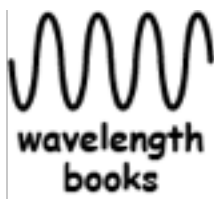


BESIEGED

BESIEGED

by Sarah Stegall



Wavelength Books

Copyright © 2022 by Sarah Stegall

All rights reserved.

First eBook Edition: November 2022

First Printing: August 2023

Published by Wavelength Books.

www.wavelengthbooks.com

Cover art: 19953168 / Lighthouse © Eti

Swinford | Dreamstime.com

ISBN 979-8-9872081-0-6

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

For Melissa, who beat the odds.

Table of Contents

1600 HOURS	9
1615 HOURS	19
1630 HOURS.....	27
1700 HOURS.....	38
1730 HOURS.....	51
1800 HOURS	61
1830 HOURS.....	71
1900 HOURS	80
2000 HOURS.....	95
2015 HOURS.....	108
2020 HOURS	116
2030 HOURS	126
2040 HOURS	136
2045 HOURS	146
2100 HOURS	158
2130 HOURS.....	169
2200 HOURS	181
2230 HOURS	195

2300 HOURS	206
2330 HOURS	215
2350 HOURS	227
0500 HOURS	235
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	241
EXCERPT	243

1600 HOURS

He only saw the corpse because the lights drew his attention to it.

Cody Breen leaned on the railing above the water, watching the weather. Below, waves curled white-topped on San Francisco Bay, just west of the Richmond Bridge to his right. The waves crashed onto the beach below the marina. The sun was setting in the west, streaking the twilight sky of November with red and orange. Gulls screamed, as they always did, but then one dived past him so close it almost clipped his nose. He jerked backwards, and saw the lights in the water.

Gleaming white and silver, a ripple of light arrowed from right to left. It looked like something moving under the water. Cody frowned. The current was running in the other direction, here where the San Francisco Bay

Sarah Stegall

segued into San Pablo Bay. He turned his head to follow the lights, and saw other lights, blue and red, flashing in a familiar sequence.

“Looks like a dead body.”

Cody glanced over at the man stepping up to the rail next to him. He tensed, feeling that wave of apprehension he always felt, even after years in combat, that quick scan to see if the other guy was also Black. Threat assessment, he would have called it once, a habit learned early by all Black men.

“A body?” he said.

The other man was white, with gray beard and hair. Under his tan were apple cheeks and grandpa wrinkles, but his eyes were not the eyes of an old man. He held a pair of high powered binoculars to his eyes, training them on the lights down the beach.

“I’m counting one, no, two police units, an ambulance and what may be a fire engine. Can’t really tell because of the curve of the shoreline.”

Cody looked in the same direction, watching the red and blue flashing lights off the emergency vehicles. “Drowning?”

“Maybe. There’s a lot of—*Jesus!*”

Besieged

The older man jerked his head back, lowering his binoculars.

“What?”

The other man gulped. “Sorry. I, uh, was wrong. It’s only part of a body.”

Cody squinted. The distant figures were hauling something out of the edge of the water. He felt a nudge and looked down. The older man was handing him the binoculars.

“Thanks.” Swiftly, Cody adjusted the glasses and scanned the scene.

Two EMTs in blue coveralls and a man in a wetsuit were staggering out of the light surf, carrying something between them. A head, an arm, part of a chest. And that was all.

“Male, Caucasian, blond. Mid twenties. May have been around five ten or eleven,” said Cody. “Not much of him left. He must have been hit by a—no.” He lowered the glasses and handed them back. “He wasn’t hit by anything.”

The old man took the glasses back and peered through them. “Bitten in half. Poor bastard. I can see the marks.”

Cody studied his companion. “You’re pretty cool about this.”

The old man shrugged. “I’ve seen worse.”

Sarah Stegall

So have I.

The older man lowered the glasses and stuck out a hand. “Jack Tarkenton,” he said.

Cody shook his hand. “Cody Breen.”

“Ex cop?”

“Ex-military.” He tensed for the questions, the justifications, the need to explain politics. But there was none of that.

“Huh.” Jack raised the glasses again. “They have him in the ambulance now.”

Cody didn’t think he needed to see any more.

“What the *hell?*” said Jack. He leaned forward, focused on something on the beach right below them.

Cody glanced down and saw something rolling in the surf, white flesh streaked with blood.

His belly tightened, his focus sharpened, the way it always had in combat. He clutched the railing and leaned farther over, peering downwards. He couldn’t make out legs or arms, but there were entrails and huge, gaping wounds. Could this be other half of the victim?

“Oh, that’s too bad,” said Jack.

“What do you mean?” Cody said.

Besieged

“*Zalophus californianus*,” Jack said. “California sea lion, probably male, looks to have been about six hundred, maybe six hundred fifty pounds.” He lowered the glasses. “Probably attacked by a shark. But still...”

Cody looked back at the carcass. He realized now why he hadn’t seen arms or legs. “Wouldn’t a shark have eaten all of it?”

The old man shrugged. “Depends. Maybe something scared off the shark.”

“Scared off the *shark*? I don’t want to meet that,” Cody said.

The older man nodded. “Me, neither.” He glanced up at Cody out of ice blue eyes. “You waiting on the boat to North Sister Island?”

“Yeah.” Cody looked up. Dark clouds were building ominously over the Mount Tamalpais watershed in the Marin Hills.

Between the marina where he stood, and the opposite shore of the Bay, lay six kilometers of open water and the Sister Islands. These were two tiny islands, not much more than a couple of big rocks, that stood in the middle of the San Pablo Bay channel, the northern extension of San Francisco Bay.

Sarah Stegall

Jack put the binoculars back into a leather case. “I’m going down to take a look at that carcass,” he said. “Holler if the boat gets here.”

Cody shook his head. “Goin’ with you,” he said. He slung his laptop case and duffle bag over his shoulder.

The two men trotted down the concrete stairs that zig-zagged down to the dock of the marina. They climbed down a short wooden ladder to set foot on the pebbled beach below the retaining wall above them. The smell of low tide—fish, mud, salt and seaweed—was stronger down here. So was the smell of feces and rotting meat.

It was only a few yards to the waterline, and the closer they got, the worse it smelled. Soon the two men were standing over the bloody corpse of a sea lion, its intestines spilling out and leading into the water. Gulls hopped and screamed just out of reach, angry at being shooed away from their feast. The body was torn and swollen, the signs of violent death plain to see. Neither man flinched.

Jack squatted slowly down to examine the corpse. “Strange,” he said.

Cody squatted next to him. This close, the stench was nearly overwhelming, but he’d

Besieged

grown used to such smells, in other contexts.
“What’s strange?”

Jack pointed to patches where the gray skin showed through brown fur. “The fur’s been yanked right off. That’s not like sharks; they rip and slash.” He looked up and down the body. “In fact, I don’t see a lot of slashing.”

“Have you seen shark attacks before?”

Jack nodded, still looking at the sea lion.
“Round wounds? What makes that?”

Cody frowned. “Round? You mean, like bullet holes? I thought it was illegal to hunt sea lions.”

“It is, but those aren’t bullet wounds. They’re too big. They’re just—I don’t know. Circles where something has torn off the fur.”

Cody bent down to look at the wounds, trying to ignore the assault on his nose. The wounds were the size of his palm, almost perfectly round. The fur in those rounds had been ripped out, leaving bleeding skin behind. “You think this is related to that other body, up the beach?”

“Who knows?” Jack shrugged. Cody noted how coolly the other man was taking all these hacked-up bodies. The old man pulled out a cell phone and snapped off a few shots. “Not great light out here, but I have a friend at the

Sarah Stegall

Monterey Bay Aquarium who might know what killed this sea lion.”

“Are you a biologist or something?”

“Nah. Retired financial advisor.” He lifted the binoculars. “Traded in the laptop and the stress for birdwatching. I spend a lot of time on beaches.” He squinted at Cody. “You?”

Cody always hated that question. “I’m ... retired.”

“You’re a little young for it. Did you win the lottery?” The older man grinned.

“I wish.” Cody headed off further inquiries by changing the subject. “So you’re going to the island. Birdwatching?” He nodded towards the low lying island in the Bay in front of them.

“Yeah. There’s a colony of sea birds on South Sister Island. The local birding society says there are some rare and endangered species on it. I want to see if they have any hooded mergansers or a brown pelican.”

They both looked out over the water to the island. Only a thousand feet from the shoreline, the two small islands lay in the channel between San Francisco Bay and San Pablo Bay. As Cody watched, the Vallejo ferry, a three-decker catamaran filled with commuters and

Besieged

tourists, chugged slowly between the islands and the marina where he stood.

From where he stood, Cody could see the Victorian bed and breakfast on the North Sister island, and above it the old-fashioned turret and light of the North Sister Light.

“I hear the views are spectacular,” said Cody.

“They are,” said Jack. “This your first time?”

“Yeah. How come I can only see one island?”

“I think because South Sister is just a rock, or so my birding friends tell me,” said Jack.

Cody turned to look up the beach. From this angle, he could only see one emergency vehicle, maybe an ambulance. As he watched, it backed up and drove away. All that was left was some yellow tape and a uniformed cop taking notes.

“Hell of a way to start this vacation,” he muttered.

“You say something?” Jack was tapping on his cell phone, uploading photos.

“No.” Over the wash of surf, Cody heard a motorboat approaching. “I think that’s our ride.”

“You go on ahead, your legs are younger. I’ll be right along.”

Sarah Stegall

Leaving the old man to puff along behind, Cody climbed back up the ladder and the stairs, thinking about the partial human corpse, the sea lion and the round, bloody marks covering what was left of its body.

End of Sample