

Chapter Two

Panhandling is not something I have to do. Only a fool or a dreamer would be in the charter-boat business for the money. Fortunately, I did well for myself when I left the Navy and took over my family's floundering boat building business. I had studied engineering and boat design at Annapolis so I had some ideas.

Up until then, Great Peconic Boats was barely staying afloat building traditional, flat bottomed skiffs used by local baymen. I took a different approach and designed a skiff that would have a wider appeal. Based on traditional designs with low freeboard in the stern, a high, flared, Downeast bow, and a raked windshield amidships, the thirty-footer moved fast and looked sharp. The boat's simple, clean lines first appealed to the weekend fishermen and, ultimately, to many of the Hampton "elite", who liked the idea of owning a piece of the real Hamptons. Before long, we were building bigger models tricked out with exotic woods, custom interiors, and faster engines.

Then Kate died and, as they say, my world came crashing down. Six-months later I sold out to a major international boat building firm. Now, there are Great Peconic Skiffs in places like Santa Barbara, the Virgin Islands, and the French Riviera. So much for the purity of form and function designed for local waters. But my accountant seems happy.

Just then, Lester, who had been swabbing the deck, jabbed me in the side and pointed up to the dock entrance. A very attractive woman was striding towards us while a chubby, older man with a full head of white hair struggled to keep up. Both of them were dressed in business clothes, he in a three-piece suit and wing tips, and she in a tailored silk blouse with a knee-length skirt, but wearing boat shoes. I couldn't help noticing that she had great legs, the legs of a dancer, and as the wind ruffled her short, dark hair she swept it back from her face languidly. I knew that these had to be the passengers from Tredia's plane.

"If this is our next charter, Erik, it looks to be a definite improvement," Lester winked.

Just as predicted, the pair stopped at the *Finest Kind*.

"Mr. Hazen?" the woman asked.

I pushed the faded cap back on my head and smiled at her. "Captain Hazen," I corrected. "At least as long as I'm on board."

She looked slightly taken aback, but I guess my smile put her at ease. She beamed a smile back and held out her hand. "I'm Laura Morgan and this is my associate Marcel Feynard. We came to talk to you about a possible charter." I wiped my callused hands on the rag I was using to clean a fishing reel and reached out to shake hers. She had a firm hand with long fingers and no nonsense nails that spoke of a woman accustomed to the outdoors.

"Are you the folks who arrived on Zeke Tredia's plane?"

She rolled her eyes and laughed. "Yes. We took off from the East River an hour ago. I don't know what's worse: three hours of Hampton's traffic or an hour of sheer terror with that maniac."

The lawyer nodded in agreement. "If I have to keep all the promises I made to God in the last hour I'll have to quit the bar and join a monastery."

"Zeke thinks he's still in Vietnam. Come on board. This is Bill Lester, trusty mate of the *Finest Kind*. He's the guy who'll handle the fish and pour the drinks."

The woman stepped gracefully across the transom. She stood looking around the boat as her associate struggled to keep his balance while Lester steadied him.

"Actually," she began, "we're not here to charter your boat for a fishing trip, Captain Hazen. That's why we came to talk to you directly instead of calling."

I raised my eyebrows and tossed my cap onto a deck chair. I could see both of them doing a quick assessment. At 46, I still pride myself on being in good shape with the lean, rangy build I inherited from my grandfather. With my khaki pants tucked into the tops of rubber fishing boots and an old tee-shirt that reads, "I fish, therefore I am", I hope that I look the part of a fishing captain. Or at least somebody that knows his way around boats. I know from experience that for some clients that's important.

"Mmm. Not a fishing trip. Well, you don't look like drug runners or arms dealers and I'm not doing dinner cruises yet. So, what is you want my boat for?"

Laura looked around. The dock was mostly empty except for Lester, who was hosing down fishing equipment. "We want to organize a diving expedition to the *Andrea Doria*."

My smile faded and I could feel the white scar on my cheek redden. I looked at Feynard who stood silently, his hands in his pockets. "Please, sit down, both of you."

I glanced over at Lester, who just raised his eyebrows and busied himself with fishing tackle.

As they settled into deck chairs, I sat on the starboard gunnel. No one spoke for a few awkward seconds. The woman saw that she had hit a nerve, and she looked at the lawyer for support.

"Captain Hazen," Feynard began, "We came to you because you seem to be the leading expert on the *Andrea Doria* wreck. You even wrote the book on it. We both read it."

"Well, in that case you must have noticed that the book was written ten-years ago?"

The woman regained her composure and spoke. "Not much could have changed. We know that it lies in 240-feet of water about 100-miles east of here. We know that it's a dangerous dive—the "Mt. Everest of dives", as some have called it—and that more than a dozen divers have died on it over the years."

At the mention of diver's dying I felt my jaws tighten. "Mt. Everest? Yeah, well maybe it is. But, they haven't had much luck on Everest lately, have they? So, why would you want to attempt this?"

Feynard interrupted. “Oh, no Captain Hazen. We don’t want to dive on it ourselves. We are looking for a team of expert divers—we are prepared to pay them well—to find personal property that we believe is on the ship.”

“What kind of property are you talking about?”

“Property that was lost by my aunt and uncle,” The woman said. “They were passengers on the ship when it sank. My aunt was killed in the collision but my uncle died only recently. He was 95-years old. I can’t be any more specific than that until I know that you will accept our offer.”

I paused and thought about the ship. It has been almost sixty years since the *Andrea Doria* was rammed by the *Stockholm*, just south of Nantucket Island, and sank with the loss of 54 lives. Amazing that there are still people who even remember it.

She was waiting for an answer. I saw that she was the type of woman who was accustomed to getting her way but my face felt like it had turned to stone and I didn’t say anything for a good minute before I answered her.

“Look. I have a reputation for being a little abrupt—some people might even say rude. But I’m not a callous bastard. I’m sure that you’re a sincere person, Ms. Morgan. I don’t know what’s motivating you to want to do this and I don’t have to know. But if you accept my role as "expert" then let me give you some advice: whatever property you may be interested in has either been destroyed by more than half a century underwater, or it’s buried under twenty or thirty feet of debris and silt. In other words, there’s nothing down there that makes it worth risking a human life.”

The woman leaned closer and spoke in a measured tone.

“Captain Hazen, I don’t know if you’re a callous bastard or not. But with you or without you I’m going to find out for myself if what I’m looking for is there.”

Now this woman was getting my interest. Her smoky grey eyes were infused with determination and confidence. Maybe the hint of a smile passed over my face.

“And how do you plan to do that?” I asked.

The lawyer spoke before she had a chance to answer the question. “There are other divers who know the *Andrea Doria* well, Captain Hazen—but I don’t have to tell you that.”

I shot him an unfriendly glance. “So there are. Why come to me, Mr. Feynard?”

He looked nervously at the woman, who tried to smooth things over. “Because we want the best. We want someone who is not just a treasure hunter or a publicity seeker. And, mainly, we want someone that we can trust.”

“What makes you think that you can trust me?”

“Call it intuition or call it a gut feeling, but everything that I’ve read about your knowledge of the ship made me feel that you could help us. I’m sorry if I was wrong.”

“It seems a little ironic, doesn’t it? A couple of treasure hunters who want the help of someone who’s not a treasure hunter?”

“We’re not treasure hunters! I told you that we’re looking for something that belongs to someone else. Something important. We have every intention of giving it back when we do.”

“I thought you said that it belonged to your uncle?”

The woman glanced at Lester who was sliding fishing rods back into their storage racks, and then back at me before she answered. “I said that my uncle lost it, not that it belonged to him.”

“Ahh! This is beginning to sound complicated and a little mysterious. Was your uncle a smuggler or something?”

The lawyer started to protest but the woman held up her hand and cut him off. “In a sense he was a smuggler. But he was attempting to right a terrible wrong. Then the sinking put an end to his efforts. So I’m committed to finishing the job that he set out to do a very long time ago.” She smiled again and glanced at the lawyer who just nodded. We all went silent for a few seconds. The high-pitched scree of an osprey drifted down from where it circled high overhead.

Lester’s foghorn voice broke the tension. “Erik, I’m all done here. I’m going over to the Nor’easter for a beer. Nice meeting you Miss Morgan and Mr. Feynard.”

I glanced at my watch. “I’ll be over later, Bub.”

I turned to the woman again. She must have thought I was sizing her up because she nervously fingered a gold earring and I could see her face redden.

I tried to clear the air. I knew I was being too much of a hard-ass. “If you have a little time there’s something I’d like both of you to see.”

She looked a little surprised as she glanced at the lawyer. “Of course. Mr. Tredia said he could take us back to the city anytime.”

“Zeke? I might have to pry that old barnstormer off his favorite bar stool and dip him in the bay before I let him fly you anywhere,” I smiled, then added, “Just kidding.”

We walked to the parking lot where my Ford F-350 sat in the shade of Duryea’s fish warehouse. Laura smiled as she watched me hauling fishing tackle, foul weather gear, boots, and coils of rope out of the truck cab and tossing them into the back.

“Sorry about the mess. I don’t think there are any fish carcasses or leftover chum in here. Might be a little sand, otherwise the seats are clean enough.”

She laughed. “My car is like this too. You never know when you might need an extra pair of shoes or an overdue library book.”

She sat in the middle. I like to think that my truck cab smells of the sea; a not unpleasant fragrance of crushed shells and salty air. I didn’t catch her gagging so I guess she saw it that

way too. As I drove, she kept her hands folded over her bare knees like a schoolgirl and listened with what passed for interest as I pointed out some of the sights of Montauk.

Leaving the waterfront with its strolling tourists, we climbed a long hill lush with scrub oak and black pines. The imposing stucco and timber edifice of Montauk Manor stood high on a hill to the south like something out of a Bronte novel. Finally, we passed the train station, crossed over the tracks and pulled up to a series of warehouses that fronted on the little-used Napeague Bay waterfront. A few rusty trawlers were tied to the docks and several derelict trucks were overgrown with weeds near a rusty railroad track spur.

"This is the Montauk most tourists don't get to see," I said, leading them across the crushed oyster shell parking lot towards a vintage Quonset hut. "This used to be the center of Montauk's fishing industry before they dredged the inlet into Lake Montauk and began to tame what was once a pretty wild place."

I guess my tour guide lecture gave her a chance to impress me, because she said, "You know, I spent six summers of my life—from the time I was sixteen, until I graduated from college—living in East Hampton, but I've never been here."

That took me by surprise. "What brought you to East Hampton?" I asked.

"My parents owned a house near the beach," she said almost as a question, then added "I was a lifeguard there for four years."

"Which beach?"

She looked at me a little sheepishly. "The Maidstone Club."

"Huh!" I said, raising my eyebrows, but not breaking my stride. "Nice spot."

In fact, Maidstone is one of the most exclusive beaches in the exclusive Hamptons. Mostly old money people with long pedigrees. It's named for a place in England that most of my ancestors came from. I don't know, maybe they once owned the beach, but, in modern times, the closest my family came to it was during the fall migration of striped bass. Then my grandfather's haul seining crew occasionally made a set or two for stripers in the pre-dawn hours.

She must have sensed my thoughts because I saw her face redden a little. "The house was sold years ago when my parents split up. I haven't been back since," she said.

"Don't worry. I won't hold it against you," I said jokingly, trying to lighten things up. "My family's beach was on the other side of the tracks. Louse Point. Plenty of gravelly sand, Zostera beds to wade through, and a great view of Gardiner's Island."

"What in the world is Zostera?" she asked.

"Eel grass. Scallops, ducks, and Bonackers all depend on it."

She shot a glance at me. "Bonackers? I remember that was the name of the East Hampton High School football team when I was a kid."

“It still is. We kinda take pride in it,” I said as we skirted the crumbling bulkheads.

Feynard stepped gingerly over weed-grown patches while Laura matched my stride. “I’m surprised there aren’t condos lining the shoreline here,” he said. “Who owns all this?”

“Mostly a few old fishing families, mine included. Outsiders have been trying to develop Montauk since the 1920’s but it’s never turned out to be a very fashionable place. Between the changeable weather and the rough-hewn mentality of the full-time folks around here, we’ve been able to resist becoming a ‘Hamptons East’.”

I unlocked the Quonset hut door and turned on overhead florescent lights. The dark interior lit up to reveal a jumble of objects that looked like an unorganized garage sale. Several long wooden tables were heaped with various dinnerware, glassware, teapots and cups and a variety of kitchen tools. Scattered around were teak deck chairs, brass portholes, a section of anchor chain with huge links, and dozens of wine, champagne and liquor bottle, some with contents still inside. Against one wall stood a safe the size of a modern refrigerator. A large, ceramic mosaic leaned against another wall; it showed a pair of stylized, leaping dolphins. Above it, at least a hundred 8X10 color photos were pinned in a rough photo montage of a huge, underwater wreck site.

I registered the surprise on the faces of both of them.

"This is my little Andrea Doria Museum. At least it was going to be until my wife died."

Laura winced and turned away from the display. "I'm sorry about your wife, Captain Hazen; how long has it been?"

“A long time for you, yesterday for me. Nearly ten-years ago.” And then added, “I rarely look at this stuff anymore.”

She looked at me quizzically. “Why’s that?” she said.

“Because she died on our last dive to the *Doria*.”

“Oh, my god! I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I’ve been so stupid. I heard a woman was among the divers that died on the wreck over the years, but I didn’t make the connection, I didn’t know it was. . .” Her face flushed. “Please forgive me.”

“It’s not your fault,” I said. “I used to have a little pull around Montauk and I was able to keep the national media from sensationalizing the story. The local papers covered it, but it quieted down pretty quickly.”

"It was a tragic accident," Feynard put in.

I ran my hand across the stubble on my cheek. "It was tragic and it was an accident. The point is it could have been prevented." I looked at Laura as I spoke.

"How do you mean?" she said.

"I mean diving to the *Doria* is one thing; the wreck is deep and it's cold but it's a nice challenge that lies right at the threshold of sport diving limits." I walked over to the cluttered

tables. "The real problem comes with entering the wreck to find stuff like this, and that's what most divers want to do. I hate to sound dramatic, but that's the Siren Song that lures most divers—like my wife, Kate, and all the others who have died exploring it: sixteen at last count, I believe."

"But you have been inside the wreck many times," she said.

"Yes," I said softly. "More than two hundred dives in twenty years. But not anymore. The *Doria* has been on the bottom more than half a century and it's become a death trap. Too many people died because they got China fever."

Laura looked puzzled. "China fever?"

I picked up a cup and saucer from the table and held it out to her. She saw that it was painted with a blue crown and the word "Italia".

"That's the ship's logo. The Italian Lines. Finding ship's China became an irresistible lure for divers." I shook my head. "People risk their lives to get souvenirs."

She placed the cup and saucer on the table and began to speak. "I see what you're saying Captain Hazen, but...."

I interrupted her. "Look," I said, pointing to a photo on the wall of the ship on its maiden voyage in 1953. "That's what she looked like then. A beautiful ship, a work of art almost." I swept my hand towards the many underwater photos. "That's what she looked like several years ago."

Both of them walked closer and looked at some of the 8x10 photos, some of which showed divers shining lights into black openings bathed in the luminous glow of sediment swirling like blown snow.

Feynard looked bewildered. "But how can one tell what he is looking at? Everything seems so jumbled."

"That's the way a shipwreck looks. People expect them to be clean and recognizable—the way the old Hollywood movies made them. In fact, familiar features take on totally different shapes after time and nature has a chance to mold them."

"But I saw the photos of the *Titanic* and it was easy to see what it was like—even a crystal chandelier still hanging above the stairway—and that sank forty years earlier than the *Andrea Doria*."

Before I had a chance to answer, Laura spoke. "The *Titanic* is twelve-thousand feet down, in black water where most organisms can't live. The intense cold, the pressure, and the absence of life keep it nicely preserved. The *Doria* is in 240-feet of water. Well within the penetration of sunlight and the influence of corrosive agents."

"Very impressive, Ms. Morgan. I see that you've done your homework," I said. I looked at her and saw the intensity of her interest as she gazed at the details of the photos.

“Yes, I suppose I have done my homework. But I’ve also done a little wreck diving myself. Nothing that impressive, but I have explored some of the reef wrecks around Bermuda.”

“Oh, good. Then you understand that diving to a hundred feet or so is what used to be accepted as the safe limit of sport diving. Unfortunately that limit still holds, but not enough people are willing to respect it now.” And then I added, “Kinda like Mt. Everest.” Again, I turned to the photo display.

“If you want to get a better perspective on the wreck, the photos are arranged from right to left and top to bottom showing sections of the ship the way they would be located if it were floating upright on the surface. The right side of the room is the bow and the top row is the boat deck—most of the superstructure has fallen off and lies in pieces on the bottom. The lowest row of photos shows the C-deck and cargo holds.”

I pointed to the far left, bottom row at a photo montage of the huge blades of the ship’s propellers looming above the gray bottom.

“A lot of the locations that you’re looking at have been seen by only a few divers since the day of the sinking. I’ve been to some sections that are still so remote that I doubt that any other divers have been there yet. It took me twenty years of diving to do that. And, of course, there’s still a good portion of the interior that’s still unexplored—probably always will be. That’s why I wanted you to see this stuff. The wreck is huge, cavernous, dangerous as hell, and getting more dangerous every year.”

I strode to the midships section of the photos. “Do you see this?” I pointed to a large, dead codfish floating inside a tangle of barnacle encrusted fishing net. “This is only one of the hazards that a diver has to deal with: lost trawler nets are draped over the ship from bow to stern. They’re ghost nets, still catching fish—or any diver unlucky enough to come up in the wrong place.”

“Sounds like you’re trying to scare us away,” Laura said, looking up from the photos and smiling thinly.

“It scares me now. The ship is a trap. Besides the nets and the fishing line on the outside, the inside is a crumbling mass of steel partitions, plumbing and electrical wire. Just going in to take photographs is pushing the envelope on safety; looking for something in there is damn near impossible now.”

I turned and walked over to the safe, spun the combination, opened it and pulled out several felt-lined drawers. “These are the only things of any intrinsic value that I’ve found in all my dives.”

They both looked down at the array of old coins, some strings of pearls, a few pieces of gold and silver earrings, bracelets, and necklaces.

I pulled out another drawer containing similar items. “There wasn’t much of value on the ship. Remember, it took ten hours to sink. Everyone who got off—all except the more than fifty who died—had plenty of time to gather up their valuables.”

Laura looked up. "My uncle's property was quite valuable," she said.

"How could that be? I've researched insurance claims and so have a dozen other divers."

"There would not have been any insurance claim for this property," she said quietly. "You see, this property wasn't supposed to exist."

As she spoke she picked up an object that lay in the last drawer. It was a mother-of-pearl cigarette case and as she turned it over, she gasped, "Oh my God!"

"What is it?" Feynard asked.

She held it out. A small, gold plate on the case was inscribed with the initials "SCM". "My aunt who died on the ship? Her name was Sara Claire Morgan!"

I stood with one arm draped over the safe and scratched my chin. "Ms. Morgan, I'm not a big believer in fate, but things are getting a little weird? A diving buddy found that case on the last dive I made--the dive that took my wife's life." My words had the effect of making her look a little less defensive and slightly more vulnerable. "So, I guess we've had a tenuous connection for a while now? You might as well keep the case. It belongs to you more than it does to me."

"Thank you. That's very kind." She paused a moment gazing at the case before slipping it into her bag. "Captain Hazen, I wonder if you are familiar with The Voyage Home Foundation?"

I smiled. "I think we can cut the formality. Call me Erik. And yes, I've heard of it. Returning money to families of Holocaust victims. Money stolen by the Nazis and hidden in Swiss banks, I gather?"

"That's right, Erik. However, what you might not know is that a great deal of that 'restored' money comes from the endowment that my uncle began with his own money. He was quite a successful investor and as his wealth grew he began to focus on philanthropy. Today, Voyage Home ranks among the greatest philanthropies in the country. We have gone beyond the original intent and now fund hospitals, schools, and medical research."

We stood facing each other across the showcase. Against my better judgment, I was beginning to like her. Something about the way she tilted her head as she spoke. Beneath the efficient businesswoman she had a fresh, outdoorsy look—only a subtle hint of makeup—and she exuded an athletic energy in the way she moved. She was also quite beautiful. "Why are you telling me this?" I asked.

"Because I want you to know that my uncle was an extremely good man. He always blamed himself for Sara's death. He apparently made one big error of judgment in his life, and he spent the rest of his life trying to atone for it. Believe me, there are not many men who did so much good in their lifetimes."

"Then this 'property' that you are interested in had something to do with your uncle's 'error in judgment'?"

Feynard in his lawyer role cut in at this point. "I don't think we're ready to discuss that until you have agreed to help, Erik. I'm sure you understand."

I nodded and looked back at Laura. "I don't know. I'm not sure that I'm ready to go back to the *Doria*. But, I have to admit, this is all becoming very intriguing."

"Suppose you give it some thought. Let me know before the weekend. We'll come back out on Saturday if you decide to help us."

"OK, I'll think about it," I slid the drawers back into the safe and led them out into the fading sunlight. "I better get you back to the waterfront before Zeke gets too comfortable at the Nor'easter Bar. I wouldn't trust him past the third beer."

Laura called Tredia from the truck and he was waiting at the dock when we pulled into the parking lot. She waved from the plane as it taxied out onto the bay and took off towards the setting sun.

I stood a moment thinking about the parallel that Laura had drawn--indirectly but not inadvertently--between her uncle, Carl Ebner, and myself. Ebner had apparently made a mistake in judgment that cost him dearly--the death of his wife. Like him, I felt responsible for Kate's death. But at least Ebner had made some good come of it. Maybe it is time for me to stop beating up on myself. Maybe my long-standing obsession with the *Andrea Doria* does have a larger purpose. Maybe Laura Morgan's quest could bring me a measure of atonement.

All these maybes beat around in my brain as I turned and walked into the bar.