

CHAPTER ONE

Professor Marcus Ryan, Las Vegas, Nevada

Marcus Ryan pounded angrily on the elevator button but the doors to the staff elevator remained firmly closed. He reluctantly conceded that the Out of Order sign actually meant what it said, and the elevator was truly not working, a rare event in the well-oiled machinery of the Mandretti empire. He was left with no choice but to leave the privacy of the Mandretti Treasure Vault and go out onto the Strip, and around the corner to the hotel entrance..

All he wanted to do was reach his room on the 20th floor of the Mandretti Resort Hotel and get himself out of his work clothes and into a stiff drink. What he didn't want to do was parade himself through the Las Vegas Strip where someone might recognize him as Marcus Ryan, the once youthful professor who used to have a network television show about historical treasures. Of course, that was before cable had destroyed the networks, and before the passage of time had blurred Ryan's youthful features.

Unfortunately, Ryan's boss was still determined to cash in on Ryan's waning popularity and insisted that Ryan should dress the way he had dressed for the TV program. Kitted out in full explorer gear including snake proof boots, khaki shorts, safari jacket, and an Australian bush hat Ryan felt like a caricature of his former self. The only really useful items were the bush hat which protected his head from the heat of the desert afternoon, and the thick soled boots that protected his feet from a sidewalk that was roughly the temperature of a bed of burning coals. As for the rest; he had no useful items in the multitudinous pockets of the safari jacket, and in real archaeological conditions his neatly pressed shorts would be of no use at all, too short, and too tight for any real work.

He scurried as fast as his long legs would carry him along the Strip, through the hotel lobby, and over to the bank of elevators serving the thousand rooms. A small group of newly arrived tourists had gathered in front of the elevator, clutching their keycards and suitcases.

"That's him," he heard a woman say.

"No, it isn't" came the reply. "He's bigger than that."

"They all look bigger on TV," the woman argued. "I'm telling you that's him. He's doing some kind of show here. I saw his picture in the brochure."

The man tapped Ryan on the arm.

"Are you him?" he asked.

Ryan removed his hat and pasted on his best TV personality smile.

"Welcome to Vegas," he said.

The elevator doors opened and he welcomed the rush of super cooled air. They all stepped inside, the tourists with their suitcases, and Ryan in his ridiculous explorer outfit.

The women addressed her husband as though Ryan was invisible. "It's him," she reiterated, "but he's looking much older."

She turned to him. "I used to watch you on TV every Sunday night," she said, "me and the kids loved Treasure Hunt. You found such interesting stuff. I was sorry you was cancelled."

"So was I," Ryan said, and breathed a sigh of relief as the doors opened onto the 20th Floor.

"Nice to meet you," the woman said as the doors closed again.

Ryan made his way along the corridor to his room where he immediately stripped off his safari jacket and flopped down on the bed in his shorts. How are the mighty fallen, he said to himself, although to be honest he knew that he had never been mighty. He had only been a fairly well known TV personality, never a major star.

The message light was flashing on his room phone and he picked it up, punched in his code and listened to a recorded messaging telling him that Professor T. Q. Peacock would like Professor Ryan to call him as soon as possible. His room number was 21112.

Ryan replayed the message to be sure that he had heard correctly. Professor T.Q. Peacock was here at the Mandretti? What on earth, he wondered, was Taras Quentin Peacock doing in Las Vegas?

Intrigued, he dialed the professor's room number and was greeted by the unmistakable upper-class British accent of the man who had been his freshman history professor his first terrifying year at Harvard.

"Good news," the professor said, "Great news. Call room service, my boy, and order something decent, none of that revolting California swill, something French. I'll be with you in a tick."

"But how did you know I was here?" Ryan asked.

"I know everything," Peacock said. "I know all about you, my boy. You certainly haven't lived up to your earlier promise. How old are you now?"

"Forty five," said Ryan.

"Forty five," Peacock repeated. "That's what I thought. You're still young but don't have any time to waste. I think I have something better for you. Stop asking questions and order the drinks. I'll see you in a minute."

Peacock broke the connection and left Ryan to wonder what on earth his old professor could want with him after so many years, and just how and why he intended to revive Ryan's flagging career.

Before he picked up the phone to order room service, Ryan shuffled through his mental filing system until he arrived at the image of T.Q. Peacock sitting at his desk and pouring red wine into a whisky tumbler. The year was 1990, the place was Harvard, and the wine was a French Chateau Neuf du Pap, served at room temperature.

Ryan called Room Service and ordered a bottle of Chateau Neuf du Pap at a somewhat alarming price, and then he took his own bottle of Jack Daniels from the mini-bar. He had several bottles of Jack Daniels in that refrigerator. For the past few years Jack Daniels had been his only friend. He slipped into jeans and a tee shirt and was searching for his sneakers when the professor knocked at the door. He greeted Ryan with a bear hug and then stepped back to look him up and down.

"You've grown taller," he said, "and thinner."

Ryan shook my head. "No taller, and no thinner," he said, "six four and one eighty."

"Five six and twenty stone," Peacock said in reply, "that's two eighty to you Americans, and I'm proud of every pound of it."

The professor stepped into the room, rubbing his hands together in delight. His hair, which had been peppered with grey when Ryan first met him, was now a mass of snowy white curls. His rotund body was stuffed into a heavy Harris Tweed suit which may well have been the same suit he had worn as Visiting Professor of History all those years ago. His eyes had the same old twinkle, and his nose was the same cheerful red.

"Look at this, look at this!" Peacock exclaimed, waving his arms expansively to encompass the room, the view and the whole of Las Vegas. "Fallen into clover, that's what we've done, lad. We've fallen into clover. Do you know how much money there in this town, lad? Do you?"

For a moment Ryan was a student again, forced to admit that he didn't know the answer. "Not exactly," he muttered.

"Neither do I," Peacock shouted, slapping Ryan on the back, "but I reckon there's enough to go around, and then some to spare."

"Do you mind telling me what you're doing here?" Ryan asked. "Of course I'm glad to see you but ..."

Peacock silenced him with a peal of jovial laughter. "Don't get upset, lad," he said, "I'm not here to get in on your act, not that you've been doing all that well lately. Lost the TV show, so I hear."

"Ten years ago," Ryan admitted. "My simple little Sunday night specials couldn't compete with the Discovery Channel and the History Channel, and all the rest."

"So now you're here authenticating treasures for a hoodlum," Peacock said.

"Not exactly," Ryan protested. "I mean, they are genuine treasures, and I have made it very clear that I will have the final say on whether or not they are authentic. He has some pretty amazing stuff and being his curator is not so ___"

"Oh, don't mind me," Peacock said. "You were my star pupil and you made such a good start, but I know times change, and you have to do what you have to do. I can quite understand you prostituting your name, we all have to do it from time to time. I've put my name on some research papers that were just ..."

He stopped in mid-sentence, shrugged his shoulders and sat himself down in an armchair.

“Did you call Room Service?” he asked.

Ryan nodded his head.

Peacock drew a cigar from the depths of his appalling tweed jacket. “Fine wine, fine cigar, and a fine student, what more could I ask for?”

“This is a no-smoking room,” Ryan protested as Peacock clipped the end of the cigar.

“I should hope so” Peacock said, “a fine Havana cigar is not something that should be smoked in the company of any lesser leaf.”

“They’re not legal,” Ryan said. “Havana cigars are not legal in this country.”

“I’m not a citizen of your petty-minded country,” Peacock said. “I am a guest and as such I am entitled to certain ethnic comforts. Anyway, this is Vegas, and as I understand it, what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas. Now stop frowning at me and sit down, and let’s get down to business. I really don’t like to say much before I have a glass of something in my hand, but no doubt Room Service will make its way up here before too long.”

“No doubt,” Ryan agreed, and sat down on the sofa.

“I’ve found something,” Peacock said, “that goes beyond your wildest dreams and you and I, Marcus, are going to sell it to the man who owns this hotel.”

“Michael Mandretti?” asked Ryan.

“Michael Mandretti, yes, that’s right. He’s going to give us a great deal of money for what I’ve found. Maybe everything he possesses.”

Ryan smiled and kept his doubts to himself. In addition to cataloguing and curating Michael Mandretti’s collection for the past twelve months, he had also been instrumental in finding new treasures for Mandretti’s horde. Ryan had no idea what was behind his employer’s hungry search for rare and irreplaceable treasures, or why the man would spend hours at a time in the air conditioned treasure vault simply staring through the armored glass at the jewel encrusted relics of lost civilizations.

Ryan had personally bargained with treasure hunters, divers, wreckers and private collectors for whatever historical artifacts appealed to Mr. Mandretti’s eclectic taste. When it came to collecting, Mandretti was like a butterfly landing greedily on whatever attracted his attention. He was not a discerning collector but on any given day Mr. Mandretti knew what he wanted, and Mr. Mandretti got what he wanted, at the price he wanted to pay. Every time. Ryan could not imagine for one moment that Professor Peacock could have found anything that Michael Mandretti could not have found for himself, if he truly wanted to.

Peacock puffed contentedly on his cigar. “You don’t believe me, do you?” he asked.

Ryan said nothing.

Peacock looked around for an ashtray. Seeing nothing suitable he hopped to his feet and trotted off to the bathroom, returning with the bathroom wastebasket. “You used to smoke,” he said accusingly. “I suppose that wife of yours talked you out of it.”

“She’s not my wife any longer,” Ryan said. “Hasn’t been for years.”

“Yes, yes, I read about it in one of the London rags,” Peacock said. “Sorry to hear it. Oh well, onward and upward my boy, onward and upward. By the time I’m finished with you, you’ll be able to buy any woman in the world.”

“I don’t want to buy a woman.”

“Figure of speech,” Peacock said, “don’t be so damned touchy.”

He blew a cloud of pungent smoke into the air and looked at Ryan through the haze.

“What,” he asked, “would be the greatest treasure anyone could find?”

Now there’s a question, Ryan thought. “The greatest?” he repeated.

“Yes,” said Peacock, “the find of finds?”

Ryan rose to his feet and looked out of the window. Below him the Las Vegas Strip slashed through the desert. Tall buildings reached for the sky and inside the buildings desperate men and women threw their money into the gaping mouths of one-armed bandits or onto the hungry green fields of the playing tables.

“Money?” Ryan asked.

“More than money,” said Peacock, “a find of such historical value that no museum could ever afford to buy it, a find that could be housed here in this hotel. People would come from every corner of the world just to see it. What would Mandretti pay for something like that?”

“I don’t know,” Ryan said. “I don’t know what it is.”

“Of course you don’t” Peacock agreed. “I’m just asking you to use your brain. You’re the expert. You’re the television personality. You’re the man Mandretti trusts with his treasures. So, what would that treasure be? Think, lad. Think.”

Ryan was a freshman again, being harassed by an eccentric bullying Englishman. “You don’t change, do you?” he said sullenly.

“No,” Peacock agreed. “I don’t change. I don’t want to change. So what do you think I’ve found?”

Ryan answered off the top of his head. “The Holy Grail.”

“Yes,” he said, “the Holy Grail.”

Ryan stared at him. “You’ve found the Holy Grail?”

He shook his head. “No, of course I haven’t found the Holy Grail. I can’t find something that doesn’t exist. I’m using a metaphor. What is the holy grail of treasure hunters?”

Determined to impress him, Ryan reeled off a list. “The Lost Dutchman Mine, Atlantis, Noah’s Ark, the Fountain of Youth.”

“No basis in fact,” Peacock said impatiently. “Think rationally, Marcus.”

Ryan glared at his tormenter. “Just tell me,” he said. “I know you’re dying to tell me.”

“Excalibur,” said Peacock.

Ryan’s heart sank. For a moment he had thought that the old man had really found something, but apparently he had only come to torment his student.

“The sword of Arthur,” Peacock said. “What would Mandretti pay if he could own Excalibur?”

“I thought we were talking rationally,” Ryan said.

“We are,” Peacock insisted. “I’m telling you that I have found it. I have seen it with my own eyes.”

“Excalibur?”

“Yes.”

“Impossible.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Ryan asked. “Why is it impossible that you’ve seen King Arthur’s sword? Because it never existed, that’s why. King Arthur never existed, ergo his sword never existed.”

“Who taught you that?” Peacock asked.

“You did,” Ryan replied.

Peacock shook his head. “I never taught you any such thing. I taught you that the Arthur we hear of in legends was probably a creation of medieval romances, but he was rooted in fact. I know I taught you that, didn’t I?”

“No,” Ryan said firmly, “you taught us that there is absolutely no historical record of Arthur, and the Arthurian stories seemed to be formed out of thin air and ancient legends sometime in the 11th Century.”

The old man grinned engagingly. “Well,” he said, “maybe that was before I had my change of heart on the subject, before I started really looking. Don’t tell me, Marcus Ryan, Ph.D. that you have never, ever, considered the possibility that somewhere in this great round world... I did teach you that the world was round, didn’t I?”

Ryan laughed and nodded.

“Have you never considered,” Peacock asked again, “that somewhere in this great round world, the sword of Arthur may exist?”

Ryan was reluctant to join in his game but honesty forced him to say that yes, he had considered it, of course he had considered it. “Historians are all romantics at heart,” he said, “and if it was ever found...”

“It is found.”

“...if it was ever found,” Ryan continued, “it would obviously be priceless.”

“We could get a price.”

“I could never authenticate it,” Ryan said. “I could never put my name to such an outrageous claim.”

“I’ve seen it,” Peacock said.

Silence filled the room. Ryan lowered himself slowly onto the sofa and stared at Peacock. He was looking for the sudden wink, the slight lifting of an eyebrow, the twitching of his lips, anything that would tell him that the aggressive little Englishman was joking. The silence hung heavily between them and Peacock’s face gave no sign.

“I’ve seen it,” Peacock said again with a note of awe in his voice. He leaned forward fixing Ryan with the hard stare of his pale eyes. “I’ve seen it,” he said yet again as though he could hardly believe it himself. “I’ve touched it.”

He stretched out his hand and touched something that only he could see. “It’s nothing fancy, just a smattering of jewels,” he said. “It’s not well formed, rather primitive, pre-Saxon, possibly Roman, or early Celtic; very heavy. It was made for a big man.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” Ryan asked.

“Yes.”

“And you’ve told Mandretti already?”

“Not everything. I’ve hinted. I’ve told him enough to whet his appetite. I told him that I had something very special and that you would authenticate it, and he invited me to come here.”

Ryan thought about Michael Mandretti seated behind his enormous desk in his enormous office in the Mandretti executive suite. He tried to imagine himself wading across the sea of white shag carpet to stand in front of that desk and tell Michael Mandretti, who was without a doubt the most frightening man Ryan had ever met, that he, Professor Marcus Ryan, was willing to throw the whole weight of his professional reputation behind a fairy tale.

“He trusts you, Marcus,” Peacock said. “He doesn’t trust me.”

“I’m not surprised,” Ryan replied. “I don’t even trust you, not this time.”

“I’ve seen it,” Peacock said again.

“Where?”

Peacock smiled beatifically. “It’s well protected, but not well guarded,” he said. “Its protection is its anonymity. No one realizes what it is. We can get our hands on it.”

“Is it in a museum?” Ryan asked.

“Not exactly,” said Peacock. “That’s why it’s safe for the time being.”

He fell silent and then took a deep breath as though he had decided to launch into an explanation. Ryan waited, admiring the professor’s showmanship. He didn’t believe a word Peacock was saying, but somehow the old professor had managed to hook him and Ryan was eager to listen.

“Let me show you something,” Peacock said at last, delving into the pocket of his tweed jacket. He produced something wrapped in a white handkerchief. He unfolded the handkerchief and revealed a small gold pin set with an unusual dull red stone.

“What is it?”

“It’s a companion piece to the sword,” Peacock said, “which I managed to liberate. The sword stays where it is, but I give you my word, they belong together.”

He handed Ryan the pin. Ryan turned it over in his hand and stared at it for a long time.

“It has you stumped, doesn’t it?” Peacock said.

Ryan continued to examine the pin in silence.

“Have you ever seen anything like it?” Peacock asked.

Ryan shook his head. “I can’t place it,” he said, “At first I thought Saxon, but it’s not quite right. It’s not Roman, and definitely not Celtic, and there’s something strange about the metal.”

“And the stone,” Peacock added. “Have you ever seen a stone like that before?”

Ryan turned the pin over and over in his hand. On first glance the stone was dull red, like something that had been shaped by the sea and washed up on a pebble beach, but on closer examination it seemed to

glow with an inner fire, as though heat had been sealed into the very center of its being.

“What is it?” he asked.

Peacock shook his head. “No idea, but it’s quite soft. I dropped it on the bathroom floor this morning and a piece broke off.”

“You dropped it?” Ryan exclaimed.

Peacock pointed a stubby finger at a corner of the setting. “There was another small stone set in metal prongs. They broke.”

“For heaven’s sake,” Ryan said, “what are you thinking of? This shouldn’t be wrapped up in a handkerchief and stuffed in your pocket. This should be in a padded case. I don’t know what it is, but it’s ancient and it’s valuable.”

“Which is the very reason why I am carrying it in my pocket,” Peacock said. “No fuss, no big fanfare, much the safest way.”

He handed Ryan a twisted scrap of paper. “I wrapped the broken piece in here. I thought you might want to take a look under a microscope.”

Ryan took the paper from him, and put it in his own pocket.

“The gold’s strange,” Peacock said. “It’s not actually gold. It’s a kind of crystal.”

“It can’t be,” Ryan said.

“But it is,” he insisted. “You’ll see what I mean when you put it under the microscope, and there’s a document _____”

“A provenance?” Ryan asked.

“Not exactly. To be honest I don’t know what it is. I’ve lodged it in a safe place but I brought a sample to show you. It’s in my room, I’ll go get it in a minute and you can see what you make of it. It’s a bit of a puzzler.”

They were interrupted by two firm raps on the door.

“Room Service.”

The dreaming look faded from the professor’s eyes and was replaced by an anticipatory twinkle. “About bloody time,” he declared. “I hope you ordered something decent.”

“Chateau Neuf du Pap,” Ryan said as he crossed the room to open the door.

Peacock raised an appreciative eyebrow.

“Very good lad,” he said. “You have a good memory.”

The waiter was a tall well-built man who looked supremely discontented with his career choice. He wore the Indiana Jones themed costume issued to all workers to complement the emerging theme of the Mandretti, including well-worn jodhpurs and soft leather boots. His hair was light brown with sun-bleached streaks and definitely needed to be styled, or at least washed, and he wore an eye patch. Ryan made a mental note to tell the management that eye patches were the preserve of pirates, not treasure hunters. The waiter deposited the tray on the coffee table. An elaborate pseudo-gothic goblet accompanied the wine.

“Compliments of the management,” he said. He picked up the wine bottle. “I took the liberty of opening the wine, sir,” he said, “to allow it to breathe.”

He spoke clearly, but Ryan found his accent unusual. Scottish maybe.

The professor beamed delightedly. “Excellent, excellent,” he said. “I see there is some culture in this benighted town.”

“Just a little,” said the waiter.

Ryan leaned forward to look at the goblet. “I haven’t seen these before,” he said. “They’re very good replicas.”

The waiter’s hand shot out, seizing the goblet before Ryan could look closer. “They’ve only just arrived,” he said. “I didn’t bring one for you. You didn’t order anything.”

“No,” Ryan said. “I have my own supply.”

He took his billfold from the nightstand and gave the waiter a tip.

“I have to get some ice,” Ryan said to Peacock. “There’s an ice machine at the end of the hall.”

“Ice!” the professor bellowed. “I don’t need ice! Philistine!”

Under the professor's eagle eye, the waiter lifted the wine bottle to pour the wine into the goblet. Peacock held out a restraining hand.

"For goodness sake," he said. "You can't put a good wine into that, that...thing. Heaven knows what it's made of and what it will do to the bouquet. Marcus, do you have another glass?"

"Yeah, sure," said Ryan. "But it's just a water glass."

"So long as it's glass," said Peacock.

Ryan held the glass out to the waiter who poured a generous measure of wine, which he handed to the professor.

"Let me look at the goblet again," Ryan said to the waiter. "I want to see what it's made of."

"No, really, it's okay," said the waiter, setting the goblet on the cart and preparing to leave.

Peacock took a sip of the wine. "If it's just some cheap metal," he said to the waiter, "you'll have everyone in the restaurant sending back their wine."

"Not in Vegas," Ryan said. "Not everyone's a connoisseur."

"I'll tell the restaurant manager," the waiter said. He sounded more angry than anxious and was making small movements towards the door.

Ryan reached over, lifted the goblet from the cart, and carried it to the window. After the first judicious sip of the wine, Peacock was taking hearty swallows and seemed to be really relaxing into the chair. Ryan assumed that he was very tired from his journey.

He tried to concentrate on the object in his hands but his mind was full of questions. He really didn't know where to begin or how to assess the professor's outrageous claim to have found the fabled Excalibur. He put his hand in his pocket and touched the twist of paper, feeling the hard outlines of the stone. Much against his better judgment, he knew he would have to find out more. Given the strangeness of the dull red stone, and the certainty of Peacock's own conclusions, he would have to do something.

"Sir," said the waiter anxiously, "you need to give me the goblet?"

"Yeah, sure," Ryan said, turning from the window and reigning in his wandering thoughts, and then he saw the professor. Peacock held the water glass of wine but he was no longer drinking. He seemed to be struggling to breathe.

Ryan fell on one knee beside the chair, dropping the goblet into the professor's lap as he reached forward to loosen the old man's tie.

"Sir," said the waiter, hovering in the doorway.

"Get help," Ryan said.

"Just give me the goblet," the waiter said.

"To hell with the goblet," Ryan shouted. "Call down to the front desk, get an ambulance."

Peacock drew in a strangled breath and dropped the water glass. The wine spilled across his lap and spread in a red stain across the floor. His eyes were fixed on the goblet that lay in his lap. He lifted it in both shaking hands.

"It's not a fake," he murmured. "Early Saxon."

"Forget about it," Ryan said, lifting Peacock's chin and seeing that his face was waxy white and that he was gasping for breath. Behind him he heard a faint click and turned in time to see the door closing behind the waiter.

"Hey," Ryan shouted, "get back in here."

Peacock drew in another strangled breath and his body began to convulse. The goblet slipped from his lap to the floor.

"I'll get you an ambulance," Ryan said. "Just hang on."

But Peacock could not hang on. His hold on life slipped away. Even as Ryan lifted the phone to call in the emergency, the professor stopped breathing.