

EPILOGUE

RICHARD ROSS

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Paperback ISBN: 979-8-9905277-0-6

eBook ISBN: 979-8-9905277-1-3

Book Design by AuthorsHQ.com

For Carol, my dream that came true.

PART ONE

PROLOGUE

ABOUT 10 YEARS AGO

Victor Penlick was well into his 60s, but his drives off the tee were only a few yards short of what they had been 40 years earlier.

“You’re buying,” he said to his golfing pal as he dropped a birdie in the 18th hole.

“Hell, I don’t know why I still do this. I should just give you my wallet and get it over with.” Roger chuckled.

“That works, too,” Penlick said.

Roger Skarlyle had been his friend for decades. An oil magnate, the press accused him of owning half the politicians in Texas. He said they were dead wrong. That the number was closer to two-thirds.

In the clubhouse, they each ordered a ribeye steak sandwich and an iced tea. Victor’s phone rang.

“Hello, Senator,” he answered. “I just so happen to be at Meadow Park having lunch with Roger. That sounds mighty fine. I’ll see you then, Pierce.”

The waiter delivered the teas. It was springtime, and the two men sported polo shirts and golf shorts. They were both clean shaven and

wore their hair cropped short, but that was where the comparisons stopped. Victor was tall and slim, and Roger was fat and bald.

“Pierce is flying in from DC,” Victor said. “He recruited another.”

The sandwiches were delivered. “Well, that’s good news,” Roger said, and he took a bite.

“He wants to talk about it tonight. He said the man sits on the highest court in the land.”

CHAPTER 1

PRESENT DAY

The stadium was sold out, all 70,000 seats. On the stage, Derrick Romano's eyes were filled with laughter as he rapped the chorus,

To the fire, in the fire,
All aflame
Ain't no shame.
To the light, in the darkness,
Where it burns
Everything turns to ash, baby.

Derrick's hair was cut short, colored black, and combed forward, framing his almost ghost-white complexion. His eyes were black and piercing, and his lips, heart-shaped and sensual. He and his bandmates—guitar, bass, and drums—were all dressed in black jeans and tees.

The song he sang was the last number for the evening. It was a new piece, and everyone was filled with anticipation. The final song at Romano's concerts always included a surprise ending.

Five thousand groupies had crammed themselves into the pit at the foot of the stage. The lyrics of the song were on a giant screen behind the rapper, and his fans screamed every word with him. The

surprise came as they sang the last line of the chorus the fourth time through, “Everything turns to ash, baby,” when there was a burst of light; it was flames modulating orange, red, and blue as they consumed a man in the middle of the pit.

All the voices became a single shrill siren of horror. Those who were close to the man on fire pushed outward. But the people on the edge of the fenced pit had nowhere to go. They pushed inward.

The smell of burning flesh filled the air of the stadium. People were throwing up, fainting, and scrambling for the exits. Some were unable to move, paralyzed with fear. The drummer finished the song with a cymbal crash, Derrick pumped his fist, and the band left the stage.

359 BC – MACEDONIA

The stone-built hall was cavernous, large enough to host hundreds of guests. This night, candles and hanging oil lamps lit the hall for the dozens of commanders of the Macedonian army who gathered there. They reclined on couches throughout the hall, drinking mead from deep cups, and satisfying their hunger with the roasted and sauced beef, goat, chicken, and wild boar that was piled high on platters. A flutist filled the room with music.

Perdiccas III, the king, and his brother, Philip II, reclined side by side.

Perdiccas gestured with a shank of roasted goat. “I’m proud to lead these men in battle,” he said. He tore off a mouthful of meat.

“No further attempts for a treaty?”

“We have exhausted all such measures. Over the past weeks the Illyrians have swept up a dozen villages inside our borders, leaving behind nothing but corpses.” He took a swig of mead and stood. After he cleared his throat, he shouted, “Men of Macedonia!”

The flutist stopped playing and the men became silent.

“The barbarians stand on our very doorstep in the north,” he said. The men roared with curses. “Tomorrow, we’ll color the border with their blood!” The hall began to rumble with shouts of approval. “I

stand in the company of the world's greatest warriors, men born to fight for their women and children, for their homes and farms, men who will never bow down to another man, men who were ordained before the beginning of time to be victors!" Perdiccas could hardly hear his own voice with the cheering, but he continued: "The Illyrians are not worthy of the expense to sharpen our swords! They are insects to be crushed and swept away; we will put them under our feet!"

The men stood and shouted, "Hoorah!" And they lifted their cups, and they drank.

"In my absence, I leave my brother, Philip, with my signet ring," Perdiccas said.

Philip stood and held up his right hand.

"I declare him regent until my return." Perdiccas slipped the ring from his finger and put it on the ring finger of his brother's extended hand.

Holding their cups above their heads, the men shouted their consent, and they drank again.

Perdiccas and Philip reclined on the couches again. Perdiccas sighed as he grabbed the remaining shank of goat and took another bite.

"When will you return?" Philip asked.

"When the Illyrians bend the knee."

"May Goddess Tyche go with you."

"Yes, and many strong and brave men."

PRESENT DAY

All was gray and the drizzle constant; it was a usual fall afternoon in Queens, New York. They were in Glen Cemetery, and a priest read Psalm 23 over Linda M. Lange's casket.

She had been widowed at a relatively young age, but she never remarried. For over fifty years she had lived in the same two-story brick house in Bayside, Queens. The one hundred people who stood in the rain for her interment were her neighbors, fellow parishioners, or family.

Clayton, her only child, sat under the canopy with his mom's brother, two sisters, and other relations. He had sandy blond hair, a cleft chin, and baby blue eyes.

Sprinkling a handful of dirt on the casket, the priest said, "We now commit Linda's body to the ground—earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ."

She was such a cheerful person, Clayton thought. A sunshiny day would've been better for her sending off.

With the invitation to say a final goodbye, Clayton led the procession and placed a rose on the casket, after which he knelt and touched the names of his grandparents' headstone that was next to his parents'. Someday, he would be buried here, too.

The reception was at Mom's house. Her sisters had organized it. Clayton thanked God for his aunts. They were just like Mom—thrifty, industrious, and cheery—stereotypical German women, who had prepared countless plates of food and welcomed all comers with their indomitable smiles.

Making a beeline through the house with many thank yous, hugs, and handshakes, Clayton got to his mom's bedroom. He shut the door behind him. There was a queen-sized bed covered with a white down comforter. A closet was across from it, which he looked at with a sense of apprehension. He did not like the idea of rummaging around in it now. But this was for her.

He opened the closet door. *Mom, didn't you ever throw anything away?* It was packed so tight he was sure there was no need for hangers. There was a cardboard box on the top shelf in the lefthand corner. That was what he had come for. It was one of the last things she had told him about before she died.

What kind of secrets did you hide, Mom?

Shaking his head, he stood on his toes and coaxed the box off the shelf with the tips of his fingers. It fell into his hands, and he read out loud the words she had written in block letters across the top: "CLAYTON LANGE – CONFIDENTIAL."

With the box under one arm, he made his way back through the house and outside to the car. His phone rang, and he put it on his

shoulder to answer as he put the box in the car. Hey, Elliot,” he said. “I’m good. No problem.” He chuckled. “I didn’t want to come to the reception myself. Please tell Sarah thank you for coming to the gravesite. I appreciate you guys. Yeah, sure, in a couple weeks. See you then.”

Elliot wanted to talk about his next novel.

He went back to the reception and stayed until his aunts shooed him out the door with the assurance they had everything under control.

After snaking through snarled traffic into the heart of Manhattan for what seemed an eternity, he finally pulled into the underground parking lot of his building in Greenwich Village.

He pushed open the door of his condo on the fourth floor; Herodotus greeted him with a lolling tongue. The French bulldog had a black coat and a white face and chest.

Clayton stooped and scratched him around the ears and rubbed his back. “How’re you doing, pal? Mom’s gone and life’s pretty sad for me right now.”

The condo had an open design with a vaulted ceiling with a sofa and armchairs that were upholstered with creamy black leather. Lamps, end tables, and a coffee table were Modernist with black metal and glass. A set of shelves against an inside wall displayed his collection of knickknacks from his travels around the world. Authentic Persian throws were scattered on the hardwood floor. There was an enclosed bookcase with his collection of original documents, papers, and books, all of which centered on his love of ancient Mediterranean history.

Paintings by local artists—mostly impressionist oils—hung on the walls.

It was nice, but for an inside glimpse at Clayton Lange’s vibrant mind, one had to visit his office, crammed with books, journals, and notebooks on shelves and in stacks on the floor. There was a row of filing cabinets crushed against one wall and stacked with documents. A computer monitor, printer, legal pad, and cup filled with pens and pencils were organized on top of a long plank desk that was shoved up beside the cabinets. There was a loveseat on the opposite wall, and

under the window on the outside wall was an antique oak and wrought-iron typing desk, on top of which sat a manual typewriter with the word, "Underwood," scrawled across the paper rest.

He set the box down on the loveseat. "Later for that," he said to the dog. "Let's get ourselves something to eat."

CHAPTER 2

PRESENT DAY

“Man, you know I’m with you in everything. But last night?” TJ said as he shook his head. “The dude burning up? And then the people getting crushed in the pit? It wasn’t right, bro.”

TJ had played bass with Derrick since a pickup gig at the club on 126th Street four years ago. He was tall, black, and gangly. Drinking an IPA, he sat with the others around a table in the Gulfstream as it flew steady at 30,000 feet.

Derrick sipped from a can of Monster Energy black cherry. He snorted. “That dude felt no pain. I saw him smile through the flames. And, besides, everyone who goes into the pit knows they’re there at their own risk.”

The lead guitarist’s name was Rex. He scrunched up his nose. “Who can die like that and be happy about it?” He was hungover and drinking seltzer water. Though he was a redhead with fair skin, he had grown up in Camden, New Jersey, and the brothers assured him his soul was as black as theirs.

Dazzle finished a whiskey neat and tapped out a rhythm on his legs with his sticks, his eyes jumping from one band member to another until they settled on Derrick. “I saw the smile,” he said. He wore his fro high and tight.

“Listen, if you boys want to go to the man’s funeral, go for it,” Derrick said. “That’d be dope. But something you all got to understand is that this thing you got in your heads about living forever is nonsense. We live, and we die, and when we do, we can either go out in a flame of glory, sometimes literally, or in a puff of smoke. Period. And besides, the fire marshal said the man had doused himself with gasoline. I didn’t even know who he was. All I did was reach out anonymously and persuade a man to do what he would’ve done someday on his own anyway.”

Amelia Irons sat at her desk, reading *The New York Times*. Floor-to-ceiling windows in the corner office on the 36th floor of the tower gave her a view of Central Park and the skyline.

She was tall and slim, and her full-length black dress made her look even taller and slimmer, an appearance she accented with a string of pearls around her neck and her gray hair in a bun. No one knew her age—she had always looked old. Rarely had anyone shown a romantic interest in her, and she liked it that way. She was married to her work, and she wore a ten-carat step cut emerald on her ring finger to show that.

Derrick Romano had caught Amelia’s interest at a concert at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, a couple of years before, singing a song about his love for redheads when every single redheaded woman in the stadium took off her shirt, exposing her breasts. There were nearly 3,000 redheaded women. It was remarkable. But the thing that got Amelia’s attention was Derrick’s remark, “All you girls just made my dream come true.”

Dreams: That was one of the clues for a legendary power she had been looking for. Her phone rang. It was her secretary. “Send them in,” she said.

The door swung open, and two women and two men entered. “Have a seat,” she said.

She seemed to glide as she moved across the office to the captain’s

chair at the head of a polished conference table. The black ops team sat around table. “Let’s begin by brainstorming our observations of Derrick Romano’s concert last night,” she said.

“No one has died at one of his concerts until now,” Penelope Savage began. She wore jeans and a long-sleeved white t-shirt. Her freckles gave her the deceiving appearance of innocence.

“That’s not exactly true,” Raven Creed countered. “There was the man who had a heart attack during a mosh pit fight who later died at the hospital.” Creed was six feet tall like Amelia, but that was the only characteristic they shared. Her skin was black velvet, and she wore wax print skirts and blouses in the bright yellows, blues, greens, and reds loved by her West African sisters. She had big, round, green eyes, and her lips were full.

“I said, *at* one of his concerts,” Penelope scorned. “There’s a difference.”

“You’re pedantic.”

“You’re pathetic.”

“Ladies,” Amelia intervened.

“May I say something?” Tarek Nasr asked. He continued without waiting for permission. “Regardless of who died when, I think it goes without saying the level of violence at this concert was without precedent.” He was a naturalized citizen as were his parents and siblings, who had immigrated from Jordan when he was in high school. He wore a blue-and-white striped short-sleeved button-up with chinos.

“You’re right,” Jake Silva said. “When Romano began, the things that happened were more like pranks, like the concert where he finished the set with ‘Prey’ and some five hundred eagles and hawks perched on banners and speakers on the stage.”

Jake’s blond mop looked like it had never seen a comb. He wore cargo pants and a t-shirt. In college he had majored in forensic science.

“Or the time he sang about his love of redheads,” said Raven.

“Keep going,” Amelia said.

Tarek flipped open a file folder. “Romano’s actions seem to be characteristic of this power we’re trying to unmask,” he said. “But we still have a question: Does he possess a physical object, like an amulet,

that somehow connects him to this power? The fragments of Ptolemy I's third century BCE diary suggests there was such a thing."

Clayton sat at his desk with the box his mom had left him in front of him. Herodotus was at his feet as he cut through the tape that sealed the lid with a boxcutter. He opened it. Inside, there was an envelope with his name scrawled across it in his mother's hand. He tore it open and pulled out a card.

It began, "Dear Son, I'm so sorry I could not bring myself to give you these things before I died." He sighed and wiped a tear from an eye.

He continued reading:

They belonged to your grandfather, Karl. He was a good man, a hard worker and a devoted husband and father. But as you will see, he was involved in some activities which are better left unsaid. Your father insisted we keep these mementos. We argued about it a lot. It is unfortunate he died before we resolved anything.

Absentmindedly, Clayton drew a finger through a chain made of white gold he wore around his neck, which his mom had given to him. He read on:

I probably should've thrown all this out and spared you the trouble of dealing with it. But I couldn't do it. It didn't seem honest. Perhaps you can use it in your writing. It's up to you, dear.

Someday we will meet again, but until that time I trust you will do the right thing for yourself and your family. I love you very much.

Your mother,

He set the card down on the desk and took from the box a plaque

that read, “Lange’s Chemical Company—Best Medium-Sized Business of the Year. Better Business Bureau, Queens, NY.” He smiled. Dad and Grandpa had run one of the fastest growing businesses in the city, and the BBB had honored them. They said Grandpa and Dad’s product development was innovative, their means of production was cutting edge, and their employees gushed about how the men had created a great place to work.

“Well, that’s harmless,” Clayton said, and he set the plaque on the desk next to the card.

In the bottom of the box was a polished black hardwood jewelry case. “This is a nice piece,” he murmured. He took it out and set it on the desk.

Opening it, he saw there was lots of gold: watches and diamond rings; bracelets, chains, and cufflinks. He had seen in photo albums that the old man loved to wear stuff like this. He lifted the tray out; there was a square envelope underneath with the word “PHOTOGRAPHS” printed across it. He set the tray down and took out the envelope and underneath that there was a medallion. He began to hyperventilate. The pendant was made of gold and silver, and in its center was a symbol painted with glossy black enamel.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he gasped.

His hands shook as he put the tray back in its place. He closed the jewelry box lid and rested his elbows on his knees. Looking at Herodotus, he said, “My heart’s about to beat out of my chest.”

He opened the envelope with the photos. They were black-and-white snapshots, 4-inches square. The first three pictures were of his grandpa with what appeared to be his soldier buddies. They all wore German army uniforms. They had armbands with swastikas, and there were SS insignias on their collars.

Oh my God, Clayton thought.

Grandpa stood next to Adolf Hitler in the fourth photo, showing a medallion on Grandpa’s right chest pocket with an eight-pointed star around its outside edge, a stylized laurel wreath inside the star which was wrapped around a black swastika: one of the highest awards for valor in Nazi Germany—exactly the medallion that lay in the bottom of the jewelry box.

Clayton's hands shook as he put the jewelry box and photos back into their cardboard hiding place.

Mom, you should've told me. I have a thousand questions, but now you're gone. He rolled his shoulders a couple times. Maybe I should do what she did and hide this stuff for another generation to find. Or better yet, maybe I should throw it all into the Hudson River.

CHAPTER 3

359 BC — MACEDONIA

A warrior-king must be a master horseman, for conducting war and ruling a people require the use of the great beast. But riding was also a pleasure for Philip. He thanked Zeus for making him as he had and for his friend, Alekos, alongside whom he had just raced from the rolling hill country where they lived into the plains—a 20-minute gallop. They slowed the horses to a trot.

“Excellent form,” Philip said.

“Thank you,” Alekos said. “You as well. It won’t be long before we ride with your brother and the other men of war.”

“I live in anticipation of that day.”

In the distance, from the north, another rider came into view. Alekos pointed.

“I see him,” Philip said. As he neared, his features became clear. “It’s Joacheim.”

“This is not a good sign,” Alekos said. “An army’s lead scout never retreats from a battle short of imminent defeat.”

“I know,” Philip said.

Joacheim rode hard.

The two men reined their horses to a stop as the scout settled his

mount before them. “Master Philip,” Joacheim said, “I have tragic news.”

“Tell me,” Philip said.

“Perdiccas is dead.”

PRESENT DAY

“It’s been rough,” Clayton said. He sat in Elliot Berkowitz’s office in Midtown Manhattan. “I’d always thought my dad’s parents had immigrated from Germany to the US in nineteen thirty-nine or ’forty because they hated Hitler. My grandma told me that when I was in middle school, I think. But lo and behold, Grandpa was a bona fide Nazi.”

“Let me think about this for a second,” Elliot said.

Elliot’s gray hair was thin, his nose hooked very slightly, and his eyes were hazel. He had been working with Clayton since he wrote his first book.

“I’m really sorry about this, Elliot. I feel terrible. And if I go public—”

“Slow down, Clayton. Let me begin by saying we are not in conflict as far as I’m concerned because I’m a Jew and there was a Nazi in your family. You have nothing to feel sorry for. And I think most people, especially your fans, will feel the same way. But what you’re talking about could become a distraction very quickly. *60 Minutes* will want to do an interview. Nazi hunters will be knocking on your door, trying to figure out how they never caught up with your grandfather. The ICC might want to poke around to find out if you inherited anything which could be linked to the Nazi lootings. And so forth.”

“Are you thinking I should do as my mom did and just keep this on the QT?”

“For now.”

“Okay. That’s good. You’ve given me some perspective.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’m good,” Clayton insisted.

“Want to talk about your next work?”

“It should be done in about six weeks.”

“That’s perfect. In the meanwhile, I’ve got a personal project I’m working on, and I’d like your input.”

“Shoot.”

“You’ll remember the non-fiction piece I wrote about writing fiction?”

Clayton nodded. “*How to Be a Bestseller?*”

“That’s it. I want to do a sequel. One of the chapters I’m writing will be about what makes Clayton Lange tick.”

“Good luck with that, Elliot.” He shook his head with a chuckle. “I’m just like everyone else.”

“You write two or three bestsellers a year. There must be something you can share that will be inspirational or technically helpful.”

“Maybe my one piece of advice to other writers is for them to be disciplined and to treat writing like they would any other job.”

“That’s good, but it doesn’t get at the quality and creativity of your work. That’s what I’m really itching to explore,” Elliot said, sincerely.

“Honestly, I don’t know how to describe that except to say I let my imagination run free, and I write. I don’t have any secrets. I just write.”

“I just write.’ That’s cute.”

“One of my advantages is that I have few outside responsibilities: I don’t have another job and I’m not married. And I’m an introvert. I read somewhere that introverts are usually faster writers than extroverts.”

“You’re not telling me anything I haven’t written about before.”

“I do have a dog.” He raised his eyebrows, smiled.

“I’ve known you all these years, and I never knew you had a dog. What kind?”

“French bulldog.”

“I love him already. What’s his name?”

“Herodotus.”

“Cute. So am I supposed to believe he’s your secret weapon?”

“He takes dictation, and he types.”

“Your punctuation gives that away.”

“Nice retort. But now you understand the run-on sentences.”

“I would’ve expected more from a Frenchie. But back to topic: There is something else we haven’t talked about. It concerns your genre. Have you been watching social media?”

“It’s against my religion, and Herodotus refuses to monitor it.”

“Your fans are calling it ‘immediate futurism.’”

“That’s oxymoronic.”

“It means that what you write happens not long after you write it. It’s as though you anticipate certain things happening as you write about them. Some believe you’re actually causing things to happen. Don’t tell me you haven’t read about this.”

Deep breath. “Okay, yes, I have. But I’m not a prophet and there’s no causal relationship between what I write and what happens elsewhere. Do you know why?”

“Why?”

“Because that would require godlike powers.”

“So what’s your explanation?”

“It’s life imitating art, or coincidence. The world is a very big place, and stuff happens.”

“You’re making sweeping generalizations that don’t take into account the precise fulfillment of your supposed fictional stories.”

Clayton frowned. “I don’t see it.”

“Then I’ll show you.” There was a wall full of books behind Elliot’s desk. A whole shelf was filled with Clayton’s novels. Elliot grabbed *The Cry*. He held it up for Clayton to see the cover, and he flipped it open. “For example, on page two-sixty-seven, you wrote:”

She thrust the blade into his chest, but its tip snapped off on a rib. Surprise, horror, and pain: Those were the words she would later use to describe what she saw in her husband’s eyes as he awoke. And she threw her body on top of the butt of the knife nearly impaling herself as the blade pierced his heart.

“Your point?”

Elliot chuckled. “That was exactly how Jennifer Houser described her murder of her drunken, cheating husband a month after your book hit the shelves.”

“Like I said, it’s life imitating art.”

“Okay. Here’s another example.” He pulled the book, *For Love*, from the shelf. He said, “page one eighty-eight,” and read,

I had known the signs since I was three: the dizziness and the breathing. But I didn’t care anymore, and I fell. Coco knew the signs, too. How many times had she seen me scramble for an EpiPen? The last thing I remember before I passed out was the dog holding the damn thing in her mouth and diving for my leg.

“That was the real story of Jackie Vander two months after you gave me your manuscript!”

“A pure coincidence,” Clayton said.

“A Chihuahua miraculously saving the life of a woman having anaphylactic shock? The only thing you got wrong was the name of the dog.”

“What was it?”

“Lucy.”

“Someone must’ve leaked the story. The woman is probably a nutjob who just wanted attention.”

“There was no leak. And the only thing about the woman that was nutty was her allergy.”

“It’s a matter of statistical probability. I write a lot. It’s inevitable that something in my fantasy world would come true.”

“You see it especially in your epilogues.”

“What?”

“You explain what has happened to your principal characters—”

“I know what an epilogue is.”

“I have found some of the most dramatic examples of your immediate futurism in those summaries.”

“But what about the sixteen-year-old boy who cured leukemia, or the discovery that Elvis lived to be eighty and died in Canada?”

“For every case I can’t prove, I can show you a dozen others which have come true.”

“Well, my friend, I wish it were true I could write what I want into reality. But, honestly, these things in my books are all just fragments of inspiration from a conversation, an observation, or a dream.”

CHAPTER 4

359 BC – MACEDONIA

Candles lined the ledges of the cave walls. There were two men whose shadows were long and deep. One of the men was a priest who wore a purple robe which enveloped him but for his face, which was defined by a long nose, thin lips, and small eyes that glistened in the candlelight. He stood next to a stone altar, on top of which was a sheep that bleated as it struggled against its restraints. And there was Philip, who stood next to the priest wearing only a simple white tunic.

“What is your petition?” the priest asked.

“I desire to be the king of Macedonia.”

“But other men have already laid claim to this throne.”

“They are imposters or as is the case with my nephew, too young to take the position. The lad is under the guardianship of old men. But we are at war, and I must take charge. If I do not, I am certain we will lose everything because of these fools who claim the right to rule until the boy comes of age.”

“I will query Lord Hades,” the priest said. He raised his hands above his head and closed his eyes. His lips moved. After a few moments, he dropped his hands to his sides, and he gazed at Philip. “My lord will give you what you desire if you pledge your eternal soul to him.”

“I do so pledge, if he will show me his favor.”

Unsheathing a knife from his belt with his right hand, the priest said, “You give your life for this covenant which we will seal with blood?”

“I do.”

A wide-mouthed bronze cup rested on the altar next to the sheep. The priest took it in his left hand, and with a single swipe of the blade, he opened the animal’s neck and filled the cup with its blood. He lifted the cup to his lips and drank a deep draught. And then he gave the cup to Philip, who also drank.

The priest said, “Lord Hades gives you a power which will guarantee your success and the success of the one who follows you.”

He took the cup from Philip and returned it to the altar.

“My firstborn?”

“Indeed, and his soul will also belong to Lord Hades.” He placed a leather pouch in Philip’s right hand. “There is a charm in this purse. Protect it and fear it, for it is as powerful as many lives in one.”

“How does it work?”

“When it touches your flesh and you express your heart’s desire in music, or with words, or in images, and then when you dream that wish, the lord of the underworld will give that thing to you.”

“And what of my heir?”

“For as long as you bear this amulet, he also will wield this power.”

“But what if he does evil?”

“The blood he sheds will be on your head, for you are the source of his power. However, whenever you remove the amulet from your person, he will be powerless.”

“And what if he chooses the priesthood and takes a vow of poverty?”

“He may abdicate the power of the amulet with such a vow.”

Without another word, the priest turned and retreated into the darkness of the cave. Philip pulled the charm from the pouch, a stone delicately woven with silver wire with a loop which was attached to a leather cord, and he gazed at it in wonder.

PRESENT DAY

Clayton had not been entirely honest with Elliot. He knew about his fans who had convinced themselves he was a mutant superhero. The tourists who wandered around Lower Manhattan were the worst. They literally hunted for celebrities. A few had trapped him a couple of times. They had memorized long passages from his books, which for some reason they felt compelled to recite to him. And after the recital, they would beg him for miracles for themselves or their friends and relatives in future books.

Clayton's disguise this morning was a Yankees' cap and sunglasses. Carrying a newspaper under an arm, he pulled the door open on a '50s-style diner. He let go of Herodotus' leash, and the dog led the way to their table.

"Good morning, Mr. Lange," a waitress behind the counter said. She was forty-something and wore a white blouse and skirt with a red apron. Her dark brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

"Good morning, Carmen."

It was late and there was only a handful of people in the restaurant—an elderly man at the counter and a middle-aged couple at a table near the door. Clayton went to a booth against a window at the end of the restaurant. The dog jumped up onto the bench across from him. Carmen carried a steaming pot of coffee, and she asked Clayton if he would like a cup.

"That would be great. Thanks." He turned over his cup and she filled it.

"The usual?"

"Yes, please. Has your son heard from NYU yet?"

"That is so sweet you remembered. Bobby got his acceptance letter last Friday."

"Congratulations. I bet he's excited."

"Yeah, except the grant money available is based on a family's net wealth. We have no cash, but the value of our house in Brooklyn makes us look rich."

Clayton sipped his coffee.

"So we're thinking he could go to community college for a couple

of years and then transfer. It won't kill him." She paused and refilled his cup. "Sorry to blab so much. Let me put your order in."

Clayton opened the newspaper. The headline was in giant letters: "High School Student Discovers Cure For Cancer." The hair on his arms stood on end, and he read on. A few minutes later Carmen returned. He pushed the paper to the side, and she set a plate with scrambled eggs and a piece of rye toast in front of him.

"Isn't that something?" she commented.

He looked up at her. His face was white.

"That a kid would somehow figure out the cure for cancer in his science class?"

"Yeah. It's a miracle."

"It truly is." She turned and left him to his meal.

It happened just as he had written in *No Other Way*. The plot was simple: A man who had been estranged from his family was diagnosed with leukemia. But his 16-year-old son still loved him. In his science class, he did a project on leukemia, first reading everything he could get his hands on about DNA, gene mutation, and bone marrow. And then he conducted a series of experiments which led him to a new chemotherapy that killed mutant cells with nearly 100 percent success. His dad was healed with the new therapy, and the family was reconciled. The end.

Clayton's hand shook as he picked up the fork for his eggs. He set it back down and stood. He set money on the table and grabbed the dog's leash.

"Hey, Carmen," he said, "I forgot an appointment, and I've got to run."

She waved, and they were on the street. Clayton slipped his shades down over his eyes, and he and the dog walked fast until they reached the condo.

Anna Kravets was in the kitchen. "Good morning, Mr. Lange," she said as she heard the door open.

Her short-sleeved gray dress fell just below her knees. It had a wide white collar, and she wore a full-length white apron. She had been with Clayton for almost ten years. She reminded him a lot of his mom

—forever blond, happy blue eyes, a great cook, and she had always been an encouragement to him.

“Good morning, Anna. Whatever you’re making smells delicious,” Clayton said.

“Thank you. It’s chicken marsala.”

He went into the office. Herodotus followed him. He knelt before the bookshelves; his journals were on the bottom. He had recorded his thoughts almost daily from the time he could complete a sentence. He scratched the dog’s head and grabbed one of his first journals; he would’ve been about six.

He found July 17: “There’s nobody to hang out with. Brian and Chad are on vacation. I wish I had a dog, and I told Mom and Dad. They argued about it for a long time. Father Francis told me to pray about it. I did that, and now we’ll see if God heard me.” He had made a crayon drawing underneath the entry of what appeared to be a very rough rendition of a furry orange creature, his attempt at a Golden Retriever.

He chuckled. An artist he would never be. He flipped through several pages of the journal to July 28. The entry read,

God heard my prayer! Dad bought me a dog! He looks exactly like what I saw in my dream!

Buddy was a great dog, his best friend through high school. Clayton grabbed another journal. He would’ve been about 15 years old. He opened it to April 22:

I wrote to the borough president of Queens and told him we need skateparks. Everyone’s mad at us because we’re on the sidewalks, in parks, and in parking lots. But where are we supposed to go?

I explained to him that skating is great for our health, and it keeps us out of trouble. I even sent him some pictures of parks in California that the borough could copy.

I got a letter from him today, and I’m not kidding when I say

he's an SOB! He said skaters have created dangerous conditions for pedestrians and vehicular traffic, and as of May 1st we will only be permitted to skate in our driveways and on residential streets. That's ridiculous! He wrote we have to stay off sidewalks and out of parking lots, that public and private open spaces are also off limits, and "skaters are absolutely prohibited from using arterials, highways, throughways, and any other road that is not in an area that is exclusively zoned residential." Nice guy.

And to top it all off, he threatened us. He wrote, "Do not interfere with traffic or you will be fined. And be careful not to injure pedestrians or you may be incarcerated." Oh gosh, thanks for the heads-up, otherwise I might've gone out and maimed someone today. A-hole! He didn't even say anything about the pictures I sent to him. He's a double A-hole!

He flipped forward to August 12. He had written, "Our first skatepark just opened! I've been dreaming about this park, literally. It has stairs, rails, and ledges just as I imagined, and it's less than a half-mile from my house! Yay!"

He could do this all day. There were dozens of accounts of good fortune or good luck or whatever you wanted to call it that ran through his journals from the beginning until the present: from the Christmas gifts he received, to the jobs he had had as a young man; from his success on the high school football team, to his adventures traveling Europe. His imagination had created all of this. The logical side of his brain had refused to acknowledge that this was possible, but there it was. He put the journals back on the shelf and sat at the desk.

"Herodotus, let's write." The dog was looking at him intently, his tongue hanging out of his pug face. "This feels like an Underwood story, doesn't it?" he said as he rolled his chair over to the ancient typewriter under the window. He pulled a sheet of paper from a stack on the desk, inserted it into the carriage, rolled it in, centered for the title, and typed, "The Italian Miracle."

He typed for several hours. It was not an award winner, but it was a solid short story with a beginning, middle, and a tear-jerking conclu-

sion. He finished with “The End” and rolled the last page out of the machine.

“Are you ready for dinner, Mr. Lange?” Anna asked from the doorway.

“I’m famished,” Clayton said, and he and the dog followed her into the dining room.

CHAPTER 5

PRESENT DAY

Victor Penlick thought himself a self-made man. He had often quipped, “I wasn’t raised with a silver spoon. But I was raised *up* with a leather belt, daily.” That drew chuckles from men who shared similar memories.

Victor had three older brothers, and Daddy’s punishments were pretty much evenly divided among them and Mother. So it was all manageable. But when his brothers started moving out, Victor knew it was just a matter of time before someone got badly hurt.

It was Victor’s brother, Luke: He lay unconscious on the kitchen floor. After twenty-plus years of silence, Mother finally spoke up. Standing over her son, she cried, “Lee! Stop! Or you’ll kill him!”

That stopped the beating, but Mother got a black eye for her trouble. That was when Victor knew it was up to him to take his family’s survival into his own hands.

Daddy was a hunter, and Victor had easily taken to the sport. The tracking, the shooting, the dressing, everything—he enjoyed it all. Spring was when they traditionally hog-hunted in East Texas. Victor had just turned 16 years old, and it was his turn to hunt with Daddy alone. It was something of an initiation into manhood Daddy had

done for each one of his sons. He was in a good mood, and he told Victor so as they loaded the truck with gear.

It was in the morning on the second day of the expedition when Victor and his dad sighted a 300-pound hog wading in a river about 50 yards from the wooded patch where they knelt. Daddy was about 20 feet away from Victor when he nodded at him to take his shot.

Peering through his rifle's scope, Victor saw the detail in Daddy's face. An eyebrow raised. Mouth open. His lips formed the word, "No." Fear—Victor had never seen that expression on Daddy's face before. It gave him goosebumps. The exchange lasted about two seconds before the .308 entered Daddy's skull and his head exploded like a can of tomatoes.

The D.A. wrote off the death as a hunting accident. Victor's punishment was a browbeating by the judge and an assignment to take a gun safety course.

Lee's funeral was a closed casket graveside service, a sad affair with only the cemetery chaplain, Mother, and Victor. When the preacher was done, Victor held his mother's hand as they watched a backhoe dump dirt into the grave. He thought he heard her breathe a sigh of relief. Neither of them ever said a word to the other about the shooting, but Victor was certain she knew that what had happened was not accidental. Himself, he wanted to dance on the bastard's grave. He had saved the family from further torment, and, unexpectedly, he had received the gift of self-understanding. It was as he watched Daddy die, he realized the one thing that would forever inspire him was power, mortal power, the power to decide who lives and who does not.

Victor went on to study law, finishing at the top of his class. Despite an offer to fast-track at a leading firm with the promise of partnership, he chose to go out on his own. The power he had tasted earlier had become an ache, a craving in his belly that he knew he could not satisfy working for someone else.

In his undergraduate course work, he had taken an interest in Western Civilization, especially the stories of the emperors, from Alexander the Great to the Habsburgs. It was in those stories where

his goals crystalized and gave shape to what had only been a feeling before. His hunger for power became a lust for absolute power, for an autocracy to reshape the political and economic landscape of the world.

As an independent lawyer with laser-like focus, he used his wit and charm to get introductions to people who lived in that place where he wanted to live. The prophets and poets said that place was close to the sun, and it was dangerous. But he knew what he wanted was worth any risk and, in the end, only fools got burned.

As he pursued his dream, he discovered that the people he wanted to be close to came from a variety of backgrounds and followed all kinds of career paths: They were politicians, CEOs, military officers, financial tycoons, real estate investors, and entrepreneurs. But they all had one thing in common: An unquenchable thirst for power, just like him.

In less than ten years of shaking hands and rubbing elbows at dinner parties, in courtrooms, and on the golf course, Victor created what he called a gentlemen's club. Anyone else would've called it a cabal: Together, the seven men guessed they might control what would amount to the twelfth largest GDP in the world. And they shared a single vision for world domination.

During one of their dinners, one of their members laughingly remarked, "I don't know if you guys are listening to yourselves, but our conversation has digressed to a game I'm calling, Drop That Name." They all laughed self-consciously. He continued, "Kidding aside, I have just realized there's probably no more than two degrees of separation between our little group and any seat of power in the world."

Besides Victor Penlick, the group's membership was Roger Skarllyle, the oil magnate; Pierce Cockler, the US senator from Texas; and the supreme court justice, whom the senator recruited, Jay J. Orden. He was a tall, wiry man. He had had his share of run-ins with Congress over supposed ethics violations. But they all had to do with money. And no one likes the green stuff more than the people who launch investigations, which had all disappeared.

There was US Army general, Bud Hammerman. Everyone called

him by his surname with a subtle twist: “Hammer Man.” He liked the title, supposing it came from his reputation for the work he had done in Iraq and Afghanistan. His square jaw and barrel chest completed the picture.

The youngest member of the group was Adam Stone, a venture capitalist. He was average in appearance. Easy to forget. But that was the only average thing about him. He was a master investor in all forms of trading and currency exchange, and he had used that skill to make himself one of the five richest men in the world before he was 30 years old.

Benjamin Greenbaugh retired when he was 50, leaving an auto company he had saved from bankruptcy and built up, multiplying its profitability many times over. He was bored only a week into his withdrawal from the daily grind. He bought a struggling machine shop that manufactured aftermarket car parts, and today, 20 years later, that shop was now only a footnote in the history of the world’s largest manufacturing conglomerate. With plants in a dozen countries, Greenbaugh’s company manufactured a host of things including microchips, cosmetics, and textiles.

The personalities of the seven men ranged from sanguine to melancholy. There was one who was a devout Catholic and another who was a self-declared atheist. But they all shared Victor’s passion to acquire that one thing they believed had empowered past empires, that object which would catapult them from the shadows into the light, that thing which Amelia Irons and her black ops team now searched for.

“She said she’s FBI,” Dazzle said, holding the telephone receiver. His body lay across an armchair with his legs draped over the side.

“So what?” Derrick asked.

He was on a couch, and the others were slung across other pieces of furniture in the presidential suite at the Four Seasons in Miami. A bottle of whiskey was going around, passed from hand to hand.

“Said she wants to ask a few questions.”

“Does she sound sexy?”

“She sounds old. There’s another agent with her. A guy.”

“Tell her it’s her lucky day.”

After inviting the agents to the suite, Dazzle hung up the phone.

“Let’s get some girls up here after this little meeting,” Derrick said. He pointed out the window with the bottle of whiskey at a rooftop pool. “For some fun in the sun.”

“I’m down with that,” TJ said.

There was a knock on the door. Rex answered it, and Amelia and Tarek came in, flashing fake FBI ID. Amelia wore her usual black dress — sans pearls, and Tarek wore a black suit and tie with a white shirt.

“I’m Special Agent Amelia Williams. And this is my partner, Special Agent Tarek Ali.”

Derrick still lay on the couch. “Whassup?”

“May we sit?” Amelia asked.

“Feel free,” Derrick said as he swung his feet around to the floor. “Want a drink?” He took a swig from the bottle and held it out to her and Tarek.

“No thanks,” Amelia said, and Tarek shook his head no. They sat on a loveseat across from Derrick. “We want to ask you a few questions about the strange occurrences that have been taking place during your concerts.”

He handed the bottle to Dazzle. “That’s what I figured,” he said. “Go for it.”

“What’s your explanation?”

“I don’t have one. They just happen. A bunch of girls get naked, birds appear, a man bursts into flames, and I get laid. Weird stuff just happens.” He grinned and looked around at the other guys.

“Were those things intentional?”

“What’s this worth to you?”

“You’ve got it backward, Mr. Romano. We could take you in for questioning, have a press conference, maybe hold you for a night. So my question is, what is this worth to you?”

“Okay, fair enough. This is my story: I write songs, and then I dream them. They’re usually set in performances, often as the last piece. And they just happen.”

“Besides performances, at what other times have your dreams come true?”

“At home with personal stuff.”

“Give me an example.”

“A few weeks ago a neighbor’s terrier barked all night, and I made up a dumb song.”

“It was hilarious,” TJ said,

“Yeah, it was,” Derrick said. “It went like this:

Little skittle bitch dog
Screams all night.
But that’s all right
Coyote’s holding tight
With a nibble, then a bite
A chomp and a chew
And it’s over for you,
Little skittle bitch dog.”

“Funny as hell.” Dazzle laughed.

“And?” Amelia asked.

“The only thing that was left of it the next morning was its tail,” Derrick said.

“Do you have any artifacts which you wear frequently?”

“Artifacts?” he tittered. “Like my cock ring?” The other guys sniggered. “No, I don’t wear no fucking artifacts. Are we done? I’m kind of busy.” The bottle came back around to him, and he took another swig.

“Tell me about your childhood,” she said.

“What’s to tell? Everyone who’s interviewed me has written about it.”

“I’d like to hear it from you personally,” Amelia said.

He rolled his eyes. “Okay. One more time: Poor white kid raised by crackhead mother in the Detroit projects gets a break singing rap. He drops out of school and makes a fortune. End of story.”

“What happened to your dad?”

“That piece of shit? He was a lawyer with an alcohol problem who left my mom for some slut when I was six.”

“And he’s dead.”

“I heard he had an encounter with a bus, and he lost.”

“Tragic.”

“For him.”

“And you and your mom.”

“Don’t talk about my mom. It’s not her fault. He screwed her up.”

“Has she ever had experiences like you’ve had with the paranormal?”

“If she had, do you think she’d be where she is today?”

“How about your father?”

“How the hell would I know?”

“Did you inherit anything from him?”

“This is getting old. I don’t know anything about that dick, and no he didn’t leave us shit.”

“One last question.”

“Good.”

“Are you familiar with the legends of other people who’ve had special powers like yours?”

“Besides Jesus and David Blaine?”

She stared at him.

“No. Are we done?”

“Yes, we are, Mr. Romano,” Amelia said. She and Tarek stood. “Thank you for your time.” They turned to leave.

“Hey, Tarek,” Derrick said.

He turned back.

“If you like girls and drink, quit that dumb job and make some real money as one of my bodyguards. We could use a Muslim brother on staff. Join us this afternoon.”

“I’ll pass, but thanks.”

In the elevator Tarek asked, “Do you think he told the truth about his father?”

“The story’s consistent with what he’s said previously and what

his mother reported initially after the accident. But that was fifteen years ago. Maybe it's time to pay Serenity Romano a visit."

352 BC - MACEDONIA

"I dreamed it last night," Philip said.

He and Alekos admired a terracotta vase he held in his hands—it was big enough to hold two liters of wine. The artist had painted the mythological war between Zeus of the Olympians and Cronus of the Titans in gold and red against a black background. The scene was familiar to all God-fearing people as it had been replicated innumerable times by artists on pottery and in murals. But this piece was strikingly different from the others: Zeus' likeness had been replaced with that of Philip's, and Cronus' resembled Onomarchus, the commander of the Phocians.

"We will crush them in Crocus Field," Philip said.

He set the vase down on a table and they went out double doors to the balcony, where they looked over the property below. Hardly a stone's throw away was a corral of horses and a great shade tree under which children played.

"Will you ever reveal to me how this works, where your power comes from, and why?" Alekos asked.

"I cannot say, even to my dearest friend. But I will tell you this: For as long as my kingdom stands, you will stand."

"I am grateful for that, and I shall not nag you again with questions. Whatever this power's origin, you have used it to serve Macedonia faithfully. With every victory we are one step closer to ruling the whole land."

The leafy branches of the tree below created a luxuriant canopy of shade under which a class of young boys played soldier with wooden swords. Philip's son, Alexander, was among them. "Do they not look like miniature versions of us in their tunics?" Philip asked.

"Indeed, they do." Alekos chuckled.

"I have married many women, but only Olympias gave me a son."

"A philosopher once said, 'A single son who is wise, strong, and

loyal is worth more than a hundred foolish ones.’ Alexander’s mentor tells me that even at the tender age of four years, the boy has shown a remarkable keenness for learning, is very persuasive in his speech, and has a high level of skill—his grip is sure and his swing, precise.”

“I suppose, then, I should start praying for his wisdom and loyalty,” Philip said.

CHAPTER 6

PRESENT DAY

“Mr. Lange?” Anna asked, as she gently shook his shoulder.

Sitting on the condo’s balcony in the late afternoon sun, Clayton opened his eyes. “I was having the weirdest dream,” he said.

“I’m leaving now. Your dinner’s on the table.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“Don’t let it get cold. And don’t forget, you still need to take Herodotus for a walk.”

“You’re a dog’s best friend. Have a great weekend.”

“Thanks. I’ll try.”

He found the dog at his bowl in the kitchen. “She loves you, doesn’t she?”

Herodotus glanced at him and went back to eating.

Clayton poured himself a glass of white wine and sat down. He took a bite. It was one of Anna’s specialties: chicken thigh marinade with a side of asparagus. He felt a little out of it, like he was still in the dream. It was about his short story, “The Italian Miracle.” It was so real, he felt like he was still there. So weird. He took a drink of wine.

When he was finished, he went to the door for his leather bomber’s jacket and whistled. Herodotus appeared, his tongue hanging out in anticipation.

“Let’s go pick up some music,” Clayton said.

It was getting dark and in the upper 40s outside. But it was a short walk, and the Yankees cap and jacket would suffice.

Carlyle’s was a jazz club he frequented. He took a table in the back not far from the small stage where a band played.

A waiter greeted him, “Hi, Mr. Lange. How’re you tonight?”

“I’m good. How about yourself?”

“I’m good. What do you think of this band? They’re new.”

“They have a nice groove. Who are they?”

“Elowen and the Hurricanes.”

“Are they living up to their name?”

“Blowing everyone away.”

“Good one.”

“They told me to say that.”

“Hilarious.”

“What’re you drinking?”

“A stout.”

The waiter left for the beer, and Clayton watched the band play. Elowen was singing “Cheek to Cheek.” Her hair was ink black and it hung below her shoulders. She reminded him a little of Joan Jett. She wore a short, black strapless cocktail dress.

“Do you like her?” he asked the dog who lay at his feet. “Yeah, me, too.”

She was accompanied by two female vocalists, a guitar, string bass, piano, and drums.

The waiter returned with the beer. Clayton nodded toward the band. “What’re they drinking?”

“The singers are drinking wine. And the others are drinking beer.”

“When they break, set ’em up on me.”

“You bet.”

After another song, Elowen said, “We’ll be back in twenty minutes. Don’t go anywhere!” She and the others stepped down to tables below the stage. She sat with the other vocalists. The waiter came with the wine and beer, and after he spoke to them, Elowen waved Clayton over.

“We have an invitation, Herodotus,” Clayton said. “What do you

think?” The dog stood and looked at him with his head cocked to the side. “Who’s dreaming now?” Clayton chuckled.

He grabbed his beer, and they went to Elowen’s table. The two background singers introduced themselves as Abby, a blonde, and Jocelyn, an African-American. Their dresses were the same style as Elowen’s, but red.

“Thanks for the wine,” Elowen said, and she held up her glass as did the others.

“It’s the least I could do. Your voice reminds me of Ella’s, but it’s still your own.”

“I think that’s the highest compliment I’ve ever gotten. Would you like to join us?”

“Sure,” he said, and he went around both tables and shook everyone’s hand.

He sat down with the vocalists, and Elowen said, “This is not a random invitation to a fan. You’re the novelist, Clayton Lange, right?”

“Yep.”

“We’re all big fans of yours. But I will confess that we buy one book and pass it around. Sorry.”

He smiled. “I think that’s the highest compliment *I’ve* ever gotten.”

They chatted through the break until the band returned to the stage. After playing jazz covers, the musicians returned to the tables.

“Is this the first time you’ve played this venue?” Clayton asked.

“Yeah,” Elowen said. “But we’re going to be here on the second and fourth Fridays for a few months.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks. Incidentally, Jocelyn is an aspiring writer.”

Jocelyn looked at Elowen, mortified.

“No kidding?” Clayton said.

“But she’s shy,” Elowen added, “and she wouldn’t have dared say anything to you.”

“That’s okay. What’re you writing, Jocelyn?”

“It’s a romance novel set in Chicago’s ’sixty’s music culture. My parents are musicians, and it’s based on stories I’ve heard them tell over the years.”

“I love it already,” he said. They talked for a few moments, and he gave her some tips for honing her work. “And when you’re done, send it to me. I’ll give it a read.”

“That would be wonderful, Mr. Lange. Thank you.”

“It’s nothing,” he said. “If you write the way you sing, you’ve got a great future ahead of you.”

“You haven’t introduced us to your girl magnet yet,” Elowen said as she bent down to pet Herodotus.

“This guy? His name is Herodotus.”

“There must be a story behind that.”

“I love Greek history. His namesake was an ancient Greek historian.”

She rubbed under his chin. “Can I have him?”

“Well, we are a package.”

As the morning sun crawled up the bed, it revealed a human body wrapped up in rust-colored linen bedsheets. Clayton peeked out from under a pillow. “Hey,” he said.

Elowen was struggling to button her dress. “Hey,” she said.

“Work?”

“Yeah. I’m going to be late.”

“This is kind of early for band practice, isn’t it?”

“I have a day job, too. It’s temp work at a bank.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Herodotus, did you hear that?” The dog barked. “I have a witness.”

“I’ve got to go.”

“Call me.”

“You call me.”

“I had fun.”

At the door she turned and smiled. “I had fun, too.”

The front door clicked shut, and he pulled the pillow back over his head.

“Good morning,” Clayton said. He stood at the edge of the kitchen in a thick blue terrycloth bathrobe.

Anna looked at the clock on the wall over the doorway. It was nearly 1:00 p.m. “Morning?”

“Someplace in the world it’s morning.” He grinned and went to the counter.

Anna poured him a cup of coffee. “A lady friend last night?”

“We’re not really friends yet.” He took the coffee.

“Mr. Lange, that’s terrible!”

“But I do like her.”

“What’s her name?”

“*Ummm*, let me think about that for a second. It’s a hard one.”

Anna *tsked, tsked*.

“Elowen of Elowen and the Hurricanes.”

“I’m sorry?”

“She’s the leader of a jazz band I met last night.”

“You’d be happier, Mr. Lange, if you got married.”

“You left your husband.”

“He cheated on me.”

“Maybe I’d be a cheater, too.”

“You wouldn’t be a cheater, Mr. Lange. I can tell. Haven’t you ever met someone you thought you might like to share your life with?”

“Back in college. But that was a long time ago. The coffee’s perfect. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Don’t worry about lunch. I’m going to take the dog for a walk in a minute, and I think I’m going to stop by the diner and have a bite to eat.”

“No problem, Mr. Lange.”

A half an hour later, Clayton and Herodotus emerged from the condominium. There was a breeze coming off the river, and he wore a heavy coat, a beanie, and sunglasses. He was well camouflaged from head to toe, but some art students recognized the dog—he had

become a social media sensation—and Clayton spent several minutes talking with them. At the restaurant, he took his regular booth by the window.

“Hi, Mr. Lange.” It was Amanda. She and Carmen usually worked the breakfast-lunch shift together. She was blond and in her forties.

“How’re you?”

“I’m well. You know the manager doesn’t really care, but if a customer says something about the dog, I’m going to have to ask you to tie him up outside.”

“Herodotus? Outside? He’s my service dog.”

She folded her arms and shook her head.

“My typist.”

“Come on, Mr. Lange. I’m serious.”

“I was just talking to my agent about his run-on sentences.”

“Why do I try?” she asked herself. “What would you like, Mr. Smarty Pants?”

He grinned. “The club sandwich and a bowl of soup.”

“How about the medley of vegetables for your side dish?”

“Chips would be better, and I’ll have a Diet Coke, too.”

“You got it.”

“Is Carmen working?”

“She left right after breakfast.”

“Sick?”

“Nope. NYU called her about her son. They told her if they wanted a scholarship for him, they had to sign up for it before the end of the day.”

He stared at her.

“It’s for Sicilian Italians from Brooklyn who’re majoring in engineering.”

“That’s amazing.”

“It’s a miracle, a scholarship designed just for him. Let me get that sandwich and soup going for you.”

CHAPTER 7

336 BC – MACEDONIA

The amphitheater was filled with people; it was standing room only. A parody of a royal wedding was playing, and the crowd thundered with applause between acts. The king's daughter had married just the day before.

"The people are so happy, Father," Alexander said as they approached the theater on foot with his new brother-in-law, also Alexander.

"They love a wedding, but they love to have a laugh even more," Philip said.

"It is all for fun," said the second Alexander.

They passed through the gate into the amphitheater. Philip gestured at box seats across from the stage where his wife, Olympias sat. "There is your mother."

"Indeed," Alexander said.

The people stood and cheered as the king and his two sons entered the stadium. Philip raised his arms to the people in gratitude. Olympias remained seated. Her black hair and piercing green eyes had always reminded Philip of Alexander.

"You should speak with her, son," Philip said, continuing his smile for the crowd. "I know she is jealous of my other wives, but you

and I are at peace since I have confirmed publicly that you are my rightful heir. She should be pleased with this.”

“I will talk to her, Father.”

“Pausanias is joining us,” the son-in-law said.

The elder warrior and bodyguard of the king approached them quickly as though he had an urgent message.

“What is it, my dear friend?” Philip asked.

Pausanias came in close, and he kissed and embraced the king. But when he pulled back, the handle of a knife protruded from Philip’s chest. Pausanias raced to the exit, and Philip’s white tunic exploded with blood. His eyes were filled with disbelief as he crumpled to the ground.

Alexander bent down over his father, kissed his forehead, and snatched from his neck the thing on a leather strap the priest had given him many years earlier. He looked up to where his mother had been seated and saw her just as she left the theater. There was a great rumbling all around—it was the beginning of a riot.

“Come,” said the brother-in-law, “we must leave immediately.”

One week following Philip’s assassination, Alexander stood with the royal family’s artist in the great room of the palace.

“Vases were your father’s preference,” the artist said, pointing at the shelves lined with them. “All his victories—in Crocus Field and in Chaerones, over the Scythians, and the Greeks—he anticipated on terracotta vases.”

“As I have trained, I have immersed myself in poetry,” Alexander said. “But now I would like to do something different, something grand, something the people can enjoy and celebrate with their king.”

“Perhaps mosaics?”

“Mosaics would be perfect. But can you do it? You know how I devise my plans with haste.”

“Yes, my king, for your purposes I will paint on wood in detail a mosaic exactly as it will appear when it is later finished with cut stone and glass. It will be an exact prototype of the final work.”

“Very good. Here, then, is what I envision for our first battle against the Persians: We will meet them on the edge of Asia, facing off across a river. I will lead my men across the water by horseback....”

PRESENT DAY

“Stunned” was the first word that came to mind for Clayton to describe it. Or maybe a better word was “shocked,” or “surprised,” or “startled.” *The alliteration is getting in the way of my thinking*, he reflected.

He had just woken up after a long, restless night. The revelation of the power he possessed had turned his sense of equilibrium upside down. His ability to make things in his imagination come true had been present for as long as he could remember, but he had subconsciously held his acceptance of it at bay. But now there was no denying it.

As he watched the morning light fill the walls from the bed, his thoughts raced: *It was one thing to fantasize or idealize or conceptualize... Stop it!* he thought. *This is scary as hell. Am I like a superhero?* He mused over the thought for a moment. *I have to test this power one more time.*

If anyone deserved a miracle it was his housekeeper, Anna. Born in the Ukraine, she had come to the States as a child with parents who had only their prayers and the clothes they wore. Anna had married and had children young and committed herself to work hard for her family’s future. But just as she and Charlie were beginning to enjoy a little financial security, he had cheated on her. After all the hardships and challenges she had weathered over the years, this guy trashed their marriage for a fling with a girl twenty years younger than himself.

Clayton sat at the island in the kitchen as Anna chopped veggies for a salad. He took a sip of coffee. “Has Charlie come crawling back yet?” he asked.

She shook her head and sighed. “Not yet. But it’s just a matter of time. That girl is hardly an adult, and I can’t help but think she’ll tire of him soon.”

“How’re you doing?”

“I don’t like the separation. I’m lonely.”

“Will you take him back when he comes?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Lange. He hurt me when he left. The things he said were really cruel.”

Amelia and two from her team had picked up an SUV at the Detroit Metro Airport, and Jake parked it in front of one of many brick duplexes in the East Detroit housing project. The mortar crumbled, bars covered the windows, the paint on the wooden porches peeled, and trash filled the gutters. The postage stamp yards were dirt and weeds. This part of Detroit had been one of the poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods in the nation for years.

Tarek got out of the SUV and opened Amelia’s door for her. He gave her his hand, and she stepped down into the street. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“She’s not dangerous. You’ll be more valuable to me out here, keeping an eye on things.”

Once on the porch, Amelia pressed the doorbell. It was dead. She banged on the metal screen. As it rattled, a dog barked inside. She banged again. “I’m a friend of your son’s!” she shouted.

The door opened a couple inches against a chain. Cigarette smoke billowed out. “Did he die?” a woman asked through the crack.

“No,” Amelia said. “He’s very much alive.”

She snorted. “You look like a mortician. What do you want?”

“Are you Serenity Romano?”

“Who wants to know?”

“I’m Amelia Williams, a private investigator.”

“Are you law enforcement or the press? You have to tell me.”

“No, I’m not law enforcement or the press.”

“What’s in it for me?”

“I can tell you about your son.”

“I can read about him in every gossip magazine.”

“And I can pay you for your time.”

“How much?”

“Hundred dollars an hour.”

“Two hundred.”

“Deal.”

The door clicked shut, and there was the sound of the chain sliding across its track. The woman pulled the door open and pushed open the screen. Looking at her face-to-face, Amelia recognized where Derrick Romano had gotten his high cheekbones, dark eyes, and sensuous lips. Serenity was not pretty anymore, but she had been at another time in her life.

A strong odor permeated the house, like ammonia—it was dog pee—and it was mixed with secondhand smoke. Serenity threw herself into a recliner and gestured around the room for Amelia to find a seat.

“Wherever you like,” she said.

Ash from her cigarette fell into the carpet. There were empty beer cans and candles that had burned down to nothing on the coffee table. The dog barked and pawed the door of a room where he had been confined.

Amelia grabbed a straight-back chair from a table in the kitchen and set it across from Serenity.

“Okay, now that we’re all comfy, what do you want to talk about?” Serenity asked, and she took a long draw on her cigarette.

Sitting at the Underwood, Clayton typed, “A Story of True Love.” Herodotus lay at his feet. “Dog, this second test will either confirm or disprove everything we’ve been thinking about this thing.”

But despite multiple attempts over many hours, everything Clayton had typed had ended up in a wastebasket. It was getting late. He had let Anna go home early because he was planning on taking Elowen out for dinner. “Damn it, Herodotus. Why can’t I get this one out?”

The dog stood and whined.

“What are you saying, pal?” He scratched behind his ears. “You want to go for a walk, don’t you?”

He folded his arms and stared out the window for a long moment. "Let's try a poem," he said, and he rolled another sheet of paper into the typewriter. After the title, he typed,

Shattered
A vow broken
A heart pierced
The circle goes round

Shattered
The man—the woman
A hope—a dream
The circle goes round

Shattered
Lives changed
As the wheels turn
The circle goes round

Shattered
The body
The spirit
The circle goes round

Shattered
Humility for hope
Pride for love
And the circle goes round

He looked at the dog. "What? It's only a start. I'll finish it later. Let's get out of here."

On the street, they went underground to the subway. They would make one connection to Brooklyn. In a little less than an hour they would be at the restaurant Elowen had chosen.

CHAPTER 8

334 BC – ANATOLIA

It was just as the artist had rendered in his painting and as Alexander had dreamed: The Persians were there, armed for battle on the other side of the Granicus River. But their formation was not right—their cavalry was in front of their infantry instead of its flanks.

Alexander's men faced the Persians. His infantry was in phalanx formation in the center, with cavalry on the right and on the left. He rode with those on the righthand side. Lifting his lance, he shouted, "Zeus shall prevail!" And the infantry plunged into the river shouting the same.

Javelins and arrows rained down on them, but to no effect as the men deflected them with their shields. Their war cry carried over the banks of the river into the ears of their enemy: "Zeus shall prevail!"

Alexander led the horsemen across the water. A giant white plume on top of his helmet whipped in the wind as he charged. He could not help but grin for his taunt of his enemy.

Alexander recognized Mithridates, King Darius' son-in-law, and he set upon him, plunging his lance into his face, killing him instantly. When the nobleman-warrior Rhosaces saw it, he attacked Alexander only to succeed in slicing off a part of the plume and cracking his

helmet. Alexander sneered at the man as he drove his broadsword into his gut.

In less than an hour the battle was done: The Persian loss was over 5,000 men. Alexander's loss was 120.

The sun settled on the horizon as the Macedonian troops burned the dead. Alexander watched with his generals not far from the river.

His close friend and the head of his personal cavalry, broad-shouldered Hephaestion, sat at his side. "Darius himself did not come," he remarked.

"Nor did I expect him to," Alexander said. "He knew me only as the son of Philip. However, he knows me now as the king who killed his son-in-law and routed his army. He will come next time."

PRESENT DAY

Elowen sat in the bedroom bay window as she watched the early sun begin to illumine the edifices of downtown Manhattan. Clayton was sound asleep. She had always been a morning person. Welcoming the day with the sunrise was a source of joy for her.

She gazed across the room at Clayton's face. He had a high forehead, a distinguished nose, and cleft chin. Noble features. And he had nice lips—very nice lips. He was a great author, and, as it turned out, an excellent lover. And he was a good man. She had thought she might go bi; it was a very real possibility after her experience with a girl in college. But she did prefer the other species. However, her experiences until now had begun to persuade her that the probability of finding a man who was not only physically attractive but intellectually interesting and not a narcissist seemed impossibly small. But here he was, Clayton Lange—never married, deliciously handsome, only two years older than she, and rich. But most importantly, he was a nice guy.

He opened one eye. "Hey, gorgeous."

"You need glasses."

He opened the other eye. "Oh my gosh, you might be right."

"I was just having pleasant thoughts about you."

"What time is it?" he asked.

“Six-thirty.”

“I’m not familiar with that time. Is that like thirty minutes before seven?”

“You are adorable.”

“Have you been awake for a while?”

“About half an hour.”

“Are you hungry?”

“For what?” she said.

“Exactly what I was thinking.” He stretched an arm out and she jumped back in bed.

It was thirty minutes later when she said she was still hungry.

“We have three choices,” he said. “We could hit the diner, or wait for Anna, who will be here in an hour and a half, or we could have Cheerios.”

“I haven’t had Cheerios since I left home for college, but let’s go to the diner. That sounds like more fun.”

After she had taken a shower, Clayton got in, and she put on his terrycloth bathrobe and snooped around the apartment. The living room furnishings were somewhat stark but for mementos from his travels. And there was an old bookcase filled with what looked like histories. There were lots of original pieces of art hanging on the walls. But the peaceful sensation the space gave her was much different from what she experienced when she stepped into his crowded office. It was as though there was a storm of ideas waiting to break loose from the piles of paper and file folders and shelves filled with journals and books. There was an ancient typewriter under the window, with a piece of paper in it. She looked at it and read out loud,

Shattered
 A vow broken
 A heart pierced
 The circle goes round....

A little before eight when they left the condo with Herodotus in tow, it was 50 degrees, and Elowen wore an oversized wool sweater with boyfriend jeans and UGGs. Clayton wore jeans, a turtleneck, his

Yankees' cap, shades, and a bomber's jacket. It was Saturday and the streets were already busy with tourists on the prowl.

"I read your poem," she said.

"Tell me you didn't."

"I love it."

"It's not done."

"It's beautiful."

Clayton let go of the dog's leash at the diner, and Herodotus went to their table and jumped up on a bench.

"I see you two are regulars," Elowen said.

"I don't know what he's going to do if there's ever someone else sitting at that table."

They sat down across from the dog.

Melody came with a pot of coffee and filled their cups. "What can I bring you?" she asked.

"I'll have my usual, scrambled eggs and rye toast," Clayton said.

"I'll have the same with a fruit cup," Elowen said.

While Melody was still at the table, a couple in their early sixties came up. They wore matching burnt orange fleece-lined jackets. "We're the Hansons," the woman said. "Are you Mr. Clayton Lange, the author?"

"I am," Clayton said, and he stood. "It's good to meet you." He held out his hand, and they shook.

"We're great fans," the woman said, "and we were wondering if we could take a selfie with you?"

Clayton invited them to squeeze onto the bench with him and Elowen. Melody took the photo. The couple thanked Clayton as they scooted out.

"May I ask you a question, Mr. Lange?" the man asked.

"Sure."

"Do you know if the things that happen in your books are going to happen in real life before they do, or are they as much a surprise to you as they are to everyone else?"

"It's always a surprise to me, Mr. Hanson."

They thanked him again, and he thanked them for reading his books.

“That was nice of you,” Elowen said.

“It’s nothing really. I try to avoid being mobbed by fans on the street because it’s overwhelming. But I am doing well because of people like the Hansons. They seemed like nice people.”

“The girls and I have talked a lot about Mr. Hanson’s question.”

“About things coming true?”

“Yeah. I’ve heard it called immediate futurism. Have you heard that, too?”

Melody came with their breakfasts. As they dug in, Clayton asked Elowen if she would like to go for a walk to the park when they finished.

“That’d be nice,” she said.

They ate in silence for a few moments until Elowen asked, “Well, are you going to answer my question?”

“Huh?”

“Clayton?” she said, lowering her voice.

“Oh, about immediate futurism?”

She nodded as she took a bite from the fruit cup.

He put his fork down, and she stopped eating. “I kind of lied to the Hansons. But honestly, I hadn’t given it a second thought until Elliot—he’s my agent—pointed it out. I don’t read reviews of my work. I just put words on paper and go about my life. I’ve always had good luck, which I attributed more to my parentage, white privilege, and being a pretty good scribbler. But after that meeting with Elliot, I looked at some of my old journals. You wouldn’t believe how many of the wishes I made ever since I was a little boy came true after I wrote them down.”

“Really?”

“Pets, presents, work, a skate park—all kinds of things.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

He sighed. “It’s messing with my mind.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I did an experiment with a story, and it came true.” He told her about the scholarship for Carmen’s son, and her jaw dropped. “I’m giving it one more test before I take it seriously, though.”

“And if the test is affirmative?”

“Then I want to figure out, why me?”

They finished breakfast and paid the bill. Central Park was about two miles away and they began their trek north. A lowrider pulled up to an intersection where they waited. Its subwoofers pounded out a rap song.

“That’s a nineteen-ninety Chevrolet Caprice,” Clayton yelled over the music.

“You know your cars,” Elowen shouted.

Before the light changed, they listened to the lyrics:

He got no creed
And I let him bleed
Let ‘em bleed
Cuz I gotta feed

With the green light, the car’s roar drowned out the song.

“That’s that death rapper, Derrick Romano,” Elowen said.

“I’ve never heard of him, though the last name sounds familiar for some reason.”

“Cheese?”

“Sorry?”

“Romano cheese?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“There’re some pretty crazy things that happen at his concerts, which you may’ve read about,” she said. “A couple weeks ago a man burst into flames.”

“Yeah, I read about that.”

“It’s a huge scandal.”

“You know your musicians.”

“I don’t know a lot about him. As a musician I just try to keep up on who’s who. About your poem?”

He responded tepidly, “Yeah?”

“Is that a part of your second experiment?”

“It is. But it’s kind of weak. I need to work on it some more.”

CHAPTER 9

326 BC – PUNJAB

Alexander ate with his generals, all of whom were drunk.

General Cassander said to Alexander, “Your affections for this young wife of yours have driven you mad.”

Alexander had boasted of his good fortune for months, having married the Persian noblewoman, Roxana. She had raven black hair, sultry eyes, and a beguiling smile.

“I highly recommend the Persians,” Alexander said. “You should marry one of their women, Cassander, and raise up a family.”

The general slammed his fist on the table. “I will do no such thing,” he exclaimed. “I and mine are nothing if we are not pure Macedonian.”

“And a tired old man,” Alexander shot back with a laugh.

The others laughed with him.

Hephaestion sat on Alexander’s right side, and another general sat on his left. He was General Perdicas, an imposing and grave character. “I have another subject to discuss, if I may?” he said.

Alexander gave him a short nod.

“I’m a little concerned about this new title you have adopted.”

“‘King of Kings’?”

“For the Persians it is a reference to a deity.”

“And what is the harm in that? I have not lost a single battle, and the people seem pleased with my new status as an explanation for this.” He ran a finger along the leather cord he wore around his neck.

“But the title includes the Persian custom of kneeling and kissing your hand before speaking to you. I fear this will create an itch where there was not one before among our own men.”

“It is just a game, General. It is a part of the culture we have adopted.”

“But it is not familiar to the Macedonians. They hate it. Kissing a man’s hand is how a servant shows deference to his master.”

“Did I ever give these men permission to feel anything? They have only one responsibility—only one—and that is to obey my orders without question.” He lifted his cup for more wine, and the steward refilled it. Standing, Alexander declared, “My brothers, I salute you. Tomorrow, we will open up a new frontier on the continent of Asia.” The men cheered. “As we move across the land, we will experience many things which none of us has ever yet imagined. Even so, I do not fear that we will lose anything, as others seem to believe.” As he said this he gazed at General Cassander and smiled. “Rather, we will be enlightened,” he continued. “And we will continue to enjoy victory after victory, personally and professionally, as individuals and as a community. We are Macedonian—this cannot be changed. It is a truth that has preserved us until now, and it will be the thing in our hearts that carries us forth to the very ends of the Earth.

“One day the time will come when you will retire from the battlefield. Some of you will return to Macedonia, others will settle in Asia, some will return to Persia, and still others will go to other parts of the world which have captured their hearts. Wherever you go, you will build your homes and your families, and you will succeed in whatever you do, for you are Macedonian. Nothing can take your heritage away from you. Nothing can rob you of the genius that flows through your veins. Wherever you go, you will be the papa of a new generation of Macedonians. My friends, through our victories, one day the world will be one Macedonia. Let us drink to our future success and the success of all Macedonians wherever we find ourselves in this world.”

The men applauded and they drank.

The next morning, Alexander emerged from his tent wrapped in fur. His face was pasty white, and his gait, unsteady. Hephaestion sat on a rock near the campfire. Alexander joined him.

“I had too much to drink last night,” Alexander said.

“But nice speech,” Hephaestion said.

Alexander laughed. “I suppose it was, if you say so.”

“Did you dream?”

“No, but it doesn’t matter. I didn’t commission a mosaic for this battle.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Our success does not depend on dreams.”

“Shall we advance as planned?”

“We shall proceed, and we will prevail.”

Over the following days Alexander’s engagement at the Hydaspes River against the forces of King Porus of Paurava was a near disaster: Hundreds of warships—armored elephants with towers on their backs filled with archers—rolled over his army. His losses were greater than anything he had ever experienced before, and his victory was only by a small margin. And Bucephalus, his beloved stallion, was injured, dying shortly after the battle.

On the night the conflict ended, Alexander lay in his tent, alone, contemplating the cost of staking a foothold in Asia. What he had said to Hephaestion about the dreams had been wishful thinking. *I must use the charm just as Father taught me*, he thought.

PRESENT DAY

It was dark but for a single lightbulb far away. And there was a sound; it was the distant echo of an electric motor and metal on metal. The wheels go round.

The sounds grew louder, and the light got brighter. It was not a lightbulb; it was a headlight. And it was bearing down on him. The wheels go round.

Light shown all around. He was in a tunnel; it was the subway. Metal screeched on metal. And a woman’s voice screamed, “No!” The wheels go round.

From a subway car expressionless faces stared down on him. The wheels go round.

Clayton yelled himself awake. Sitting up, he shook his head. It was only a nightmare. Herodotus was on the floor, looking up at him. Clayton looked at the clock. It was just after five, and he lay back down.

The phone rang. He rolled over. Slowly the clock came into focus. It was seven. He looked at the caller ID and picked up the phone. “Good morning, Anna. How’re you?”

“Hello, Mr. Lange. I’m not so good. I’m at the hospital. Charlie has had an accident.”

Fifteen minutes later, Clayton was outside and making his way to the subway platform for the next car to Brooklyn. “What have I done?” he muttered to himself. The car squealed to a stop, and he got on.

For the next hour he thought about his poem, about how he had caused this. What happened was his fault.

The subway stopped under the hospital, and he ran from the underground into the hospital building.

He found Anna in the surgery waiting area with a dozen other people. Her face was buried in her hands. She was sobbing.

Clayton sat next to her. “Anna,” he whispered, and he put his arm around her.

She looked up. Her eyes were red and filled with confusion, like those of a bewildered child.

He did not have to ask—he knew what had happened. “I’m so sorry,” he said, and her sobs turned into convulsions.

As they waited, Clayton glanced around at the other people. They were like mirrors. They looked like how he felt and how he knew Anna felt—afraid, anxious, and sad.

A doctor emerged from behind Staff Only doors. “Mrs. Anna Kravets?” he called.

Clayton stood with her. “I’m Mrs. Kravets,” she said.

“Your husband just came out of surgery.”

She covered her mouth with one of her hands.

“He’s stable.”

She released a sigh of relief.

“He’ll be in recovery for a couple hours. You’ll be able to see him then.”

“How are his legs?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Kravets, but he lost both of them,” he said, and he turned and disappeared behind the doors.

Anna’s eyes rolled back, and she fainted. Clayton caught her in his arms, and he lay her down on the white tile. He pushed her hair back. After a few moments, she opened her eyes.

“Are you okay?” he asked. With tears, she said she was, and slowly she got to her feet. “How about a cup of coffee?” Clayton asked.

She nodded, and they went to the cafeteria. With their cups in hand they found a table and sat across from each other. “When did it happen?” Clayton asked.

“They said it was at about five. He was on his way to work at the warehouse.” She sipped her coffee. “I feel so bad. It’s my fault. He called me last night and asked if he could come home. I told him no. I’m so upset, Mr. Lange. He wouldn’t have jumped if I’d let him come back.”

“It’s not your fault, Anna, it’s mine,” Clayton said.

“What?”

He muttered to himself and gazed over her shoulder for a moment. After releasing a sigh, he said, “I mean we’re all in this together. Why do you think he jumped?”

“The police said several people witnessed it. You know how busy the subway is at that hour. They said he was standing really close to the edge of the platform, and as the first car was about to pass by he stepped off the platform in front of it.”

For the next couple of hours, they drank coffee and shared their thoughts and fears. Anna said, “It’s times like this that make you think about what’s really important.”

“You’re right,” Clayton said. After refilling their cups, he said he wanted to help.

“We have insurance,” Anna said.

“Yeah, but I bet there’ll be expenses that aren’t covered. I’ll take care of it.”

“Mr. Lange, you don’t have to.”

“I know, but I want to. And I also want you to take some time off. It’ll be paid leave. Under no circumstances will you be allowed to work for me until Charlie is well on the road to recovery. Okay?”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive.”

It was almost 10:30 a.m. when they were permitted to visit Charlie. Bedside, Anna took one of his hands. He opened his eyes.

“Hey, Charlie.”

“Hey, Anna. What happened?”

“You don’t remember?”

“All I remember is being underground. The subway was coming.”

“You jumped, Charlie.”

“What? No. I couldn’t.”

“And you lost your legs.”

He looked down at the end of the bed, and his mouth fell open. Squeezing her hand hard, he groaned, “Oh, no.”

“But you’re alive,” she said.

He wept. “What am I going to do?”

“You’re coming home.”

Three days after Charlie’s accident, Clayton had not left the condo except to let Herodotus do his business. Man and dog sat together brooding in the front room. The only calls he had taken were Anna’s. They would keep Charlie under observation for at least two weeks as an attempted suicide. It would be three to four months before he was ready to be evaluated for prosthetics. Life would never be the same.

Clayton sat in the front room on the couch with its view of the Hudson. It was a dreary afternoon, raining and sleeting. It was going to be a desolate Christmas. Maybe he should see a therapist for depression. But not yet. He deserved to be depressed, to be sad, to be filled with shame.

Elowen had left messages for him several times. She knew what

had happened from a text he had sent her on the day of the accident, which reminded him of how he had told her the poem was weak.

This is so incredibly bad, he thought. *What am I going to do?*

He was obsessed with trying to figure out how he could fix this thing with Charlie. But the best he could conjure up was a story about the donation of two legs from a car accident fatality. But would that make him responsible for another accident, plus a death?

Thoughts about taking his own life had entered his mind, but he wanted to figure this out first. If there was something he could do to control this weird power he had, maybe he could do something to make amends for this evil he was responsible for.

He got up and went out onto the balcony. It was wet and cold. He had to get out of the city. He found Elliot's number on his cell and called it. Elliot picked up. "Hey, Clayton. What's going on, my friend?"

"Hi, Elliot. I'm sorry I've been out of the loop. My housekeeper, Anna—you met her at the funeral?"

"Yeah, I remember. Nice lady."

"Her husband had an accident in the subway. He lost both his legs."

"Was he the jumper in Brooklyn I read about?"

"Yeah, but I don't really believe he jumped. He's not the type. Anyway, we're all very close. She's been like my second mom. I'm kind of depressed and I'm going to take some time off."

"This weather is miserable and doesn't help."

"That's what I'm thinking."

"Are you going to travel?"

"Yeah, I could really use some sun."

"Bon voyage, Clayton. Give me a call when you're ready to get back to work."

"Thanks, Elliot." He disconnected and looked at the dog. "What am I going to do about Elowen?" Herodotus whined. "Yeah, that's how I feel."

He speed-dialed her number: As he had hoped, she was working, and her phone went straight to voicemail. He left a message: "Hi. It's me. Sorry I haven't returned your calls. I'm in a really bad state right

now, and I need to unplug for a while. Take care.” He disconnected. “I am so lame,” he said out loud.

It was afternoon the next day when he and Herodotus stood outside the terminal of the Rio De Janeiro International Airport waiting for a taxi. The sky was clear blue, it was hot, and it was humid. In half an hour he would be poolside drinking a piña colada.

CHAPTER 10

300 BC – EGYPT

Ptolemy I Soter reclined in the great hall of the palace. He wore the usual costume of a pharaoh—the blue-and-gold-striped headdress and ornamental robes. A scribe sat cross-legged on the floor next to him. He wore only a white tunic. A writing board with a sheet of papyrus lay on his lap.

Ptolemy dictated, “Alexander revealed his secret only to Hephaestion. But we all suspected it. It was in the mosaics he commissioned of actual scenes from the battles we ourselves beheld. A clue to understanding Alexander’s unique power is to know the mosaics were completed before the battles ever happened.

“At first, we thought the images were premonitions, that Alexander saw things in his mind’s eye which were destined to happen. But there were other clues, like the times he would tell the troop physician to concoct a potion to help him dream after his artist had presented him with the image he had commissioned for an intended mosaic. I, myself, witnessed such an exchange before the War of Gaugamela, and I shared it with General Seleucus. He told me he had overheard a similar conversation before the Battle of Issus.

“In addition to these things, there was the amulet which Alexander always wore. It was the one his father had worn until his

death, and like his father it hung to the middle of his chest. He could not help but touch it whenever he spoke about a coming engagement with an enemy.”

Pausing, Ptolemy gave the scribe time to catch up. He gazed at the great walls of the hall as he fondled the charm he had acquired from Alexander posthumously. Ptolemy admired the genius of the Egyptian engineers, how they had created this building and so many others, stacking such enormous carved stones one on top of the other. It was the same technique they had used with the pyramids thousands of years before. The stone-built palace reflected strength and power, but with the statues of previous pharaohs on pedestals and the tapestries on the walls and Alexander’s mosaics in the floors, there was an element of nobility and elegance.

Ptolemy fixed his eyes on the mosaic of the Battle of Issus: Darius rode his chariot hard. But his eyes, they were filled with fear. In the background there was a dead tree, which was a hint of what would become of the Persians. Across from Darius was Alexander on his great steed, which reared up with so much power. The king did not wear a helmet, often his practice after his victory at the Granicus River, for he thought himself invincible.

The Persians—such awesome warriors of antiquity with so many crowns—were portrayed in the mosaic as confused and afraid. That Alexander could imagine such a catastrophe in the ranks of his enemy’s army despite the number of voices that were in his ear saying otherwise, was an inspiration from the gods. But for his illness he would have continued his campaigns and put the entire world under his feet.

The scribe said he was ready for further dictation. “I think that’s enough for today,” Ptolemy said. “Let us continue tomorrow.”

With a bow, the scribe backed out of the room. The pharaoh smiled to himself. *Someday my story will be read by my heirs*, he thought. He wanted them to understand how he had acquired the amulet from Alexander. But it was a story they would not hear until after he was gone. If it got out while he was still pharaoh, his status as a living deity among the Egyptians might be put in jeopardy. But that would not dissuade him from having the scribe record in detail exactly

what had happened for later generations, a tale he enjoyed remembering.

He closed his eyes, and he recited in his mind the story: After Alexander died, General Perdicas insisted he lie in state in Babylon for two years. This made Ptolemy angry. But when he heard that the charm had never left Alexander's neck, he realized Perdicas did not know what it was, and it was there for him to take! But how?

Perdicas himself provided the answer. He built a mausoleum for Alexander's body. It was made of marble and gold and Greek columns; it was beautiful, and it was monstrously heavy. He then announced he would transport the mausoleum back to Macedonia. The people believed that living or dead Alexander's body possessed special powers and that wherever he was there would be prosperity and security. And who deserved such a blessing but Alexander's own people?

These ideas about Alexander's body were nothing but pure superstition. But when it comes to politics, faith is half the battle, and Ptolemy knew that if he brought the king's body back to Egypt, he would hold the heart of the people in his hand.

Engineers designed a carriage for the mausoleum, which would carry it from Persia all the way back to Macedonia under the tow of sixty-four mules. To ensure its safe arrival, mercenaries would accompany it. But, alas, Perdicas should have sent soldiers, for the loyalty of mercenaries can only be measured in gold.

Ptolemy's envoy caught up to the carriage before it even left Asia, and his men paid the mercenaries three times what Perdicas had paid them. Thus without spilling a single drop of blood, the whole caravan turned to Egypt.

The pharaoh was sitting in the portico of the palace in Memphis when the carriage with the mausoleum arrived. He watched his hand shake. How he longed to know whether or not the charm still hung around the king's neck.

Once the mausoleum was unloaded from the carriage in the palace square, he stationed a unit of armed troops to watch over it. And he waited, but only a few hours. At the deepest hour of the night he strode to the square with his guards. Standing before the mausoleum,

he ordered the troops to open it for him that he might venerate the king. They did so without hesitation. However, when he commanded them to remove the lid of the sarcophagus, they turned white. But they could not refuse the order, and they did it. Not surprisingly, they left him alone with the king's body without any reluctance when he told them to go.

Alexander was wrapped in layers of linen, but the charm hung around his neck on a leather strap outside the linens. Gently, Ptolemy pulled the strap over his head. And he remembered the next moment as though it had happened yesterday: When he had hung the medallion around his own neck, there had been a flash of light behind his eyes, and, falling to his knees, he cried out, "The face of Alexander!"

That was Ptolemy's story, and he knew when the people heard it and realized how much he and the great king had depended on the talisman, they might think less of their skills as strategists and army commanders. But things such as these did not concern him as much as the need for the dynasty to continue to possess and use the amulet in perpetuity. For with it they would govern with success the vast stretches of territory in the north, including Libya, Palestine, and Syria. These acquisitions had prospered Egypt far beyond anyone's wildest dreams.

Ptolemy's son, Ceraunus, was eighteen years old. Ever since he was a young man, he had possessed the same power he had, so he had figured the charm was for the succession of a dynasty. He imagined that it all began with Alexander's father, Philip II. Alexander must have taken it from him when he was assassinated by his bodyguard, Pausanias, in the amphitheater the day after his daughter's wedding.

Alexander's son was born after his death, so the child was always powerless. To add to the misery of it all, the baby and his mother, Roxana, suffered a miserable end at the hand of that wicked creature, General Cassander.

Ptolemy discovered how the power of the charm worked through experimentation, using what he knew about Alexander and the mosaics. Himself, he would draw an image of an idea he had or of a physical object he desired. And if he dreamed the image, what he had drawn would come true. The same had been true for Ceraunus.

When Ceraunus was very young, Ptolemy conducted an experiment with him; he had wanted to discover how the power flowed between generations. He put the charm around the boy's neck, and then he told him to draw a picture of something he wanted, something that had been on his heart. He drew an elephant, that great creature which had captured his imagination ever since he had heard the stories about the Battle of Hydaspes. And then he told him to meditate on those things before he slept that night. Ptolemy also drew an image. But his was of a woman whom he had seen in the market the day before. She was the most beautiful he had ever set eyes on. The next morning there was a great trumpeting outside the palace. It awakened everyone. And there, underneath Ceraunus' window, was an elephant!

To this day, the elephant's origin remains unknown. And as for the woman Ptolemy imagined, she never appeared. That was how he discovered the charm works for both generations but only from the oldest to the youngest, just as one's last will and testament would work.

It was only last year when Ptolemy transported Alexander's body to his namesake city, Alexandria. His remains now resided in an underground tomb suitable for a son of a god. And the people believe their prosperity flowed from that place.

Ptolemy touched the amulet with his forefinger, and he smiled.