make sure of it.”

“Sorry again. I always liked—”

“Another word, and it will be your last. Go.”

Fancy hurried off and disappeared into the fog.

Jotun quickly considered his options. The fact that Fancy had lied about the Millwall meant he was lying about the ship, which in turn meant she was going downriver, not up. He couldn’t let that happen. Now the question became: Was it wiser to run from the men who were coming up behind him or to fight them? If he ran, they’d chase him, and the last thing he needed was a ruckus this close to the dock. The ship’s crew was probably already on edge, and he needed to catch them calm and unawares.

Jotun turned around to face the alley.

There were three of them, one a little shorter than him, two much shorter, but they all had heavy, round shoulders and bucket-shaped heads. Street thugs. Throat cutters. Had there been enough light for Jotun to see their faces, he was certain there would be very few teeth, plenty of scars, and small, mean eyes.

“Good morning, gentlemen. How can I help you?”

“Don’t be makin’ this harder than it needs to be,” the bigger of the three said.

“Knives or hands or both?” Jotun asked.

“Whot?”

“No matter. It’s your choice. Come on, then, let’s get on with it.”

Jotun took his hands from his pockets.

The big one rushed in. Jotun saw the knife coming up from the man’s waist, a well-timed slash designed to open up a femoral artery in the leg or tear open the lower belly. Jotun not only had two inches of height on the man but at least four inches of arm’s reach, and he used it, lashing out with his own uppercut blow. At the last second he let the palmed cosh swing forward. The leather-wrapped lead bulb caught the big man squarely under the chin. His head flipped up, and he stumbled backward into his partners, then dropped hard on his butt. The knife clattered across the cobblestones. Jotun took one long stride forward, cocked his knee up to waist height, and slammed the heel of his boot down onto the big man’s ankle, shattering the bone. The man started screaming.

The other two hesitated then but only for a moment. Often in these circumstances a wolf pack like this disperses once the big dog is put down, but these were men accustomed to easy fights.

The one on the right sidestepped his fallen partner, dropped his shoulder, and charged forward like a bull. The charge was a ruse, of course. There was a blade hidden in one of those hands; the moment Jotun grabbed ahold of the man, the knife would come up. Jotun took a quick step back on his left leg, coiled it, then sprung forward, simultaneously swinging his right foot forward. The kick caught the charging man fully in the face. Jotun heard the wet crunch of bone. The man dropped to his knees, teetered for a moment, then collapsed face-first onto the street.

The last man was against hesitating, and now Jotun saw what he was looking for: that watershed moment when a man realizes he’s going to die if he doesn’t make the right decision.

“They’re alive,” Jotun said. “If you don’t turn around and run, I’m going to kill you.”

The man stood rooted, knife before him.

“Come on, son, did they really pay you enough for this?”

The man lowered his knife. He swallowed hard, shook his head once, then turned and ran.

So did Jotun. Ran for all he was worth, down the street, right onto Dock Road, then through a line of hedges and across St. Andrews. A short alley took him to a pair of warehouses. He sprinted between them, vaulted over a fence, landed hard, then rolled to his feet and kept going until he heard the pounding of wood beneath his boots. The docks. He looked left, then right, but saw only fog.

Which way?

He turned around, read the building number above his head, then turned on his heel and sprinted south for fifty yards. To his right he heard the sound of water lapping. He veered that way. A dark shape loomed before him. He skidded to a stop, bumped into the stack of crates, stumbled sideways, then found his feet. He hopped up onto the smallest crate, then boosted himself up one more level. Twenty feet below, he could just make out the surface of the water. He looked upriver, saw nothing, then turned to look downriver.

Twenty yards away he saw the faint glow of yellow light behind a mullioned window; above this, past the deck rail, a ship’s wheelhouse.

“Damn it!” Jotun barked. “Damn it to hell!”

The ship faded into the fog and disappeared.

Chapter One

CHUMBE ISLAND, ZANZIBAR, TANZANIA

The sharks darted at the edges of their vision, sleek gray shapes that offered Sam and Remi Fargo only glimpses of knife-edged fins and flicking tails before disappearing into the curtain of swirling sand. As usual, Remi had refused to pass up the photo opportunity, and as usual she’d asked Sam to serve as scale as she focused her high-speed underwater camera past him and at the feeding frenzy. For his part, Sam was less worried about the sharks than he was the precipice at his back—a hundred-fifty-foot drop off the sandbank into the dark deep of the Zanzibar Channel.

Remi pulled her face up from the camera, smiled with her eyes behind the mask, and gave him an OK sign. Sam thankfully finned forward to join her. Together they knelt in the sand and watched the show. It was July off the coast of Tanzania, which meant monsoon season, which in turn meant the

warm East African Coastal Current (EACC) was surging from the southeast until it met the southern tip of Zanzibar, where it split into inshore and offshore currents. For sharks this created a “food funnel” in the eighteen-mile gap between Zanzibar and the mainland as prey fish were driven northward. An irresistible moving buffet, Remi called it.

Sam and Remi took care to stay within what they’d dubbed the Safe Zone, that fifty-yard, crystal-clear water strip off Chumbe Island. Past that was the drop into the channel. The demarcation was hard to miss: The current, moving at six knots or more, threw up a roiling curtain of sand as it scraped along the island’s sandbar. This Sam and Remi had dubbed the Good-bye Zone; step into this rip current without a safety line and you were in for a one-way trip up the coast.

Despite the danger—or perhaps because of it—this yearly trip to Zanzibar was one of their favourites. Along with sharks, prey fish, rip currents, and underwater sandstorms that lasted for months, the EACC offered up treasure—albeit usually bits and pieces worth nothing more than their curiosity factor, but this was enough for Sam and Remi. Over the centuries, ships had been plying Africa’s east coast from Mombasa to Dar es Salaam, many of them laden with gold and gems and ivory bound for colonial empire cities. Countless ships had sunk in and around the Zanzibar Channel, the contents of their holds spilled along the bottom, just waiting for the right current to uncover or move them within reach of curious divers such as the Fargos. Over the years they’d recovered gold and silver coins from the Roman Empire to Spain, Chinese ceramics, Sri Lankan jade, silverware . . . From the fascinating to the mundane, they’d uncovered it. So far on this trip, they’d found only one item of note: a diamond-shaped gold coin so barnacle-encrusted they could make out no details.

Sam and Remi watched the sharks feed for a few more minutes and then, by mutual nod, turned and began finning south along the bottom, each stopping occasionally to use a Ping-Pong paddle to waft at the sand, hoping the lump that had caught the eye might be a hidden bit of history.

Chumbe Island, roughly six miles long and two miles wide, is shaped like a woman’s boot, with the shin, ankle, and forefoot facing the channel, and the back of the calf, the stiletto heel, and sole facing Zanzibar proper. Just above the ankle there was a break in the sandbar, an inlet that led to the lagoon created by the stiletto heel.

After fifteen minutes of trolling along the sand, Sam and Remi reached this stiletto break, then turned west until they were ten yards off the beach, then swung north again to resume their search. Now they became more watchful. It was along this stretch of the sandbar that the main channel pushed dangerously close to the beach, a bubble-shaped salient that narrowed their Safe Zone to a mere forty feet. Remi swam inshore and ahead of Sam by a few feet, each of them frequently checking to make sure the other hadn’t drifted toward the precipice.

In the corner of Sam's right eye he saw a glint, a fleeting flash of gold. He stopped swimming, settled knees first into the sand, then tapped his dive knife on his tank to get Remi's attention. She stopped swimming, turned, and finned back to him. He pointed toward the spot. She nodded. With Sam in the lead, they swam toward shore until the sandbanks came into view. A wall of sand nearly twelve feet tall, these banks marked a precipice of sorts where the water depth dropped from chest height to twenty feet. They stopped before the bank and looked around.

Remi shrugged *Where?*

Sam shrugged his shoulders and kept scanning up and down the bank. There. Twenty feet to his right he saw it again, a flash of gold. They swam to it and stopped again. Here the Good-bye Zone precipice was closer still, not eight feet behind their backs. Even at this distance they could feel the surge of the current, like a vortex trying to sweep them into the deep.

Jutting from the bank at waist height was what appeared to be six or seven inches of a barrel's hoop. Though tarnished and fuzzy with barnacles, in a few places the hoop had been sandblasted by the current, exposing shiny metal.

Sam reached out and fanned the area around the hoop. The exposed portion widened to eight inches, then ten inches, before curving back and disappearing into the bank. Sam moved his paddle upward, hoping to uncover some of the barrel's staves if the wood hadn't succumbed to rot.

Sam stopped fanning. He looked to Remi and saw her eyes were wide behind her mask. Above the hoop was not rotted wood but a curved metal facade, mottled green with patina. Sam dropped to his knees and wiggled forward until his chest was nearly touching the bank, then craned his neck and waved his paddle beneath the hoop. After thirty seconds of work a cavity appeared. Gently, slowly, Sam slipped his hand into the hollow and probed the interior with splayed fingers.

He withdrew his arm and backed away from the object until he was again beside Remi. She looked at him with expectant eyes. He nodded back. There was no doubt: Their barrel wasn't a barrel but rather a ship's bell.

"Well, that was unexpected," Remi said a few minutes later after surfacing.

"I'll say," Sam replied after removing his mouthpiece. Until now, the biggest artefact they'd ever found was a sterling silver trencher from a torpedoed World War II Liberty Ship.

She shed her fins and tossed them over the gunwale onto the afterdeck of their rental—a commuter-style twenty-five-foot Andreyale Joubert-Nivelt express cruiser complete with lacquered teak woodwork and retro subway windows—then climbed the ladder, followed by Sam. Once they'd shed the remainder of their gear and tucked it away in the Andreyale's cabin, Remi

fished a pair of water bottles from the ice chest and tossed one to Sam. They sat down on the deck chairs.

“How long do you think it’s been down there?” Remi asked.

“Hard to say. Doesn’t take long for patina to set in. We’d have to see the thickness of the growth on the rest of it. The interior felt fairly unblemished.”

“And the clapper?” Remi asked.

“Couldn’t feel it.”

“Looks like we’ve got a decision to make.”

“That we do.”

Not only did the Tanzanian government have some unorthodox laws when it came to maritime salvage, Chumbe Island was officially known as Chumbe Island Coral Park, a good portion of which had been partitioned as a Reef Sanctuary and a Closed Forest Reserve. Before Sam and Remi could do anything, they first had to determine whether the bell officially lay within either of these protected areas. If they passed this hurdle, then they could in good conscience proceed to the next step: determining the bell’s provenance and/or pedigree, a requirement should they want to stake a legal claim before alerting local officials to the bell’s presence. It was a tenuous tightrope on which they tread. If they reached the far side, they may have a significant historical find on their hands, but on either side of the tightrope were laws that could lead to, at best, having the find snatched away, or, at worst, criminal charges. By law they could take any found man-made objects that required “no extraordinary excavation methods.” Trinkets such as Remi’s diamond-shaped coin were fine; a ship’s bell was a wholly different matter.

None of this was new to the Fargos. Together and alone, privately and professionally, Sam and Remi had been hunting for treasure, artefacts, and hidden history for most of their adult lives.

Following in her father’s footsteps, Remi had attended Boston College, emerging with a master’s in anthropology and history, with a focus on ancient trade routes.

Sam’s father, who’d died a few years earlier, had been one of the lead engineers on NASA’s space programs while Sam’s mother, a vivacious lady, ran a charter dive boat.

Sam received an engineering degree from Caltech, along with a handful of trophies for lacrosse and soccer.

While in his final months at Caltech, Sam was approached by a man he would later discover was from DARPA—the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency—the government’s research and development arm. The lure of pure

creative engineering combined with serving his country made Sam's choice an easy one.

After seven years at DARPA Sam returned to California, where Sam and Remi met at the Lighthouse, a jazz club on Hermosa Beach. Sam had wandered into the club for a cold beer, and Remi was there celebrating a successful research trip looking into rumours of a sunken Spanish ship off Abalone Cove.

Though neither of them had ever called their first meeting a case of love at first sight, they'd both agreed it had certainly been a case of "pretty damned sure at first hour." Six months later they were married where they'd first met, in a small ceremony at the Lighthouse.

At Remi's encouragement Sam dove headfirst into his own business, and they struck pay dirt within a year with an argon laser scanner that could detect and identify at a distance mixed metals and alloys, from gold and silver to platinum and palladium. Treasure hunters, universities, corporations, and mining outfits scrambled to license Sam's invention, and within two years Fargo Group was seeing an annual net profit of three million dollars. Within four years the deep-pocketed corporations came calling. Sam and Remi took the highest bid, sold the company for enough money to see themselves comfortably through the rest of their lives, and then turned to their true passion: treasure hunting.

For Sam and Remi, the engine that drove their lives was not money but rather the adventure and the satisfaction of seeing the Fargo Foundation flourish. The foundation, which split its gifting among underprivileged and abused children, animal protection, and nature conservancy, had grown by leaps and bounds over the last decade, the previous year donating almost twenty million dollars to a variety of organizations. A hefty part of that money had come from Sam and Remi personally, and the rest of it from private donations. For better or worse their exploits attracted a fair amount of media attention, which in turn attracted wealthy, high-profile donors.

The question they now faced was whether this ship's bell was something they could turn into philanthropic funds or simply a fascinating historical diversion. Not that it mattered, of course. The pursuit of hidden history held its own joys for them. Either way, they knew where they had to start.

"Time to call Selma," Remi said.

"Time to call Selma," Sam agreed.

An hour later they were back at their rented plantation-style bungalow at Kendwa Beach, on Zanzibar's northern tip. While Remi prepared a fresh fruit salad, slices of prosciutto and mozzarella, and iced tea, Sam dialled Selma. Above their heads, a sixty-inch ceiling fan churned the air while through the French doors a cool offshore breeze billowed the gauze curtains.

Despite it being four A.M. in San Diego, Selma Wondrash picked up on the first ring. Sam and Remi were not surprised, having come to believe Selma slept only four hours a night, save Sundays, when she slept five.

“The only time you call me when you’re on vacation is when you’re in trouble or about to get into trouble,” Selma said over the speakerphone without preamble.

“Not true,” Sam replied. “Last year from the Seychelles we called—”

“Because a troop of baboons had broken into your beach house, destroyed the furniture, and made off with all your worldly goods, and the police thought you were burglars.”

She’s right, Remi mouthed from across the kitchen island. Using the tip of her knife, she tossed Sam a chunk of fresh pineapple. He caught it in his mouth, and she applauded silently.

“Okay, that’s true,” Sam told Selma.

A former Hungarian citizen who’d never quite lost her accent, Selma Wondrash was the stern but secretly soft-hearted head of Sam and Remi’s three-person research team behind the Fargo Foundation. Selma was widowed, having lost her husband, an air force test pilot, in a crash ten years earlier.

After finishing her degree at Georgetown, Selma had managed the Library of Congress’s Special Collections Division until Sam and Remi lured her away. More than a research chief, Selma had proven herself a superb travel agent and logistics guru, getting them to and from destinations with militaristic efficiency. Selma ate, drank, and lived research: the mystery that stubbornly refused solution, the legend that showed the barest spark of truth.

“So what is it this time?” Selma asked.

“A ship’s bell,” Remi called.

They could hear the fluttering of paper as Selma retrieved a fresh legal pad. “Tell me,” she said.

“West coast of Chumbe Island,” Sam said, then recited the coordinates he’d locked into his GPS unit before heading for the boat. “You’ll have to check—”

“Boundaries of the reserves and sanctuaries, yes,” Selma said, her pencil rasping on paper. “I’ll have Wendy look into Tanzanian maritime law. Anything else?”

“A coin. Diamond-shaped, about the size of a U.S. half-dollar. We found it about a hundred twenty yards north of the bell . . .”

Sam looked to Remi for confirmation of this and got a nod in return. “We’re going to see if we can clean it up a bit, but the face is obscured right now.”

“Got it. Next?”

“There’s no next. That’s it. As soon as possible, Selma. The sooner we can put a hook on that bell, the better. That sandbank didn’t look all that stable.”

“I’ll get back to you,” Selma replied and hung up.

Visit www.clivecussler.com.au for more about Clive Cussler and his books.

Coming soon, a brand new Dirk Pitt, [*Crescent Dawn*](#), out on 25 October 2010.